

Israel: A Colonial, Anti-Colonial, or Post-Colonial History? Historiography, Ideology, and Epistemology

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Are Zionism and the establishment of Israel part of the history of colonialism, anti-colonialism, or post-colonialism? While Jewish communities existed in Palestine\The Land of Israel continuously throughout history, the first Zionist pioneers arrived in Ottoman Palestine\The Land of Israel in the 1880s, the majority of which from Tzarist Russia, and, with the support of Jewish philanthropists, established the first agricultural Jewish colonies. The Zionist movement, which was established in Basel in 1897, sought to establish a Jewish home for the Jewish people in its historic land of origin, and, for the purpose of which, it sought the support of the European Colonial Empires. In 1917, during the Great War, the Zionist movement achieved the Balfour Declaration, in which the British Empire declared its support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. The British Empire also recognized the Arab national movements in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the British conquering of Palestine, Britain received a mandate from the League of Nations to rule Palestine, including in order to establish there a national home for the Jewish people. In the 1930s, following increasing Arab resistance and rebellion, Great Britain gradually accommodated its policies and set increasingly severe limitations on the entrance to Palestine of European Jews seeking refuge there from persecution in Europe. Israel was established as a state in 1948, following the United Nations partition plan in 1947, and as part of a broad post-World War II decolonization process, a process which in the context of the British Empire, the partition between and independence of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Historians, sociologists, literary scholars, and historical geographers are engaged in bitter controversy whether this history is an expression of European imperialism, Orientalism, and colonialism, or, on the contrary, the expression of an anti-colonial history of liberation from repression, deep-seated ambivalence or hostility toward Jews (as Semites and Orientals strangers in Europe; and as European foreigners in Palestine), the establishment of Israel and Jewish national self-determination, deeply embedded in the history of decolonization. Discussion of this history is further complicated by deep historical and political transformations in the meaning and value of some of the key terms and concepts in this history.

Taking an agnostic stance, the aim of this short course is to survey and analyze the major positions with regard to the question whether Zionism and Israel are extensions of European colonialism or the historical course of a repressed national minority to self-determination. We will read and discuss key historiographical publications on several chapters of history, ranging from early colonization of Palestine in the 1880s, through the relationship between the Zionist movement and the British Empire and the establishment of Israel. We will attempt to differentiate, analyze, and unravel the possible coordinations between history (what are the questions addressed, based on what kind of evidence), ideology (what kinds of political commitments and political goals), and epistemology (based on what kinds of assumptions about human agency and their shaping of history and historical analysis). We will take special notice of terms such as colonization and colonialism, Orientalism, or Imperialism, and their uses in this case in point.

Every meeting will focus on a book chapter or an article which will be distributed prior to the meeting. Readings will include Edward Said, Derek Penslar, Uri Ram, Baruch Kimmerling, Ran Aaronson, Richard Koebner, and Gershon Shafir, Maxime Robinson. Participation in the course will require reading the course readings, attending the course meetings, and submission of a short written assignment at the end of the course.