

SHAFIR, GERSHON. *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict 1882–1914*. [Cambridge Middle East Library, 20.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, Port Chester 1989. xvi, 288 pp. £ 25.00.

This important book deals with a period which is usually placed *before* the outbreak of the modern Palestinian conflict. The author shows, however, that it is precisely in the period under discussion that the origins of this drama of the century are to be found.

Before the Balfour Declaration in 1917 the Jewish settlers had neither the support of the European powers exploiting the weakness of the “sick man of Europe”, nor any military power of their own. Consequently they had to rely more than other colonizers on private land purchases. This circumstance, which explains the limited colonization up to 1948, was in turn made possible by the Tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Empire, which made land alienable and created a class of landowners willing to sell. It also explains the geographic distribution of the first land purchases (the coastal region, the Valley of Jezreel, the area north of Lake Tiberias), which would still provide the basis for the United Nations partition plan of 1947. Not biblical significance but availability of land was the criterion for the choice of settlement areas. The biblical “core”, the mountainous interior, was far more densely populated (by Arabs) than the coastal region. But the same processes which made Jewish settlement possible also stimulated the Arabs’ interest in the same areas – they did not diffuse the potential for conflict, in other words. Three quarters of the land acquired by the Zionists between 1878 and 1936 was bought from big landowners who themselves had only acquired it in the second half of the nineteenth century. More than half the land was bought from landowners who lived outside the country (in Beirut, for instance). But Palestinian landlords were not “immune” to the temptation of rising land prices, and a quarter of all the land was brought from them. The same prices of course also increased the costs of Jewish land purchases. But there was no alternative. As Menachem Ussishkin wrote in 1904: “How does one acquire land? With one of the following three methods: by force, that is, by conquest in war, in other words by landgrabbing; by compulsory purchase, that is, by expropriation by the state; and by purchase with the agreement of the owner.”

Whatever the *motives* of the Jewish immigrants, once they arrived in Palestine they were confronted with the Arab presence. This confrontation was of decisive importance for the development of Israeli society. Here Shafir takes a different line from most Israeli historians and sociologists, who either underestimate or even ignore this factor. The emergence, in the course of the first wave of immigration (*aliyah*), of *moshavim* and estates employing Arab labour presented an acute problem for the poor new immigrants. It was impossible for them to secure a livelihood under the wage levels paid to the indigenous population. They therefore tried initially to drive the Arab workers out of the sphere of the Jewish “colonies”. The means used to provide jobs for Jewish workers included the provision of subsidies and the monopolization of certain skills. But the existence of a reservoir of cheap labour and the exigencies of the market economy undermined these efforts. While the colonists of the first *aliyah* clashed with the Palestinians only over the issue of land purchases and could imagine a future coexistence with the indigenous

population on which they were dependent, proletarian Jewish nationalism clashed headon with Palestinian workers.

After the Eastern European, ashkenazi immigrants had failed to overcome the Arab competition on the Jewish estates, an idea arose around 1910 to bring Jews from Yemen to Palestine, where they were supposed to work for Arab wages. One of them reported: "We were really forced to work with the axe, we endured endless pain and the curses of the foremen. When someone made a mistake, the foreman called him 'ass', 'Arab' or 'savage'." Instead of solving the problem, a new one was created. A division of labour evolved within the Jewish community whose potentially explosive dimensions emerged only after the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948. An early manifestation of what was to come can be found in an article published in 1911: "While the young ashkenazi worker contributes life, ideals and culture, the oriental contributes nothing". Oriental Jews were excluded from the formative elements of Israeli nation building (in particular the *kibbutzim*) and were marginalized politically from the beginning.

If the ashkenazi farmworkers wanted to stay in Palestine, they would have to *bypass* the existing labour market; and for that they needed a quasi-governmental organization. Conversely the zionist movement needed forms of settlement which corresponded to its national, colonizing interests. Arthur Ruppin had studied this particularly in his native Posen (Poznan) region, where the Germans had been interested in strengthening their *demographic* position against the native Poles. Accordingly it was not the desire of Jewish immigrants for socialist lifestyles but the demographic-national interests of the zionist movement which tipped the scales in favour of collective forms of settlement. The elimination of Arab labour was achieved by the elimination of wage labour altogether. With the help of the zionist organizations, an exclusively Jewish labour force – the germ of the Israeli state – was created which, it was intended, would be shielded from market forces by quasi-government methods.

The land purchases by the colonists of the first *aliyah* did not lead to a total exclusion of the previous (Arab) peasants and therefore spawned only sporadic conflict (for instance in Petach Tiqva in 1886). But the growth of collective settlements, whose beginning by chance coincided with the revolution of the Young Turks in 1908, resulted in a more systematic antagonism. As an example Shafir quotes the case of Fulla/Merchavia of 1910, where the contract between the absentee landlord Sursuk and the zionist purchasers contained an explicit clause under which "all peasants are to leave the transferred lands, houses and mills".

Shafir attributes, wrongly in my view, the inability of the collective settlement movement to take possession of all of Palestine to a principled willingness to compromise and an aim of eventual partition, in other words to a willingness to recognize the national rights of the indigenous population. Rather, it seems that we find here a demographic limitation of political claims of sovereignty not on the basis of a principle of moderation but of the existing balance of power. The element of *non-restriction* (on settlement) derives from the consideration that the zionist appropriation of land is to serve a large population which has not yet arrived in Israel/Palestine. The structural intention to end the Jewish diaspora required that claims of sovereignty legitimized on the basis of demography remained provisional.

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