Israel’s Moment is a major new account of how a Jewish state came to be forged in the shadow of World War II and the Holocaust and the onset of the Cold War. Drawing on new research in government, public and private archives, Jeffrey Herf exposes the political realities that underpinned support for and opposition to Zionist aspirations in Palestine. In an unprecedented international account, he explores the role of the United States, the Arab States, the Palestine Arabs, the Zionists, and key European governments from Britain and France to the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Poland. His findings reveal a spectrum of support and opposition that stood in sharp contrast to the political coordinates that emerged during the Cold War, shedding new light on how and why the state of Israel was established in 1948 and challenging conventional associations of left and right, imperialism and anti-imperialism, and racism and anti-racism.

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Israel’s Moment

International Support for and Opposition to Establishing the Jewish State, 1945–1949

Jeffrey Herf

University of Maryland, College Park
For Sonya
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Preface

During the years in which the establishment of the state of Israel took place, the political vocabulary of imperialism and anti-imperialism, racism and antiracism, and left and right differed greatly from what it came to mean after the Soviet purges of 1949–53, and the shift of the international radical left to anti-Zionism during and after the Six Day War of 1967. In the two years of what I am calling “Israel’s Moment” the “imperialism” against which liberals fought was Britain’s attempt to preserve its influence in the Middle East while the “anti-imperialism” was that of Zionists who sought to form a Jewish state in what was then Palestine under the British Mandate. The “antiracists” were Zionists who fought against antisemitism and the “racists” were leaders of the Arab Higher Committee who celebrated the supposed racial homogeneity of Arab societies.

It will come as a surprise to many readers that liberals and leftists in the late 1940s rallied to the Zionist cause, while those government officials who helped to launch the Western Cold War saw a Jewish state in Palestine as a benefit for the Soviet Union, a danger both to the policy of the containment of communism and to Western access to Arab oil. That surprise will be pleasant or unpleasant, depending on the reader’s views. Israel’s Moment was a unique and fleeting period when the anti-Nazi passions of the “united nations” that fought in World War II persisted into the very different, at times reversed, currents of the first years of the Cold War. The foundation of the state of Israel was most importantly the result of the efforts of the Jews themselves. Yet it was made possible by the contingent, short-lived, and unexpected agreement between an American president and the leaders of the Soviet bloc just as the international anti-Hitler coalition split apart into the reversed fronts of the Cold War. The simultaneity of past and present in those crucial months and years marked the international history of the establishment of the state of Israel. The following work seeks to offer a fresh perspective on a fascinating and oft-told tale.

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Acknowledgments

Scholarship requires large amounts of uninterrupted time. A reduced teaching load made possible by the Distinguished University Professor program at the University of Maryland, College Park gave me many needed hours. A research fund, also from the university, supported travel in summer 2019 to France’s Archives Nationales in Pierrefitte-sur-Seine and the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de la Courneuve, both near Paris. The diplomacy and good judgment of Philip Soergel, our current chair, and the respect for academic norms of my colleagues have fostered an environment in the History Department at the University of Maryland, College Park that is conducive to important historical research and fine teaching.

As has been the case for many years, my research in the invaluable National Archives of the United States, conveniently also located in College Park, benefited greatly from the staff of its reading room. David Langbart again offered helpful advice regarding the State Department files; Eric van Slander did as well regarding the military and intelligence files; Amanda Weimar assisted my Freedom of Information Act requests for Department of Justice files; David Fort did likewise for my FOIA requests for CIA, State Department, and military intelligence files. The archivists at the Library of Congress Manuscript Division facilitated my work in the papers of Robert Jackson and Emanuel Celler, and in the records of the Assemblée Nationale, the French Parliament. The reference librarians working in the Newspaper and Current Periodical Room facilitated access to American and French newspapers. Special thanks are due to Gary Johnson who, in the days before the library was completely closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, sent me scans of important United Nations records. Ted Jackson, manuscript archivist at the Georgetown University Booth Family Center for Special Collections, and its helpful staff assisted my research in the papers of Robert F. Wagner. The same was the case with archivists at Columbia University’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library for work on the papers of Telford Taylor. Thanks are due as well to the archivists of the Center
for Jewish History in New York, where I examined the Jewish and Zionist press in Paris. My thanks as well to Louise Fischer in the State Documents Department of the Israel State Archives for providing a copy of a map of the 1949 armistice lines. For assistance with photos, maps, and documents from the United Nations archives in New York, thanks are due to Natalie Melville, and Brenda L. Fong at the Photo Library; to Maricela Martinez at the Dag Hammarskjöld Library; and to Stephan Haufek and Aleksandr Gelfand at the UN Archives Unit.

Professor Frédéric Bozo of the Sorbonne University in Paris helped me contact archivists at the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, and they in turn facilitated my work in those files. Thanks are due to Caroline Piketty and Violaine Challeat-Fonck at the Archives Nationales for their helpful replies to my emails and on-site assistance. Anouk Brodier efficiently and quickly checked several files for me in Pierre Pette. The interlibrary loan desk of McKeldin Library at the University of Maryland delivered books I needed from libraries around the United States and in Europe. Eric Lindquist, McKeldin’s librarian for History, American Studies, Classics, and Religion, has generously responded to my many requests for additions to our library that I think are important for its modern European collections. I extend my thanks to Izabella Tabarovsky of the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC for the invitation to present work in progress dealing with George Kennan’s performance as head of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff.

As a historian whose work has focused on Germany in the twentieth century, I had much to learn in writing Israel’s Moment. I have learned much from fellow scholars. My intellectual debts to the publications of many scholars are in the footnotes, but particular thanks are due to Ronald and Allis Radosh, whose work on Truman and the establishment of the state of Israel was one starting point of this work. David Greenberg offered helpful comments on the American press. Anson Rabinbach shared views about the shift from World War II to the Cold War. The importance of William Roger Louis’s published work on the British Empire and his comments in a paper from this work in progress is evident in the following pages. Thanks are due to Shlomo Slonim for his original scholarship on the American arms embargo. The same is true of Benny Morris’s very important scholarship on the Arab-Zionist conflict and the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. Tuvia Friling and Anita Shapira, both in their published work and in conversations that began at the Yitzak Rabin Center in Tel Aviv in the spring of 2000, contributed a great deal to my understanding of the Zionist response to the Holocaust, both in pre-state Palestine and in the new state of Israel, as well as of Ben-Gurion’s views.
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My greatest debt is to my wife, Sonya Michel. She read the manuscript with the eye of the fine editor and fine historian that she is. Her edits, suggestions, probing questions, and valuable insights enhanced the book a great deal. Historians know the value of understatement. Suffice it to say, she is a very great blessing. The book is dedicated to her, with much love.
A Note on Style

In the 1940s the common spelling of the city on the French Mediterranean coast was “Marseilles”; in recent decades the French have dropped the final “s” and spelled it “Marseille.” When quoting directly from French documents, I have kept the final s, but when referring to it in my own prose I use the standard contemporary spelling, Marseille. I use the abbreviation MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) to refer to the Ministre des Affaires Étrangères or MAE in France. The ministry is also referred to as the Quai d’Orsay. After the establishment of the state of Israel, Moshe Shertok Hebraized his name to Moshe Sharett; as he appears in all the documents of 1945–9 as Moshe Shertok, I have decided to keep that name. In notes, “Washington” refers to Washington, DC, not the state of Washington. Before the establishment of the state of Israel, the area governed by the British Mandate from 1919 to 1948 was called “Palestine.” The files of the State Department for 1945–9 are listed as “the Palestine Files.” The use of the term “Palestine” in those years did not imply an anti-Zionist perspective. The term for the Jewish community in pre-state Palestine from the 1920s to 1948 is the “Yishuv.” I have left the grammar and spelling in the original documents of the 1940s intact. For example, “Negev” is left as “Negeb.” I have refrained from inserting definite articles in texts of telegraphic and telex diplomatic except when essential for clarifying meaning for the contemporary reader. Capitalization in some footnotes to diplomatic cables was in the original texts.