

Book Reviews...

Arthur Koestler (1949). Promise and Fulfilment: Palestine 1917-1949. London: Macmillan

This is a book review with a difference. Far from being about a new publication, the year it first appeared was 1949. But there is a good reason for revisiting it now. In the face of ongoing hostilities in and around Gaza, the well-worn text offers some unique insights into a situation which is far more complex than present street demonstrations suggest. It is all too easy to march behind a Palestinian flag, or to hold banners displaying the Star of David, as if there is a simple choice to make: right or wrong. More difficult but also more meaningful is to take time to think through why this part of the world was a war zone even before the formal birth of Israel as a new nation, and why it continues to be so now.

Finding the book was a case of serendipity, a dusty volume previously hidden in a personal collection. At first, I turned the pages not expecting to find much of relevance but was soon captivated by details that cast a revealing light on the present. Some readers will immediately be suspicious of the veracity of the text as the author, Arthur Koestler, was at the time a war journalist of Jewish origins. But he was not defined by the religion of his Hungarian parents nor his early flirtation with Jewish nationalism. He was a controversial figure because of his tempestuous private life but, in his voluminous writings, no one could reasonably doubt his intellectual honesty.

History matters and the longest section of the book is the background of events which led to the foundation in 1948 of the State of Israel. It was, the author claims, 'one of the most curious episodes in modern history'. This, as events have shown, is hardly an exaggeration. A crucial intervention came during the third year of the First World War, when the allied forces, awaiting the arrival of the Americans, were under great pressure to find additional support. Arthur Balfour, as Britain's foreign secretary, believed there was advantage in responding to the international lobby of Zionists, who were seeking a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The location was important to the lobbyists because it was from there, in biblical times, that Jews had originally been ousted. With a casual indifference to the fact that the area had for centuries been part of the Ottoman Empire, and the land was occupied largely by Arab farmers, in his famous Declaration of 1917, Balfour acceded to the demands of the Zionists. Reflecting on the agreement, Koestler beautifully captures the moment in just a few words:

In this document one nation solemnly promised to a second nation the country of a third.

Such are the origins of a dispute that evades resolution.

With the ending of the war in 1918, the Ottomans were forced to relinquish control of Palestine. Britain, as the newly designated Mandatory Power, with the endorsement of the League of Nations, was then handed responsibility for the peaceful administration of the region. It was, in modern terms, a case of 'mission impossible', described by Koestler as follows:

Any departmental head in any foreign ministry in the world could have foretold that to embark on such an entirely unorthodox and romantic experiment meant asking for no end of trouble. And to crown the amateurishness of the whole thing, the Mandate contained two obviously contradictory promises made in one breath: the establishment of a National Home for Jews in an Arab country, but without prejudice to the rights of the Arabs.

As the subsequent years have shown, 'no end of trouble' is precisely what has been delivered. In one sense, the search for a homeland was understandable, if only because persecution in one country after another had been a permanent thread in Jewish history. At the same time, the Zionist insistence that it had to be in Palestine was based on biblical evidence that was surely by then outweighed by the realities of existing occupation. Yet, even before the Declaration, a vanguard of pioneers (mainly from central and eastern Europe) were making their way to the Promised Land. Contrary to modern accusations, they bought, often barren, land in Palestine from willing Arab sellers and set about making it productive. The problem, though, was not that it was an illegitimate process but rather the growing resentment and fear amongst the Arab population that the Jewish settlers would one day be in a majority. The British administration tried to slow down, if not to totally restrict, the influx but that only led to violent confrontation with the Zionists, who were determined not to be stopped. In the event, it was the overwhelming impact of the Holocaust which tipped the balance and international support led in 1948 to the establishment of Israel.

Koestler succinctly sets the scene and then provides a fascinating account of British diplomatic incompetence. He shows how civil servants were perplexed by the brief they had been given and inexperienced, if not inept, in the face of competing claims. Balfour had created the situation but future politicians and administrators had neither the competence nor ideological will to find a way through the impenetrable forest. The real crunch came during and at the end of the Second World War, when refugees from war-torn Europe and, later, concentration camp survivors, arrived at the port of Haifa, believing that redemption was finally awaiting them. It was then that the British really discovered that the various interests were incompatible; with Arab resistance to any landings a growing force. Ships crowded with desperate migrants were either held in the harbour or turned back; those who tried to swim ashore were invariably shot.

Amongst the many incidents (and of particular interest to local readers), an account is given of a tragic attempt in November 1940 to find a new destination for 1,800 arrivals. It was impossible to send them back to Germany and, in any case, the vessels that anchored

in Haifa were by then barely seaworthy. So, instead, they were transferred to a more robust ship, the Patria, with a view to sailing to Mauritius. And, so the migrants were told, when the war ended they would never be allowed to enter Palestine. With hope taken away, on the morning they were due to depart for the Indian Ocean the passengers blew up their own ship:

Over two hundred of them were torn to bits, or drowned a hundred yards from the shore of their promised land. They had reached their journey's end.

Without remorse, even while bodies were being recovered from the sea, the British commissioned another ship to repeat the exercise of diversion with a further boatload of arrivals, this time the survivors of the decimated Jewish community of Danzig (now Gdansk, in Poland). After a period of incarceration, 'amidst scenes of mass hysteria' they were forced to reboard their ship, once again with Mauritius the destination. This time the ship arrived intact but the outcome was another needless tragedy:

They stayed on that malaria-ridden tropical island for five full years, until August 1945... around 10 per cent of the deportees died of tropical diseases.

Families were split, with the men kept in cells in an old French prison, while the women lived in corrugated-iron huts, 24 in each one. They were allowed to see each other three times a week for two hours. At the end of the war, some were to content stay on the island, forming a small but surviving community. In 2022 this numbered about 100. The whole episode has been researched by Genevieve Pitot for a book, *The Mauritian Shekel*.¹

The Indian Ocean event was an outlier in what proved to be a traumatic finale to the campaign for a Jewish homeland. One might have thought that, with the ending of the world war, negotiators would have found themselves on the home straight. But that was not to be. For three years, Britain, which still held the Mandate, continued not only to prevaricate but also to engage in hostile actions against prospective Jewish settlers. Seeing their hopes in the balance, the Zionists supported outright terrorist attacks to convince Britain to live up to its earlier promises. The Arabs, previously disunited, found a new sense of destiny in turning back the infidels. And nations like the US, outwardly sympathetic to the Jewish cause, failed to offer asylum to the many refugees who had nowhere else to go. Before the war there were seven million Jews in Europe; by the end of the conflict, this number had been reduced to one million, and of these some 300,000 lived in countries that had not expelled them. So there were some 700,000 without a home to go to; it proved to be a cold truth that none of their so-called friends would open doors for them. In these circumstances, Palestine remained their greatest hope although, Britain, especially, remained obstructive. There was no shortage of international negotiations and

¹ Genevieve Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel: The story of Jewish detainees in Mauritius, 1940-1945*. Lanham US, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

Koestler believed that at one time a united Palestine was still possible. But, in the event, partition (with the most improbable boundaries) became the solution and the rest, as they say, is history.

Reading a contemporaneous account is instructive although one cannot pretend it offers all the answers. Any author has their own prejudices and these must be taken into account. But a reading of Koestler adds invaluable insights to what is available to us now. If one has any doubts about this, take turns in watching the contrasting reports provided by the BBC, Al Jazeera and CNN, to name just three broadcasters. For me, the most important lesson is that it has been like this since Balfour's Declaration of 1917. Against a background of duplicity, self-interest, tragic events and political adventurism, it is hardly surprising that we find ourselves in the seemingly intractable situation we have inherited.

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