

From Belsen to Gaza: *The Promise* (2011), British and British-Jewish Identity

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This article discusses some of the issues raised by Peter Kosminsky's miniseries *The Promise* (2011) and investigates the intense public responses it engendered in Britain. The first part of the article explores how the miniseries takes the lead from the paradigmatic British Holocaust memory of the liberation of Belsen to engage with issues of British national self-perception. Drawing on Paul Gilroy's notion of 'postimperial melancholia', the article argues that *The Promise* explores important issues related to Britain's past and present, in particular the lasting heritage of Empire. The second part of the article engages with the intense reception of the miniseries among opinion makers and the general public, with many critics seeing *The Promise* as aimed at delegitimising the State of Israel both historically and in relation to the present. In thus doing, the article will situate the debate within the broader context of discussions on the supposed relationship between anti-Zionism and the so-called "new anti-Semitism", and more specifically discussion of the role of anti-Zionist Jews. The debate around *The Promise* is a valid case study for the exploration of two related controversies. The first one pertains to Jewish/non-Jewish relations, in particular regarding the international role of Israel in the twenty-first century. The second

one is more specifically infra-Jewish and revolves around the issue of which subjects are legitimate to speak out as Jews and in the name of which values.

Keywords: *The Promise*; British identity; British-Jewish identity; television; British Empire; Peter Kosminsky

Introduction

In the last few decades, Britain has shown extraordinary, and according to some commentators, unprecedented levels of interest in history (Cannadine 2004, 1). Mass media and especially television have played a major role in this phenomenon. The interest in history shown by commissioning editors, producers, sponsors for commercial channels, and of course the public, is not the same for all events. Some topics, such as the Tudor and Victorian periods, the two World Wars, Nazism and the Holocaust, have taken up most of the time allocated to history in television programming. In 2001, the then Head of History, Art and Religion for Channel 4, Janice Hadlow, claimed that almost every night British television offered at least one programme about the Second World War (Reading 2002, 78). Television's interest in the Second World War and the Holocaust has not significantly ebbed since then, and such topics are presented from a variety of angles in an imposing number of programmes.

The relationship between the Holocaust, the end of the British Mandate in Palestine and the foundation of the State of Israel, and the resulting explosion of the Israel-Palestine conflict is not one of the events more widely talked about and represented. More precisely, the end of the Mandate is very seldom represented in British films and fictional television. There are, of course, visual representations of

those events from other markets, from the Americans *Exodus* (Preminger 1960), *Judith* (Mann 1966), *Cast a Giant Shadow* (Shavelson 1966) and *A Woman Called Golda* (Gibson 1982), to the much less well-known Italian film *Il grido della terra* (The Earth Cries Out, Coletti 1949) and miniseries *Exodus: Il sogno di Ada* (Exodus: Ada's Dream, Calderone 2007), to the international co-productions *Eden* (Gitai 2001), *Kedma* (Gitai 2002), *Miral* (Schnabel 2010), *The Little Traitor* (Roth 2007) and *O Jerusalem* (Chouraqui 2006), among others. Whilst these works present an understandably varied range of interpretations and perspectives on the period, what is worth noting here is that none of them are predominantly British productions. In this sense, the end of the Mandate is part of a broader semi-repression of the late-imperial period in British visual culture. Whilst there is no paucity of films set in the Second World War, film and television's dramatic representations of the many wars fought by Britain after 1945 in the various recesses of the Empire are relatively rare.

Documentaries offer a slightly different picture. Both the BBC and private networks have contributed to the documentary production on the Mandate period. This is the case of ITV's early 1970s documentary *Struggle for Israel*, which in its second part engaged directly with the 1945-1948 period (Essex 1972). The BBC engaged with specific episodes of the late Mandate period, for example in *People of the Exodus* (Webster 1973), as well as with broader historical reconstructions of the period, often presented in the context of the larger Israel-Palestine conflict.¹ Such was the case of

¹ On *People of the Exodus*, see *Radio Times*, Issue 2583 (10 May 1973), p. 35. The programme is available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/entries/6f0ea5ae-2fee-3a36-a7fd-4059d334899f>.

Whose Land? (Jarvis 1975); the ten-episode 1978 BBC 1 educational programme *Roads to Conflict*, in particular episodes three to six (Owen 1978d, 1978b, 1978a, 1978c); the first instalment of the three-episode long 1981 biographical documentary *Dayan* (Davies 1981); episode two of the 2004 BBC 2 series *Empire Warriors* (Molloy 2004); and episode three of the 2007 BBC 2 series *Clash of the Worlds* (Pennink 2007). Finally, the end of the Mandate was at the centre of one episode of Channel 4's landmark 1985 series *End of Empire* (Anderson 1985).²

The BBC also tackled the Mandate period and its end in two documentaries aired to mark the twentieth and thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of Israel: *The State of the Jews* and *Israel: A Promised Land* (Wheeler 1968; Mirzoeff 1978).³ The latter was written and narrated by journalist James Cameron, who had been stationed in

² The full list of episodes for *Roads to Conflict* was "The Land Itself" (3 October 1978); "Return to Zion" (9 October 1978); "War and Diplomacy" (17 October 1978); "The Mandate Begins" (24 October 1978); "From Rebellion to War" (31 October 1978); "Towards a State" (7 November 1978); "From War to War" (14 November 1978); "Nasser and Israel" (21 November 1978); "The 'Palestinian Problem'" (28 November 1978); "End of the Road" (5 December 1978). All documentaries aired between 23:10 and 23:40 and were rerun one week later on BBC 2 at 14:30, thus granting the series an opportunity to cater to different audiences. The three episodes of BBC 2's *Dayan* were "Settler" (3 May 1981); "Warrior" (10 May 1981); "Statesman" (17 May 1981). The four episodes comprising the series *Empire Warriors* were "Mad Mitch and His Tribal Law" (18 November 2004); "The Jewish War" (26 November 2004); "The Intelligence War" (3 December 2004); "The Hunt for Kimathi" (10 December 2004). The three episodes of *Clash of the Worlds* are "Mutiny" (28 October 2007); "Sudan" (4 November 2007); "Palestine" (18 November 2007). Information from <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/>.

³ On these two broadcasts, see *Radio Times*, Issue 2320 (25 April 1968) and Issue 2843 (4 May 1978).

Palestine at the end of the Mandate, and returned to Israel decades later to assess how the hopes and dreams of the Jewish State's founders had withstood the test of time. As we will shortly see, this dual temporal structure bears some similarities to the main cultural product discussed in this article. Whilst clearly relatively minor compared to other events like, for example, the Holocaust, British television's engagement with the end of the Mandate and the foundation of Israel is not an unspoken area either. However, the programmes mentioned above are documentaries, and in most cases do not have as their primary focus a reflection on what the history of the end of the Mandate in Palestine can say about broader British identity. It is for these reasons that the miniseries *The Promise* (Kosminsky 2011b) is important, independently from its (not insignificant) viewing figures of 1.7 million spectators at its premiere (Laughlin 2011). Co-produced by the British companies Daybreak Pictures and Stonehenge Films and the Israeli Lama Films, directed by Peter Kosminsky and aired on Channel 4 on four consecutive Sundays between 6 and 27 February 2011, *The Promise* tackles the Israel-Palestine conflict by merging two temporal perspectives: that of the immediate post-war years, from 1945 to 1948, and the more recent one of 2005, at the climax of the Second Intifada.

The miniseries tells the story of eighteen-year old Erin Matthews (Claire Foy), who decides to take a gap year in Israel with her friend Eliza Meyer (Perdita Weeks) while the latter serves in the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). Erin takes with her the diary of her ailing and hospital-bound grandfather Len (Christian Cooke), found accidentally while clearing his house with her mother Chris. By reading Len's diary, Erin learns that he was among the liberators of Belsen and was then shipped to Palestine, where, as a sergeant in the Sixth Airborne Division, he spent the three crucial years that led to the

establishment of Israel. *The Promise* alternates scenes set in the immediate post-war period with others set in 2005. In its 356 minutes, the miniseries puts on screen some of the key events of these two periods. With regards to 1945-1948, *The Promise* shows the 22 July 1946 bombing of the British Headquarters at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, the hanging of two British sergeants on 29 July 1947, and the massacre of Palestinian civilians in the village of Deir Yassin on 9 April 1948, the first two carried out by the Irgun and the latter conducted predominantly by members of Irgun and of Lehi (also known as the Stern Gang).⁴ In the modern, 2005-set strand, the miniseries illustrates the conditions of the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian population in the early part of this century, in Nablus as much as in the occupied territories of the West Bank and in Gaza.

It is therefore clear that *The Promise* engages with sensitive topics, and it is not surprising that it generated intense debates on a variety of fronts upon release. This article will predominantly provide a reception study of the miniseries. As a result, the article's main focus is on the sets of meanings ascribed to the miniseries by a range of commentators from within Britain and from a variety of political and cultural backgrounds. As the next few pages will show, these different backgrounds often resulted in substantially different assessments of *The Promise* and of the events

⁴ Small contingents of the Haganah and Palmach took part in the Deir Yassin massacre, as shown by Morris (2004, 237). *The Promise*'s decision to show from up-close the impact of the King David Hotel bombing sets it aside from *Exodus*, which instead shows it from a distance in the form of smoke rising over Jerusalem. These two different approaches highlight different assessments of Irgun's terrorism in the pursuit of Israel's independence. On *Exodus*'s relationship with the theme of violence, see Shaw (2015, 62-81).

represented by it. In thus doing, the article will assess the sociological roots of various historical interpretations of the end of the Mandate and the Israel-Palestine conflict (On this methodology, see Staiger 2005, 2; Kansteiner 2002, 180). Throughout, these interpretations of the miniseries will be tested against my own reading of the filmic text. The analysis will focus on two of the more significant themes touched upon by the miniseries and by its reception. The first one is about the relationship between British national identity and the past, with particular reference to the largely repressed (or selective) memory of the end of Empire. The second theme refers to the way in which *The Promise* represents Jews in Mandate Palestine and in 21st-century Israel. Strictly related to this second theme is the interpretation of the miniseries's "message" offered by commentators from a variety of sectors of public opinion. This aspect of the miniseries generated the most intense controversy, including charges of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. As I will show in what follows, commentators' assessment of the degree of historical accuracy offered by *The Promise* was paramount for both themes.

Coming to terms with the end of Empire

The Promise tackles head-on the role played by Britain in the unfolding of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In turn, this theme is part of a much broader one, which can be synthetically defined as the repressed memory of Empire, and in particular the Empire's end made of defeats, humiliation and wars that are hard to justify in the present and the result of which was a significant reconfiguration of Britain's international standing (Grob-Fitzgibbon 2011; Drohan 2017). This selective memory is what Paul Gilroy has defined as "postimperial melancholia" (Gilroy 2004, 98). His argument is that the wealth of late-Imperial conflicts, including the end of the Mandate in Palestine, has left

deep scars on the British body politic but that Britain has avoided as much as possible coming to terms with these scars. According to Gilroy, this explains the national obsession with the Second World War, the last war to present sharp moral contours and the irritation with which less pleasant sides of the imperial experience are often met in public debates (97, 100). Thus, from this point of view what Gilroy describes is very similar to what in a different context Eric Santner defined as “narrative fetishism”, with which he identified “the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously designed to expunge the traces of trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place” (Santner 1992, 144).

The Promise subverts these very dynamics. Len’s diary starts with the liberation of Belsen. Viewers see the iconic archival images of bulldozers removing piles of corpses, as well as those of a weeping survivor holding the hand of a British soldier.⁵ The words from Len’s diary in which he argues that that alone was more than enough to explain once and for all why the war was worth fighting for make the concept even more explicit. Had the miniseries stopped there it would have been in line with established narratives about the past without adding much.⁶ But this was only the

⁵ On the relevance of Belsen in the shaping of British perceptions of the camps, see Reilly (1998) and Reilly et al. (1997). More specifically on the images of Belsen, see Haggith (2005) and Michalczyk (2014, 31-46).

⁶ See for example Kushner et al. (1997, 12). On the problematic nature of contemporary British Holocaust memory and its substantial failure in helping Britain rethink her national self-perception, see discussions of the paradigmatic example of the Holocaust Exhibition at the

beginning of the narrative, and the diary continues with the sinister omen “the damage that’s been done can’t be so easily repaired.”

Thus, *The Promise* starts when the majority of other narratives end; in this, it first welcomes viewers to adopt a morally and historically comfortable position, but then it takes them to a much less conventional and comfortable moral and historical territory (McElroy 2013, 287). In the miniseries, Len is called a “Nazi” by a survivor, and the British soldiers themselves realise the ambiguity of their task of preventing Holocaust survivors from reaching Palestinian shores. *The Promise* explicitly and self-consciously draws on Holocaust imagery by showing survivors imprisoned behind barbed-wire-fenced camps, women in those camps forced to undress in front of male soldiers, entire families rounded up, torn apart and forced into trucks. Viewers also witness anti-Semitic (and more generally racist) conduct from British soldiers. As Ruth McElroy noted, within a mere twenty-five minutes Len and the others (and viewers with them) go from the position of liberators to that of defenders of a system that “reproduces certain features of the inhumane treatment of Jews” (291). But there is more. The miniseries explicitly drives home the point that Britain failed its mission as the colonial power responsible for three decades of the fate of Palestine. Kosminsky himself repeated it on several occasions, most forcefully in an interview published in *The Observer* in which he stated: We were the

Imperial War Museum in Stone (2013, 224); Lawson (2013); Jinks (2013); Pearce (2014, 131).

colonial power in Palestine and, as in so many other examples of our retreat from Empire, we left it totally fucked up. Chaos. We washed our hands of it. I wanted to say: if you think the Israel-Palestine situation is not our problem, think again (Cooke 2011c, 16-7).

What was the response to this approach to such page of British history? On the right, some eyebrows were raised in *The Spectator*, which in a column published on the eve of the broadcast, remarked with mild sarcasm that, being commissioned by Channel 4, and therefore liberal in the columnist's view, *The Promise* would have found a way to blame the entire Israel-Palestine conflict on the British (Delingpole 2011). However, the majority of the press more simply approved of the chance offered by a cultural product of expected high value to engage with such complex historical and current issues (Cooke 2011b, 2011a), with the Scottish tabloid *Daily Record* going as far as to define the miniseries as "true gourmet fare" (Mark 2011). As implicit proof of the point made above about the relative absence of this page of British history from mainstream historical consciousness, one is struck by the reviews and other commentaries that candidly admitted not knowing much about Mandate Palestine, for example Hugh Montgomery in *The Independent* (Montgomery 2011).

In light of this, it is therefore not entirely worthless to ask to what extent *The Promise* was historically accurate and briefly examine the debate around this point. The main contribution in this sense came from the late David Cesarani, who in an op-ed gave a pretty trenchant judgement on this aspect of the miniseries, as well as on the notion of British national identity promoted in his view by *The Promise*. Cesarani criticised the miniseries for not stating eloquently enough that Britain was not in Palestine simply on a peacekeeping mission (or as an officer says in 1945 to some

newly-arrived troops, to be “the meat in the sandwich” between the Arabs and the Jews), but to defend the Empire. Despite its didacticism, continued Cesarani, *The Promise* failed to mention the 1917 Balfour Declaration, with which the British Empire committed itself to allowing the establishment of a “Jewish home” to prevent the birth of an Arab state that would have jeopardized the governability of India, just as it failed to mention the fact that Palestine was of strategic importance for the Empire even after 1945. Cesarani’s conclusion was that because of these omissions, *The Promise* is “a glossy exercise in self-exculpation” (Cesarani 2011; On the importance of the Balfour Declaration, see Schneer 2010).

Cesarani’s opinion was important in its own terms because of his expertise on the topic and because of his public role as an authoritative historian. At the same time, however, this opinion was, on the one hand, relatively isolated (as I will shortly argue, most of the controversy was not on this issue) and, on the other, perhaps a little unfair. In an interview with the liberal online magazine *JNews* that specialized in Israeli and Palestinian themes, Kosminsky explained how Len represented the point of view of many soldiers at the time who barely knew where they were and had precious little knowledge of the history and political intricacies of the region. It is for this reason, Kosminsky argued, that there is no mention of the Balfour Declaration or of anything preceding 1945, because those developments were not experienced or known by Len (whose character, according to Kosminsky, is based on the testimony of around 80 veterans interviewed in preparation for the miniseries) (Weingarten 2011). This focalization, whilst irritating for Cesarani, is historically plausible if one considers that even in September 1947, at the climax of media exposure, half of the respondents to a Mass-Observation survey had never heard of the Balfour Declaration (Mass-

Observation Archive September 1947, 24). Furthermore, such focalization is not devoid of coherence in the narrative. Proof of this is the dialogue between Len and his Arab acquaintance Hamid (Loai Nofi); when asked why Britain suppressed the 1936 Arab revolt, Len does not know what Hamid is talking about (Weingarten 2011).

Besides this specific point about historical accuracy, there are many fictional elements in the miniseries, including characters, events and locations. For example, the bombing of the British military Headquarters at the King David Hotel takes place while British staff officers are discussing the details of Operation Bulldog, aimed at surrounding Tel Aviv and rounding up Irgun militants hiding in the city. In reality, the operation (named Shark) did not precede the bombing but followed it as a direct consequence. By the same token, the Irgun arsenal discovered during the operation was not in the Meshek Yagur kibbutz, but in the foundations of a school in Tel Aviv (Rose 2009, 118). Moreover, the killing of the two sergeants by the Irgun in 1947 was a reprisal for the execution of three militants, and not only one as shown in the miniseries (Golani 2013, 205-8). Finally, Deir Yassin is on the outskirts of Jerusalem and not Haifa as shown in *The Promise*. Having said that, and in this I differ from Cesarani, I would say that these inaccuracies are still within what Robert Rosenstone has defined as “true inventions,” by which he refers to departures from the historical record that do not, however, distort or ignore the historical discourse (Rosenstone 1995, 72).

Beyond this, any discussion about *The Promise*'s approach to history and its importance for the theme of British national identity should not exclude Erin's character and her role within the narrative. Through her, viewers are shown 21st-century Israel and Palestine and the impact of the events that led to the establishment of the Jewish State continue to have on the entire region. However, Erin is an essential point of

junction between the past and present not only for the Middle East, but also for British national identity.

By reading Len's diary, Erin realises that he has spent all his life after 1948 feeling guilty for having betrayed the promise made to his friend Mohammed (Ali Suliman) to bring back his son Hassan (Amir Najjar) who had gone missing during the flight towards the Haifa port, and to return the key to Mohammed's house entrusted upon Len when the Arab family left. This is a symbol to this day for many Palestinian families of their hope to be able to return someday (Webster 2016, 58-60). The child Hassan dies by a sniper's bullet, and Len is unable to return the key because he is arrested by the military police charged with being a deserter after having briefly joined a group of Arabs defending their village. It is this unfulfilled promise that pushes Erin to look for Mohammed's family in a journey that will take her from the "heaven" (as she first defines it immediately upon arrival) of Cesarea where Eliza's family lives, to the Arab villages in Israel divided by the contentious separation barrier set up by Israel, to cities like Nablus under the control of the Palestinian Authority, to the occupied territories of the West Bank like Hebron, and finally to the "hell" of Gaza. In Gaza, Erin finds Mohammed's daughter Jawda (Maria Zreik/Hiam Abbass), to whom she finally returns the key, thus fulfilling at least in part the promise Len made to Mohammed.⁷

⁷ The miniseries's title is thus not only an obvious reference to the land promised by God to Abraham, and perhaps to the promise made by the Balfour declaration, but also the promise of protecting the Arab population implied in the British Mandatary role, only to be betrayed. On this, see Hary (2016, § 9).

Commentators have interpreted this denouement in radically different ways. For example, Nir Cohen applies to Erin the same judgement Cesarani expressed about the representation of Len. During her journey in Palestine Erin gets involved in a number of extraordinary situations: these include almost being arrested by the IDF for having vocally defended a group of Palestinian schoolchildren who are the victims of stone-throwing by a group of settler children, chaining herself to a house about to be demolished by the IDF in Gaza, and shortly thereafter risking being run over by a bulldozer in an episode reminiscent of Rachel Corrie's death ("Rachel Corrie" 2012). For this reason Cohen claims that Erin's virtuosity serves the function of relieving contemporary Britain of any sense of guilt and responsibility for the current situation in Israel and Palestine. To corroborate this claim Cohen references an exchange towards the end of the miniseries, in which Jawda's question "Why are you here [in Gaza]?" is met with Erin's reply "I don't know, I'm from England; I suppose I'm trying to help" (Cohen 2013, 52).

This criticism is convincing *prima facie* but perhaps it only partially engages with Erin's symbolic function. In fact, hers is a coming-of-age journey. Erin bridges the chasm between her and Len when she returns the key and closes the small historical circle Len had opened. In so doing, she finally manages to understand him and through him to understand herself a little better, growing up from a self-centred and narcissistic teenager to fully-rounded young person capable of important moral and political choices. Erin thus represents an emerging (albeit still germinal) sense of understanding among members of the younger British generations of being part of Imperial history, and that this awareness brings with it a degree of responsibility for the past, even when such past is less than glorious (McElroy 2013, 284, 95). *The Promise* is quite explicit in

emphasizing the similarities between British practices of repression and control in the past and Israeli ones in the present. Erin comes to understand and take sides on the latter having developed knowledge of the former through Len's diary (Bernard 2013, 99).

Here is the gist of the miniseries, as Kosminsky himself affirmed when he claimed that:

In Palestine, as in so many other examples of our rapid retreat from empire, we left chaos, political confusion, bloodshed and war. It turns out that it is our problem, at least in part, and we should take some responsibility for it (Kosminsky 2011a).

From this point of view, then, Erin is similar to Giovanna, the lead character in Turkish-Italian director Ferzan Ozpetek's Holocaust-related *La finestra di fronte* (Facing Windows, 2003). Set in the present, Ozpetek's film tells the story of the encounter between Davide, a traumatised Jewish survivor who lost his lover Simone in the Rome roundup of October 1943, and Giovanna, a young mother of two struggling with the drudgery of her daily life. It is only when Giovanna learns of Davide's story and incorporates his historical trauma within her own identity that she is able to achieve a sense of self-fulfilment in the present. Thus, both Giovanna and Erin manage to find themselves in the present only after they have developed an engagement with, and understanding of, a difficult aspect of their country's past (Gordon 2012, 107). Finally, the line "I'm from England; I suppose I'm trying to help" takes on a different meaning when read alongside Jawda's sarcastic response, delivered whilst her house is about to be demolished, that "you're not really succeeding." What Cohen reads as an unself-conscious sense of moral superiority and entitlement to interfere typical of a colonial power, McElroy sees it instead as evidence of a coming to grips with the present and the burden of the past and, at the same time, an acknowledgement that this awareness

makes practically no difference in the world (Cohen 2013, 53; McElroy 2013, 295). In the end, the expression “I’m from England; I suppose I’m trying to help” draws on a comfortable and widespread self-representation in British culture, only to subvert it to show its ineffectiveness.

The Representation of Jews

The first part of the article has almost exclusively engaged with the ways in which *The Promise* engages with the theme of British history and national consciousness. This is understandable if we consider that the miniseries is in part about a page of British history, centred on two English characters (Erin and Len), directed by an Englishman and aimed primarily at a British audience. However, it should not be forgotten that *The Promise* is a three-way story involving the British, the Israelis and the Palestinians. The remainder of this article focuses on the representation of Jews in *The Promise*. In a preview of the miniseries, *The Times*’s Benji Wilson succinctly summed up *The Promise*’s main thesis that “it was a combination of bungling Britons and traumatised Jews [...] who created the conflict” (Wilson 2011). Wilson then predicted that, since both Kosminsky’s main characters Len and Erin “end up sympathizing with the Palestinians in the face of Israeli aggression, [Kosminsky] will be accused of being anti-Israeli.” This prophecy proved accurate. The fiercest debates in Britain were not about the representation of the British but that of today’s Israel and of Palestinian Jews in the immediate post-war period. The debate involved a variety of commentators, including the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the State of Israel through its Embassy in Britain, and was occasionally quite vitriolic. According to critics there were two main problems with the miniseries: the first one was that the representation of

Jewish characters was exceedingly negative and unrealistic; the second one was that the political “message” delivered by *The Promise* was, in their view, that the State of Israel is morally delegitimized by its own violent birth and by its oppressive policies against the Palestinians.

As mentioned above, Len arrives in Palestine with the human catastrophe of Belsen still in his eyes. Just as in the case of many of his comrades, his initial point of view is sympathetic towards the Zionist cause, more for humanitarian than political reasons, and he feels deeply uneasy about his task of having to try to limit the Holocaust survivors’ influx into Palestine. This view is summed up in the diary with the phrase “these people have suffered, and we respond with barbed wire.” However, soon enough the series of attacks against British troops (including one in which Len himself is seriously wounded), together with the growing realization that the Arabs were going to be victims of the establishment of the Jewish State and that the British army was not going to do anything to help them, led to a change of heart in Len and a realignment of his sympathies. The last entry in his diary, written after having witnessed first-hand the massacre of Deir Yassin, encapsulates this shift:

It’s tough to see the British army crawling away on its belly after winning the war so bravely. [W]e’ve left the Arabs in the shit [...]; but what about the Jews and their bloody state for which they fought so hard. Three years ago I’d have said give them whatever they want; they deserve it after all they’ve been through. Now I’m not so sure. This precious state of theirs is been born in violence and in cruelty to its neighbours. I’m not sure how it can hope to thrive.

Moreover, Len engages in a relationship with a woman, Clara, who not only proves herself to be an Irgun militant, but also uses Len for her own political ends.⁸ In short, there are not many decidedly positive Jewish characters in the portion of *The Promise* set in Mandate Palestine.

The representation of the section of Israeli society Erin encounters is to some extent similar but also more complex. Eliza's family lives in Cesarea and owns a house with a swimming pool and a live-in maid, all rather rare occurrences in Israel; in other words, it is a family decidedly situated in the upper stratum of society. Eliza's father Max (Ben Miles) is an important intellectual and a point of reference for the Israeli liberal intelligentsia, while her mother Leah (Smadi Wolfman) comes from a right-wing family, and Eliza's grandfather Immanuel (Yair Rubin) was an Irgun militant involved, among other things, in the King David Hotel bombing. Eliza's brother Paul (Itay Tiran) is a militant pacifist, a view he developed while serving with the IDF in Hebron. Paul confronts Max arguing that far from achieving tangible results, the liberal opposition he

⁸ The theme of family and romantic ties being entangled with, and fatally undermined by, incompatible political affiliations in the final years of Mandate Palestine appears to be a trope of contemporary British-Jewish cultural work. In Linda Grant's *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2011 [2000]), the female British-Jewish protagonist Evelyn Sert falls in love with an Irgun member; in Bernice Rubens's *The Sergeants' Tale* (2004 [2003]), the Haganah member Hannah plans to marry a British Sergeant who is kidnapped and killed by the Irgun with the decisive help of her own father. In *The Promise* the roles are reversed: Clara is an Irgun militant and her disapproving father works for the Haganah. I would like to thank one of the anonymous peer reviewers for reminding me of these two novels.

represents does nothing more than legitimize the occupation of the West Bank. Paul appears to be the only member of Eliza's family to have Arab acquaintances; moreover, he takes it upon himself to give Erin a crash course on the conflict, as well as driving her to several points in her quest for the family owners of the key Len had never returned. If the Meyer family is not without ambiguities, the rest of Israeli society seen by Erin is painted in more emphatically negative tones. The Israelis Erin consults about the fate of the Arab families who lived in their homes before the Nakba reply with a mixture of indifference and outright hostility; the settlers in Hebron are brutes and so is the IDF, and Gaza is a pile of rubble to which the army adds more rubble when it demolishes the homes of suicide bombers and their families.

This description of the miniseries's plot and characters is necessary to understand some of the more ferocious criticism it received. The Board of Deputies of British Jews, in the person of its Chair Vivian Wineman, wrote a letter of complaint to Chief Executive of Channel 4, David Abraham. In the letter, Wineman claimed that *The Promise* was packed full of historical errors and biased against the Jews in the name of "a very specific political agenda that unfortunately resulted in the demonization and dehumanisation of the Jewish protagonists and, by association, all Jews, including in this country, who support Israel" (Fleischer 2011). In particular, Wineman took issue with what he saw as the arbitrary choices made by the miniseries. Among these, for example, are the fact that *The Promise* did not mention the war waged by a coalition of Arab states against Israel immediately after its establishment, the failure to mention the phone calls made by Irgun warning the British of the impending destruction of the King

David Hotel, and what he saw as the comparison established by *The Promise* between Nazi crimes in the Holocaust and the conduct of Jews in Palestine.⁹

Channel 4 defended the programme, mostly via Camilla Campbell, at the time the channel's Head of Drama. First of all, she claimed that it is unfair to expect the same level of accuracy and exhaustiveness from a work of fiction normally required by a documentary.¹⁰ Campbell also added that *The Promise* establishes some similarities between the way the British forces treated the Irgun and the way the IDF have treated Palestinians in more recent years, but that at no point in the miniseries there are similitudes between the conduct of Jews and that of the Nazis (Khalsa 2011). One could even add that the only direct comparison with the Nazis refers to the way in which the Mandate treated Holocaust survivors landing in Palestine. Furthermore, had the miniseries really pursued the complete historical accuracy proposed by Wineman, it could have dwelled on the fact that the interpretation of yishuv terrorism as "a manifestation of Nazism", as Information Officer in Palestine Christopher Home defined it, was almost hegemonic among the British establishment and the press (Carruthers 1995, 32). Moreover, even though not mentioned in Channel 4's reply, it

⁹ For a diametrically opposite interpretation, i.e. that *The Promise* reinforces "a 'soft' Zionist position,, see Ginsberg (2016, 112).

¹⁰ This was also the view taken by the Special Broadcasting Service Corporation in Australia, which after "several discussions with some of the Jewish community affairs groups" after the airing of the first episode, decided to preface the remaining three episodes with a statement reminding viewers that it was a work of fiction. See SBS's Managing Director Michael Ebeid in ("Special Broadcasting Service Corporation" 2012, 128).

could be argued that the reason why *The Promise* does not show the phone calls warning of the bomb might be that those phone calls were not received in time (Rose 2009, 115-6).¹¹

The Board of Deputies represented an important critical voice in the debate engendered by *The Promise* since they constitute the institutional voice of the British Jewish community. However, it was not the only one. *The Jewish Chronicle* also attacked the miniseries, for example in one column written by the PR officer at the Board of Deputies Simon Round and titled “Fatah could have written *The Promise*” (Round 2011). Moreover, *The Jewish Chronicle* gave voice to criticisms of the miniseries coming from a range of sources. Among them was that of the press attaché at the Israeli Embassy in London Amir Ofek, who defined *The Promise* as “worse than anything I’ve seen” and as a product that “has created a new category of hostility towards Israel” (Dysch 2011). The miniseries was deemed, in Diana Pinto’s words, “totally unacceptable for the vast majority of Israelis (and Jews) who adhere to a zero-sum reading” of the Israel-Palestine conflict (Pinto 2013, 163).

The Zionist Federation went a step beyond simply writing disparaging reviews and sent Ofcom¹² one of the over forty letters of complaint against the miniseries sent by organisations and private citizens. These complaints were filed by Ofcom as being about religious discrimination or offence (42 letters), materially misleading (3), breach

¹¹ The warnings are shown in *Exodus*, though; see Shaw (2015, 75).

¹² Office of Communications, the regulatory and competition authority for the broadcasting, telecommunications and postal industries of the United Kingdom.

of generally accepted standards (1), and due accuracy (1) (Ofcom 2011). In its reply, Ofcom explained how the main charge against *The Promise* in those letters was of representing Jews in an anti-Semitic way and in thus inciting racial hatred against the Jews. It is impossible to account in detail for Ofcom's response, which was relatively lengthy and articulate; suffice to say here that the communications regulator did not find anything in the miniseries that breached its standards ("The Promise – Finding Letter [sent to complainants and the Broadcaster]" 2011). As a result, *The Promise* was the second most complained about programme among those found not in breach of Ofcom standards for the period February to April 2011.

What matters here is that *The Promise* situates itself within a debate, in Britain as elsewhere, on the relationship between anti-Zionism and the new anti-Semitism, and more specifically on the public role of anti-Zionist Jews, as well as on the role of Israel as a source of communal and individual identity. The literature analyzing this phenomenon is voluminous and steadily growing.¹³ In its current form the debate on the new anti-Semitism closely follows the exacerbation of the Israel-Palestine conflict, with every recrudescence of violence since the 1967 War (Judaken 2008). In fact, the qualitative difference between "old" and "new" anti-Semitism is, according to this literature, that the latter is less concerned with religious or racial themes than with the State of Israel and the Zionist project. For this reason, one of the most contentious aspects of the debate is about the relationship between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

¹³ Relatively recent additions to this literature include Marcus (2015); Rosenfeld (2015).

More precisely, the literature on the “new antisemitism” tries to navigate between the theoretical awareness that not all anti-Zionism or criticism of Israel are necessarily anti-Semitic, and the suspicion that in the end they are indeed anti-Semitic, and that anti-Zionism is a socially-acceptable byword for anti-Semitism.¹⁴ Even though Walter Laqueur admits that “there is no clear border line” between the two, he also adds that in his view they are historically non-distinguishable (Laqueur 2006, 7). David Patterson offers a particularly explicit illustration of this reasoning . In his view, since after the Holocaust the aim of Zionism is to “establish a safe haven for the Jewish people,” the anti-Zionists must either be Holocaust deniers or desire the occurrence of another Holocaust-like event. For this reason, Patterson concludes, “to deny the Jewish state the right to exist is to deny the Jewish people the right to live” (Patterson 2015, 196). Anthony Julius shares this premise to the point of proposing to replace the definition of “new antisemitism” with that of “contemporary anti-Zionism”, with the latter being nothing else than a more precise description of the former (Julius 2010, 442).

This is clearly not the place to engage in full with the validity of such claims and to unpack the knotted debate between pro- and anti-Zionists.¹⁵ What matters is that the conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism exemplified above illustrates the issues at stake in the debate and helps explain why the Jewishness of many advocates of the anti-

¹⁴ For a recent work that reiterates the notion of anti-Zionism as simply a “newer, subtler” guise of anti-Semitism, see Jaspal (2014, 4).

¹⁵ For an attempt to go beyond (or around) these issues, see the study of the historical arc of post-Zionism in Israel in Kaplan (2015).

Zionist or post-Zionist position is not a mitigating circumstance in the eyes of their opponents. Quite the opposite. Peter Kosminsky's Jewishness became integral to the public debate engendered by *The Promise* in Britain. The most intense articulations of the miniseries' reception took the form of an infra-Jewish debate and must therefore be briefly situated within the context of contemporary British Jewish culture.

The Promise is, along with Howard Jacobson's novel *The Finkler Question*, a work that to some extent goes against the grain of most twenty-first century British Jewish cultural productions. In fact, while mainstream contemporary British Jewish culture is, in general terms, much more concerned with the theme of "Britishness", intellectuals like Kosminsky, Jacobson, and Linda Grant who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s bring Israel back to the centre of British Jewish discourse (Stähler 2013, 112). In the case of Kosminsky, this is done through a postcolonial lens.

Postcolonial discourse is essential in this context. According to Anthony Julius, secular anti-Zionism emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Among its main features are the fact that it emerges from the Left and includes many Jews among its ranks (Julius 2010, 441). Such Jews, anti-Zionist in the name of justice and universal values and influenced by postcolonial discourse, are the main targets of Julius's criticism. In his view, unlike the traditional figure of the self-hating Jew, this new generation of anti-Zionist Jews are confident of representing Jewish moral conscience. Julius dismisses the arguments put forward by what he defines as this "club of narcissists" not so much for their content but on the grounds of the interpretation of the psychological reasons for which they are

presented in the first place.¹⁶ Through a series of syllogisms, Julius claims that, albeit unintentionally, these anti-Zionist Jewish voices offer an important contribution to anti-Semitic discourse (Julius 2010, 549-54). Howard Jacobson makes the same point specifically about *The Promise*. In his view, anti-Zionist Jews do nothing but play into the hands of what he sees as the current “brute consensus” that “Israel is the proof that Jews did not adequately learn the lesson of the Holocaust” (Jacobson 2011). According to Jacobson, the miniseries, just like Caryl Churchill’s play written in the wake of the 2008-2009 Gaza War, *Seven Jewish Children* (2009), uses the Holocaust to charge Jews with failing to live up to its lesson. Here, too, we have a psychological explanation of Kosminsky’s thinking (self-hatred according to Jacobson) combined with a complete dismissal of the miniseries, judged a “ludicrous piece of brainwashed prejudice” that Ofcom failed to denounce only because it is an “intellectually unsophisticated” body itself. For Jacobson, the miniseries’s main crime was to follow “the consensus” in arguing that “Jews went through hell only to build a hell for others” (Jacobson 2011). This is, in his view, the “new strategy” of anti-Semites replacing Holocaust denial.

The idea at the root of Jacobson’s and Julius’s reasoning that the emphasis on human rights offers a platform for anti-Semitism is made even more explicit by Efraim Sicher in a 2011 article, followed the next year by a book co-authored with Linda Weinhouse that combined show what is at stake in the debate of which *The Promise* is part. Sicher’s argument takes the lead from the claim that postcolonial discourse tends

¹⁶ Julius’ criticism can be thus seen as a variant of what Mick Finlay has defined as “pathologizing dissent”; see Finlay (2005).

not to engage with Jewish matters and with anti-Semitism, focusing instead on the theme of “Palestine” (which Sicher writes between inverted commas). Sicher particularly laments the fact that, in postcolonial discourse, victorious post-1948 Zionism has moved Jews from the position of outsiders in Europe to that of belated expansionist and racially exclusivist European colonialists. In his and Weinhouse’s view, this transition and exclusion of Jews from postcolonial discourse can only be explained with reference to the traditional Christian resentment of alleged Jewish arrogance and chauvinism (Sicher and Weinhouse 2012, 15). According to Sicher, then, postcolonial discourse “in some ways” reproduces the well-known hostility for the Jews of Christian replacement theology. Because of its identification with what Sicher terms “the new gospel of human rights” that sees the “mythicization of land as nation” as “a cause of racism and war”, postcolonialism is for him intrinsically hostile to the idea of Israel as a Jewish State, even more so in light of the sufferings of the Palestinians (Sicher 2011, 4; Sicher and Weinhouse 2012, 19). To be fair, Sicher acknowledges that advocates of a binational state solution “do not usually *openly* call for the deportation or extermination of the Jewish population of Israel” (Sicher 2011, 10, my emphasis). While Sicher does not state what he thinks supporters of the one-state solution secretly hope for, he does argue that any criticism that transcends the critique of specific Israeli government policies in the end results in the demonization of Israel, denying its right to existence and thus “licensing” anti-Semitism.

The main targets of the tirade are not only postcolonial scholars like Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, but also (and perhaps primarily) what Sicher sees as anti-Zionist Jews like the late Tony Judt. From this point of view, John Lloyd’s review of *The Promise* for *Financial Times* is accurate in defining the Israel-Palestine conflict as one fought at

many levels, including crucially “within Jewry itself, both in Israel and in the diaspora” (Lloyd 2011). The arguments presented by Julius and Sicher suggest the existence of a twofold and intimately entwined conflict. The first one is about the place of Israel in the twenty-first century’s system of moral values. The second one, more decidedly infra-Jewish, is about who is entitled to speak as Jews and in the name of which values they can exert this right. It is precisely this double tension that explains some of the sharp responses to *The Promise*.

Conclusion

The controversial representation of Jews and of the Israel-Palestine conflict offered by *The Promise* dominated its reception in Britain, thus offering a useful case study of some of the main tenets of the literature on the so-called new anti-Semitism. This literature develops a series of themes, some of which are often repeated but occasionally also under-theorised, and sometimes result in the construction of peculiar intellectual arguments. This article has discussed some of them in relation to *The Promise* and, in particular, the substantial identification made in much of the literature on the new anti-Semitism of anti-Zionism or advocacy of the one-state solution with anti-Semitism. Because of this slippage, when those positions are suggested by Jews, the response in part of the scholarship on the new anti-Semitism is to dismiss them as dangerous when not malicious, and to explain them away as the product of alternatively self-hatred or narcissism. This is a peculiar way of proposing political and intellectual arguments, which makes them interesting to analyze but perhaps do not represent the most efficient use of intellectual resources.

Because of this rehashing of all-too-familiar heated discussions and allegations, the important points made by *The Promise* about British imperial history and its relationship with contemporary British identity ended up being overshadowed. This is a pity, because *The Promise* takes the lead from a relatively comfortable and almost ossified subject position, such as that of Britain victorious against the Nazis and liberator of the camps, and turns it on its head in a provocative manner. Independently from one's opinion of it, credit should be given to *The Promise* for making a strong intervention on crucial themes of British history and memory. Ultimately, the miniseries is an example of "palimpsestic memory,"- reengaging with, and seeking productive interconnections between, different moments in time and space (Silverman 2013, 4-5). In this case, this memory takes the lead from the Holocaust to touch upon other themes related to the legacy of Empire, important both for the centre and the periphery. This is, in the opinion of this writer, a productive way of keeping both the Holocaust and the messy end of Empire relevant for Britain in the present and for the future.

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