1 Introduction

“Israel’s Moment” comprised the two years from May 1947 to May 1949 when both the Soviet Union and the Soviet-bloc states of Eastern Europe as well as the president of the United States supported the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. That rare agreement took place in the interregnum between the end of World War II and the Holocaust, and the first months of the Cold War. In these years anti-Nazism, antifascism, and anticommunism existed in an uneasy simultaneity. The foundation of the state of Israel was a highly contingent event that was facilitated by the short-lived and, as we shall see, tenuous agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The present study draws on existing scholarship and on a close reading of various primary sources to reach four core conclusions: First, although the favorable decisions of President Harry Truman were a necessary precondition for the establishment of the state of Israel, the United States government from 1945 to 1949 was far less supportive of or important for that outcome than were the Soviet Union and the Soviet-bloc states, particularly in the years of Israel’s Moment, which ran from May 1947 to the end of the Arab-Israeli war in early 1949. Second, though there were some moderate conservatives in the United States and France who supported the Zionist cause, the core of the Zionist passion in the United States and Europe, in addition first of all to the enthusiastic support of Jewish organizations and leaders, came overwhelmingly from American liberals and left-liberals, French socialists and, between 1947 and 1949, from communists in France and in the Soviet bloc, especially in Czechoslovakia. For these two years Stalin viewed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine as a possible instrument to eliminate or certainly reduce British and American presence and power in the Middle East. Yet, as records of United Nations debates indicate, support for the Zionist project in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe during these years also drew on the powerful memories and the antifascist passions of World War II on the Eastern Front and the Holocaust. Emotions and power politics were both motivating factors.
Third, while historians have documented the well-known active opposition to Zionist aspirations on the part of the British Labour government and the Division of Near Eastern and African Affairs in the State Department, a close reading of the American files reveals a hitherto underexamined depth and intensity of opposition not only among the State Department’s Arabists but among leading officials in that department, in the Pentagon, and the Central Intelligence Agency. The belief that the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine would undermine American national security interests remained a consensus of those officials when the issue hung in the balance. During the four decades of the Cold War, outside Israel, the limits of American support, the extent of American opposition, and the degree of support from left-of-center politicians and the press in the West, and from the Soviet Union and Soviet-bloc states, faded from public view. The American alliance with Israel that emerged only decades later was projected backward onto a romanticized – or demonized – view of early American support, as if President Truman’s sympathies overcame the reservations of American diplomats and military leaders. The Soviet Union as well, after turning against Israel in late 1949, treated the short era of Soviet Zionism as anathema. The actual international history of the establishment of the Jewish state did not fit at all well into the communist and anticommunist binaries of the Cold War. This work offers a fresh look at the realities of the four years from the Holocaust to the Cold War during which the Zionists won their struggle to create a Jewish state in Palestine.

Fourth, the passions of two eras – World War II and the Holocaust, and the Cold War, one just past and another just beginning – shaped Israel’s Moment. The controversies during this period reflected the lingering passions of the former and the new-found zeal of the latter. This work recalls and reveals political coordinates on the left–right spectrum that stand in stark contrast to those that have emerged in subsequent decades. In the years in which Israel was established, its supporters saw it as part of a broad movement against imperialism and racism, while its opponents outside the Arab world viewed the Zionist project as a hindrance to the British Empire and then to American power in the Middle East.

This history of the ideas and passions that motivated support and opposition to Zionist aspirations focuses primarily on events in the United States, but also those in France. It follows debates at the United Nations in New York, policy decisions and discussions in the State Department and Pentagon in Washington, DC, assessments of the US Central Intelligence Agency, and decisions made in France’s Ministry of Interior and its Ministry of Foreign Relations. It is also a history of
American and French dissenters from an anti-Zionist consensus in the American national security institutions—those who saw a Jewish state in Palestine as both the logical outcome of the anti-Nazi passions of World War II and a state that would serve as a bulwark against, rather than a vehicle for, Soviet expansion in the Middle East.

It was in spring 1947, when Britain asked the United Nations to address “the problem of Palestine,” that the issue of whether or not there would be a Jewish state in Palestine first became an issue engaging many powers in international history. From the time of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 to that spring, it had primarily involved Britain, the Jews and the Arabs of Palestine, and other Arab states. While others, including the United States, had expressed views on the matter, it was not until the years after World War II, and especially after the involvement of the United Nations, that many other states exerted an impact on the outcome of events. The “international” history examined in the following pages focuses on only a few of the many states expressing views on the matter. The United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, Czechoslovakia, Poland, the Arab Higher Committee, and the Arab League loom largest because they, more than others, were at the center of this chapter of international history.

Support in the United States and Europe for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine was one aspect of the general shift to the left that was evident in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust. There were conservative figures such as Winston Churchill, Senator Robert Taft, and a number of French Christian Democrats who looked favorably on the Zionist project. Yet Zionism’s most emphatic support came from those infused with the liberal and leftist anti-Nazi passions of World War II and from Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and their fellow Jews. They included liberals and noncommunist leftists in the United States, socialists in France, and the governments of the Soviet Union and the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Czechoslovakia. In the United States, Zionism’s strongest advocates evoked the moods of Franklin Roosevelt’s anti-Nazism and the alliance of the first “United Nations,” that is, the alliance of nations united to defeat Nazi Germany during World War II. These liberals denounced the American and United Nations Organization decision to embargo arms shipments to both Israel and the Arab states as a form of “appeasement” that benefited the Arabs who, they pointed out, already had the advantages of statehood. In their view, support for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, far from being an example of Western imperialism, was instead a product of the continuing antifascist passions of World War II that persisted up to 1949.
This history of the debate about the Zionist project offers added perspective on a familiar theme, that of acknowledgment of the Holocaust in the immediate postwar years. There was no German government in these years, but the history of the memory and forgetting of the crimes of the Nazi era resonate in this work.¹ Historians of Germany have examined judicial and political reckoning as well as the inclination to silence and amnesty that accompanied the displacement of the imperatives of the Nuremberg war crimes trials with those of rebuilding West Germany as an anticommmunist bulwark.² Historians of postwar Europe have drawn attention to a European-wide “Vichy syndrome,” which downplayed or apologized for the actions of non-German collaborators with the Nazis while exaggerating the extent of national resistance.³ That syndrome was also evident in the discourse of anticolonialism that took the form of apologia and denials about the realities of collaboration with the Nazis by some Arab leaders who played central roles in opposing the UN Partition Resolution of 1947 and then launching the war of 1947–8.

This work connects the scholarship on memory and politics in postwar Europe with the international history of Zionism/Israel debates of 1945–9. It offers a history of support and opposition to the Zionist project which brings the perspectives and questions that emerged from that historiography to bear on the question of why there was support in 1947 to establish a Jewish state in Palestine and why, once established, it received outside support.

¹ See the discussion of these issues in Jeffrey Herf, Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jeffrey Herf, Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Jeffrey Herf, Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West German Far Left, 1967–1989 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Mary Fulbrook, Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
support that helped it win its war for independence in 1948. On the whole, those who remembered the Holocaust and extolled the ideas of wartime anti-Nazism supported the Zionist project, while those who forgot or were uncomfortable with them, and wanted to turn the page quickly to the fight against communism, did not.

The East European dimensions of World War II, though a commonplace among historians, remain on the margins of American memory. Most of the refugees seeking to come to Palestine after the war came from Central and Eastern Europe. The most passionate supporters of the Zionist project were those who remembered World War II on its Eastern Front and the Holocaust. For Zionists in Palestine, and for American liberal and left-leaning supporters of the Zionist project, the fresh memory of World War II, the Holocaust, Nazi Germany’s war on the Eastern Front, and the alliance of “the United Nations,” the coalition that included the Soviet Union as well as the United States and its West European allies, loomed large. With the emergence of the Cold War, a forgetting or even reinterpretation of the realities of the anti-Hitler coalition took place both in Moscow and Washington. In both capitals the memory of that United Nations and that alliance became an embarrassment at best and evidence of communist sympathies or imperialist deviations at worst. In the Britain- and America-centric version of World War II, the history of the war on the Eastern Front and the Holocaust played a diminished role. In Europe the immediate postwar years witnessed leniency toward those accused of collaborating with Nazi Germany. Zionism’s liberal and left-leaning supporters in the United States criticized the refusal of the governments of Britain, France, and the United States to indict Haj Amin al-Husseini, the former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, for war crimes. Husseini had collaborated with the Nazis, especially in the fields of propaganda. These governments also refused to publish the evidence in their files of his collaboration. This work draws attention to the arguments and evidence of the critics of the leniency shown toward Husseini. They viewed that official reluctance in Washington, London, and Paris and the opposition to the Zionist project as related aspects of

the above-mentioned shift from the passions of World War II to those of the early Cold War.\(^5\)

The documents of the US State Department’s “Palestine File” and those of the Pentagon on “The Problem of Palestine” from those years are notable for how little the events of World War II, especially the Nazi race war of extermination on the Eastern Front, and the Holocaust, seem to have influenced policy. In these files the press of ongoing events crowds out the very recent cataclysm. The absence was particularly striking since the secretary of state in the crucial two years was George C. Marshall, who had been chief of the Joint Chiefs during the war, and George F. Kennan, the conceptual architect of the policy of the containment of communism who served as the first Director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, had worked in the US Embassy in wartime Moscow. All the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and leaders of the postwar US armed forces had served in the military in some capacity in World War II. Yet their postwar memoranda and policy statements about the Zionist project contain scant reflection on the impact of the war and the Holocaust on events in the postwar Middle East.

That was unfortunate because American and Soviet support for the Zionist project at the UN in November 1947 turned out to be the last political expression of what remained of the anti-Nazi coalition that had won World War II. The controversy about the establishment of the Jewish state in Palestine has not occupied a large place in the historiography of the early years of the Cold War.\(^6\) It should. The following pages draw attention to the simultaneity between Israel’s foundation and the beginnings of the Cold War. Recent historians of Western decision making in the early Cold War have underestimated the extent of antagonism to the Zionist project, overestimated pangs of guilt among Western policy makers, and overlooked the passions of antifascism, anti-Nazism, and anticolonialism among Zionism’s most determined advocates.\(^7\)

Though historians have documented aspects of the short but important era of Soviet and Soviet bloc support for the Zionist project, its existence

\(^5\) On the consequences of the failure to indict Husseini see Matthias Künzelt, Nazis und der Nahe Osten: Wie der Islamische Antisemitismus Entstand (Berlin and Leipzig: Hentrich & Henrich, 2019).


\(^7\) For example, Odd Arne Westad writes, “Israel was first and foremost expiation for the Holocaust – an easy way of atoning to Jews for not having done enough to save them from Hitler’s policy of extermination”: *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 127.
and its significance remain too little known, both in the scholarship and even more among a general readership. Instead, what looms larger in both are the results of forty years of antagonism to the state of Israel on the part of the USSR and its satellites. From 1949 until the Gorbachev era, Stalin and his successors made “Zionism” into a term of abuse. Soviet diplomats waged political warfare against Israel at the United Nations, and the Warsaw Pact countries armed and trained Israel’s Arab enemies. For four decades, with a modest reduction in the Gorbachev years, the Soviet Union claimed that the state of Israel was a tool of “US imperialism” and that Zionism was a form of racism.

Yet in 1947–8 the Czech, Polish, Ukrainian, and Soviet communist representatives at the United Nations were far more emphatic than the United States in support of Zionist aspirations. They opposed American, and of course British, efforts to postpone the establishment of the Jewish state and, once founded, to deprive it of territory it had been promised in the famous UN Partition Resolution 181 of November 29, 1947. Moreover, and very importantly, when the United States imposed an embargo on arms deliveries to the Jews and the Arabs, and then sought and gained United Nations support for that embargo in spring 1948, communist Czechoslovakia was the only government anywhere willing to violate the embargo. It did so by selling weapons first to the Jewish Agency, the political representative of the Jewish population in Mandate Palestine, and then to the new state Israel after it was established on May 14, 1948. These efforts by the Soviet bloc states in the UN deepened State Department and Pentagon suspicions of the Zionist project and the new state of Israel.

This study draws attention to the contingent meanings of famous oppositions such as “left and right,” progressive and reactionar, imperialism and anti-imperialism, fascism and antifascism, racism and antiracism in the late 1940s in connection with the Zionist project. Their meanings changed – in some cases were even reversed – in the “anticosmopolitan purges” carried out in the Soviet bloc from 1949 to 1953, and then again


10 The resolution, passed by a two-thirds majority in the UN General Assembly, called for the partition of the former British Mandate in Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state.
after the leftist attack on Israel and Zionism beginning in the 1960s and continuing for many decades. From the 1960s the association of Zionism with imperialism became conventional wisdom, first in global politics, then in leftist academic discourse. The coupling of those terms with one another was foreign to supporters of the Zionist project in the late 1940s because in those years those who would be labeled “imperialists” in London and Washington opposed that project, while “anti-imperialists” supported it. Moreover, those officials in the United States and Europe who opposed Zionist aspirations did so, on the whole, to fight communism in the Middle East and preserve access to Arab oil, not to defend human rights or oppose racism. The establishment opponents were convinced that the Jewish state would undermine both past British and French colonial positions and new American efforts to expand economic and military influence. In 1947–8, other than in the Arab states and the Arab Higher Committee in Palestine, the principal opponents of the Zionist project came from the British Foreign Office, the US State Department, and the Pentagon – the very institutions and persons whom the communists castigated as imperialists.

The extent and intensity of opposition to the Zionist project in the entire top leadership of both the State Department and the Pentagon compose an important theme in the following pages. While historians have examined the antagonism to Zionism among State Department “Arabists,” this work demonstrates the degree to which opposition to the Zionist project extended well beyond them and became a constitutive aspect of American foreign policy at the dawn of the Cold War. It was shared by Secretary of State Marshall; the under secretary of state, Robert Lovett; the head of the Department’s Near East Division, Loy Henderson; the secretary of defense, James Forrestal; members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter, the first director of the Central Intelligence Agency; as well as Kennan and his Policy Planning Staff in the State Department.

As the first director of the Policy Planning Staff, Kennan played an important role, the key conceptual role, in connecting opposition to the Zionist project with the policy and strategy of the containment of communism. He did so in important memoranda of January and February 1948 in

which he echoed but also elaborated on the conviction that establishing a Jewish state in Palestine would severely undermine American national security interests in the emerging Cold War in the Middle East and around the world. Kennan was among those who argued that the American alliance with its closest ally, Great Britain, required broad agreement with British policy in Palestine. Kennan articulated this consensus, but he did not create it. The view that the Zionist project opened a dangerous opportunity for Soviet expansion in the Middle East became widespread among diplomats, military officials, and intelligence analysts in Washington and London. Those associating Zionism with Soviet expansion generally did so with scant acknowledgment that the association of Jews with communism had been central for Nazi Germany’s attack on “Jewish Bolshevism” and had become common in the vocabulary of antisemitic abuse.

The American policy makers who established the postwar Atlantic Alliance initiated the policy of containment of communism and launched the Marshall Plan of economic assistance to postwar Europe saw far and clearly when they examined totalitarianism in its communist form. Marshall, Lovett, and Kennan understood that containment in Western Europe would fail without support from left-of-center democratic parties. While they found common cause with the British Labour Party, French and Italian Socialists and West German Social Democrats, they did not do so when it came to the Zionist movement and then the new state of Israel, which were both predominantly on the democratic left. There were voices in American politics who did argue that the Jewish state in Palestine would be a significant asset to the Western democracies, comparable in its political outlook to the left-of-center democratic parties that the USA supported in Western Europe. But officials in the State Department did not see a center-left state of Israel as a comparable bulwark. American liberals criticized the State Department policy as a moral failing and a strategic blunder.

Historians have amply demonstrated that in these crucial years American policy toward Palestine and Israel operated on two tracks. The first came from the White House. It was apparent in President Truman’s decision to support the UN Partition Resolution of November 29, 1947 and become the first country to recognize the new state of Israel on May 14, 1948. Truman’s decisions to reject the unanimous advice of the diplomatic and military leadership of his administration have received much attention from historians. 12 As important as

those decisions were, the opponents of his policies regarding the Zionist project succeeded in limiting the extent of support the United States offered to the Zionist project and the infant state of Israel. The impact of this limitation is an important theme of the following pages.

Track two, supported by the State Department and the Pentagon, included an attempt to replace the Partition Plan with a trusteeship proposal in spring 1948, support for the Bernadotte Plan of summer and fall 1948, and, crucially, an embargo on arms to the Arab states and Israel, which caused more difficulties for Israel than for the Arab states. The embargo persisted even after the invasion on May 15, 1948 of the new state of Israel, primarily by Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Transjordan, with the participation of Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In accord with the views of the Departments of State, Defense, and the CIA, the arms embargo remained in place throughout the Arab-Israeli war of 1948.13 This work gives to track two, the successful effort of American national security leaders to prevent more robust support for the Zionist project when its outcome hung in the balance, the overdue attention it deserves.

In April 1948, angered over the State Department’s efforts to undermine his own efforts regarding Israel, Truman began to bring control over Middle East policy back into the White House. Yet, though the State Department lost some battles, it did not completely cede influence in this area, in part because Truman himself was the author of a doctrine that came to bear his name and that launched Western policy of containment of communism in the Cold War.14 While the State Department, Pentagon, and CIA failed to prevent Truman from supporting the Partition Plan and recognizing the new state of Israel, they did succeed in keeping the American connection to Israel cool and distanced, and in preventing military assistance from arriving when the Jews needed it the most.

American military support for Israel began to some extent in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations but reached significant dimensions

13 Track one did have an ally in the State Department: Truman’s appointee, James McDonald, the first US ambassador to Israel; but his support for the Zionist project was an exception. See Norman J. W. Goda, Barbara McDonald Stewart, Severin Hochberg, and Richard Breitman, eds., To the Gates of Jerusalem: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald, 1945–1947 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press/United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2015); and Norman J. W. Goda, Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart, and Severin Hochberg, eds., Envoy to the Promised Land: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald, 1948–1951 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).