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## Jews and the British Empire c.1900

David Feldman

In the years of high imperialism at the beginning of the twentieth century what bearing did the British Empire have on the Jews, or Jews on the British Empire? The silence of scholarship might lead us to answer 'not very much'. Concerned with the legacy of Jewish emancipation, the dynamics of social integration, the challenge of large-scale migration, and the representation of Jewish difference in political argument, historians of the Jews have barely touched on the subject. Historians of empire, for their part, have had other preoccupations too. Perhaps the identification of imperialism with Jewish finance by J. A. Hobson and other radical critics of empire in the 1890s and early 1900s, as well as the Jew-baiting rhetoric of some critics, has rendered the relationship of Jews to the Empire a difficult problem for later generations to address.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the subject itself is scarcely hidden from view. If we look at some of the Jewish community's central institutions we find they held an imperial dimension. The Chief Rabbi was the religious head of the United Hebrew Congregations not merely of England or Britain but of the British Empire.<sup>2</sup> The Anglo-Jewish pulpit was fulsome in its support for empire. In 1897 Queen Victoria's jubilee was celebrated in every synagogue in Britain. Here, as in the nation at large, the celebrations delivered an imperial message. The Chief Rabbi – Nathan Adler – marvelled that 'Nothing in the history of the world has been more remarkable than the growth and expansion by leaps and by bounds, of the prosperity of the Empire, of its population, and of its wealth, its commerce and industry'.<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Michael Adler, minister at Hammersmith Synagogue, surveyed 'the political and social condition of our coreligionists at the present moment in the British Empire' and found it 'better than at any previous period of the exile'.

At the Central Synagogue, Israel Abrahams connected the success of Jewish emancipation to the practice of toleration that, in his view, was required by successful imperial rule. 'With off-shoots in all countries and climes, embracing under its banner men widely differing on race, in religion, and in language, England alone of all the

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<sup>1</sup> My own book, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture, 1840–1914*, London, 1994, while it does not entirely ignore imperial themes, provides one illustration of this tendency. Only a little more work by literary scholars has focused on the ways Empire figured in representations of Jews. See Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature 1875–1920*, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 55–94.

<sup>2</sup> The inevitable disputes between ministers and their congregations in the colonies were referred to the Chief Rabbi in London. In time, some colonial congregations tried to establish their own rabbinical court – a *Beth Din* – but these courts required approval from the Chief Rabbi in London to establish their legitimacy. Louis Hermann, *The Jews in South Africa*, 1930, pp.161, 164; Suzanne D. Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora: two Centuries of Jewish Settlement in Australia*, second edn, 1997, Rose Bay NSW, Australia, pp. 30, 48, 74.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Adler, *Anglo-Jewish Memories*, London, 1909, pp. 96–7.

empires of Europe has grown to understand that national life needs differentiation in a union of many forces on behalf of progress and righteousness.’<sup>4</sup>

The Board of Deputies of British Jews, the body that represented Jewry to the British government, tried to influence colonial affairs when it deemed Jewish interests were at stake. In 1902, when the Cape of Good Hope Immigration Act required immigrants to sign their name in a European language but did not count Yiddish among the European languages, the Board made representations to the Cape government.<sup>5</sup> The *Jewish Chronicle* was the pre-eminent communal newspaper, and provided the community with one widely-circulated representation of itself. It is significant that at the turn of the century it carried a regular column titled ‘Colonial and Foreign News’ as well as another which presented ‘Jottings from South Africa’. The *Jewish Year Book*, first published in 1896, fulfilled a similar role defining the parameters of the community and it too acknowledged the community's imperial dimension as it listed synagogues, associations and personages across the Colonies. But it is not only in the official and quasi-official institutions of Anglo-Jewry that we can find an imperial presence. Among the Jewish friendly and benefit societies in the East End of London there were lodges and associations named after Major General Baden Powell or which gave an ‘imperial’ prefix to their name.<sup>6</sup>

If we move from institutions to individuals we can see that the empire offered careers for English Jews as well as for non-Jews. Many, of course, emigrated permanently. However, others, such as Henry Herman Gordon returned. Gordon was born in Germany of Russian Jewish parents. His father came to London to serve as a minister and the young Henry, having been educated at the Jews’ Free School and at Cambridge University, went to India as a railway engineer before returning at the turn of the century to become a member of Stepney Borough Council.<sup>7</sup> Among the clergy, this sort of circulation was not unusual. The colonies provided congregations for underemployed ministers and, by the start of the twentieth century, colonial congregations themselves provided ministers for congregations in Britain. Julius Goldstein, the minister at the North London Synagogue in Dalston, had been born in Australia.<sup>8</sup> The most striking instance of this sort of movement occurred in 1912 when Dr J. H. Hertz, who had been the Rabbi of Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation, was appointed Chief Rabbi in succession to Nathan Adler. Hertz first came to notice in Britain on account of his noisy support for the British cause in the months preceding the Boer War. For his pains he was expelled from Johannesburg. After Hertz had settled in the Cape, the British High Commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner appointed him to his advisory council. A decade later, Milner's recommendation, and his friendship with Lord Rothschild, assisted Hertz in his candidacy for the vacant Chief Rabbinate.<sup>9</sup>

Jews were also involved in fighting for and administering the empire. Between 1893 and 1903 the number of Jews holding a commission doubled and those in the ranks

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<sup>4</sup> Both quotations are cited in William D. Rubinstein, *A History of the Jews in the English-speaking World: Great Britain*, Basingstoke, 1996, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Herbert Lewis Emanuel, *A Century and a Half of Jewish History*, extracted from the *Minute Books of the London Committee of Deputies of the British Jews*, 1910, p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> National Archives, FS 4 29.

<sup>7</sup> Parliamentary Papers 1903 IX, *Royal Commission on Alien Immigration*, qq. 17,594–6.

<sup>8</sup> *Jewish Year Book*, 1900–01, 1900, p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Alderman, *The Jewish Community in British Politics*, Oxford, 1983, p. 88.

increased sixfold.<sup>10</sup> The Nathan family evidently looked on the British Empire as a sort of family concern. In the first decade of the twentieth century Sir Matthew Nathan served as Governor of the Gold Coast, Hong Kong and Natal. One brother, Sir Nathaniel Nathan, was Attorney-General and Chief Justice in Trinidad, and a second brother, Sir Robert Nathan, rose to become Private Secretary to the Viceroy of India and Officiating Chief Secretary to the Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Hermann Kisch entered the Indian Civil Service in 1873 where he passed through a series of posts finally becoming Postmaster-General of Bengal. At home, Sir Lionel Abrahams became Permanent Assistant Under-Secretary at the India Office. Indeed, he held this post at the same time as Edwin Montagu was Parliamentary Under-Secretary for India.<sup>11</sup>

Empire, of course, was also a field for the pursuit of profit. The house of Rothschild concerned itself mainly with loans to governments and public bodies. However, in the 1890s it became heavily involved in diamond and gold mining on the Rand. When Alfred Beit and Julius Wernher floated Rand Mines in February 1893, Rothschilds were allotted 27,000 of the 100,000 shares.<sup>12</sup> The scandals that beset the Edwardian Jewish plutocracy also illustrate Jews' involvement in the empire as a money-making enterprise. The Marconi scandal of 1912, it is well known, centred on the allegation that four Liberal cabinet ministers stood to profit from a contract awarded to the English Marconi Company. Two of the cabinet ministers in question – Sir Rufus Isaacs and Herbert Samuel – were Jews. The head of the English Marconi Company was Geoffrey Isaacs, the brother of Sir Rufus. However, what is less often noted is that the prize Marconi had won was a contract to construct an *empire-wide* chain of wireless stations. In the Indian Silver Scandal, which broke in 1912, Ernest Franklin, a Jewish merchant banker and partner in the firm of Samuel Montagu suggested to Sir Felix Schuster – the chairman of the finance committee of the Council of India – that his company should purchase £5m of silver for the Indian government and so circumvent speculators who might drive up the price. This was an unusual arrangement. Normally, the India Office purchased its silver through the Bank of England. The civil servant who transacted the business was Lionel Abrahams while, as we have seen, Edwin Montagu was a minister in the India Office and his cousin, Stuart Samuel, was both a partner in Samuel Montagu and Co. and Liberal MP for Whitechapel. Critics detected impropriety and a Jewish plot to use public service for personal gain. Montagu and Samuel were both exonerated. But whatever the role of family and religious connection in the affair, the capacity of empire to provide opportunities for some Jews to pursue profit for themselves and their firms is beyond dispute.<sup>13</sup>

But it is not only at these elevated levels of wealth and influence that the British Empire influenced the course of Anglo-Jewish history. In 1879 the Jewish Board of Guardians, the body chiefly concerned with the relief of the Jewish poor in London, established an emigration committee. The largest numbers assisted by this committee were either repatriated to Eastern Europe or helped onward to the United States. But a

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<sup>10</sup> Cecil Roth, 'The Jews in the Defence of Britain', *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 1939–45, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Rubinstein, *History of the Jews*, pp. 198–9

<sup>12</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The World's Banker: the History of the House of Rothschild*, London, 1998, pp. 877–92.

<sup>13</sup> On these scandals see Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876–1939*, 1979, pp. 70–9.

significant minority were sent on to Australia and South Africa. The Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter, a charity located in the East End that took in new arrivals, was also a staging-post for Jews travelling from Lithuania to South Africa.<sup>14</sup> But even for those East European Jews who settled in England the empire was significant. Most found work in the clothing trading and here the export market was important, particularly at the bottom end of the trade to which the least skilled, most recent arrivals gravitated. The value of exports in clothing and apparel rose from £3.7m in 1881 to £5.1m in 1901, much of it shipped to the empire. In the East End of London the cheapest tailoring work performed by the Jews and destined for Africa was known as the 'kaffir trade'.<sup>15</sup> Imperial imports too, such as the trade in ostrich feathers, were the source of new Jewish fortunes both through farming ostriches in the Cape, and processing and trading the plumes in London.<sup>16</sup>

This quick survey of some the ways that Anglo-Jewish history was imbricated with the history of the British Empire does not depend on fresh archival research. Little of it is new. What *is* new, however, is the emergent tendency of a few historians to examine in detail one or other of these fragments or to focus centrally on the interaction of Jews and empire.<sup>17</sup> Why, we might ask, is this happening now? In part, no doubt, this move is one response to the contemporary political and cultural conflicts that engage us. In Britain the legacy of empire has figured in debates provoked by racialized conflicts in public life as well as in debates over the meaning and possibility of a multicultural society. Scholars have engaged in these debates and it is not surprising that academics involved in Jewish studies should seek to participate in them as well.<sup>18</sup> There are other dimensions too. Current debates over globalization and transnationalism promote questions about the international dimensions of the Jewish past. In this respect the British Empire presents one promising field for research.<sup>19</sup> However, the current interest in the junction of Jews and empire is also a response to the arrival, development and institutionalization of post-colonial studies in a wide range of disciplines and interdisciplinary fields, including history. This, it is easy to imagine, has presented a particular challenge to scholarship on modern Jewry which is strongest in the United States and in Israel. The creation of the Jewish state and its continuing conflict with the Palestinians means that Jews in Israel and their supporters elsewhere figure in postcolonial discourse as the legatees of a dead British empire as well as a prop for a new American empire. These are connections made by no less a figure than Edward Said, one of the founding figures of postcolonial studies.<sup>20</sup> In this light it is both timely and pertinent to ask what difference can

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<sup>14</sup> Vivian Lipman, *A Century of Social Service, 1859–1959. The Jewish Board of Guardians*, London, 1959, pp. 97–100; Aubrey Newman 'The Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter: Directed Migration', in *Patterns of Migration, 1850–1914*, ed. Aubrey Newman and Stephen Massil, London, 1996, pp. 175–86.

<sup>15</sup> Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, p. 191.

<sup>16</sup> Sara Stein, 'Falling into Feathers', *Journal of Modern History*, forthcoming.

<sup>17</sup> The role of Southampton University's Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations has been important in this respect. See <http://www.parkes.soton.ac.uk/pastevents.htm>

<sup>18</sup> See the aims of the Parkes Institute <http://www.parkes.soton.ac.uk/ahrc.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Stein, 'Falling into Feathers'; Abigail Green 'The British Empire and the Jews: an Imperialism of Human Rights?', *Past and Present*, forthcoming 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, London, 1992

postcolonial studies make to our understanding of the Jewish past? And, conversely, what happens to postcolonial studies when they encompass the Jews?<sup>21</sup>

One starting point for postcolonial analysis has been its insistence that we yoke histories of exploration and conquest, colonization and coercion, dispossession and military force, repression and resistance beyond Europe to our understanding of history and culture in the colonial metropole. As Catherine Hall helpfully expresses the point: 'Colonialism made both colonisers and colonised, and postcolonial forms of analysis attempt to understand that process'.<sup>22</sup> One result has been a burst of scholarship that has both asserted and explored the impact of empire on metropolitan society and culture. In the case of British history this writing has reshaped the parameters of debate on the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>23</sup>

When this work brings together metropole and colony within the same analytical field it not only broadens our understanding of European history it also demands a reevaluation of that history. Anthropologists and literary critics, geographers and historians have asked how colonialism made Europeans. Starting from the premise that knowledge is a discursive field whose significance is embedded within systems of power, many scholars have examined colonialism not only as a military, economic and institutional force but also as a phenomenon that operated within European culture. This has led some writers not only to point out that colonialism and racism were important facets of European modernity but to suggest that European culture and politics is fatally compromised by its colonial and racist past. Robert Young, for example, simply asserts, 'postcolonial cultural analysis has been concerned with the elaboration of theoretical structures that contest the previous dominant western way of seeing things'.<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein Homi Bhabha insists that 'metropolitan histories of civitas cannot be conceived without evoking the savage colonial antecedents of the idea of civility', and he asks his readers to 'rethink the profound and collusive "liberal" sense of community' and to question 'the language of rights and obligations, so central to the modern myth of a people'.<sup>25</sup> Some historians write in similar terms. Antoinette Burton tells us 'the "Enlightenment promise" was historically unrealised for women citizens as for colonial subjects of all persuasions and allegiances'.<sup>26</sup> These are not isolated voices. Frederick Cooper recently has pointed to the tendency to turn the centuries of 'European colonization overseas into a critique of the Enlightenment, democracy or modernity'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> On this see *Orientalism and the Jews*, ed. Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar, Lebanon NH, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Hall, *Cultures of Empire: a Reader*, Manchester, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> For example, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson, Cambridge, 2004; *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton, 2003; Hall, *Cultures of Empire*.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: a very short Introduction*, Oxford, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994, p. 175.

<sup>26</sup> Antoinette Burton, 'The Unfinished Business of Colonial Modernities', in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernity*, ed. Antoinette Burton, London, 1999, p. 4. There are other voices, however, among postcolonial historians. See, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge and History*, Berkeley CA, 2005, p. 15. See too Neil Lazarus, 'Introducing Postcolonial Studies', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus, Cambridge, 2004, p. 13.

At the same time as this essay examines the interaction of Jews with the British Empire at the start of the twentieth century, it also explores both the reach and some limitations to this widespread analysis of the colonial past. The relationship between Jews and modernity was a concern for both Jews and non-Jews as they tried to shape and comprehend the relationship of Jews to the British Empire. These debates and projects allow us to convert some of the preoccupations of present-day theory into a historical question. How, at the beginning of the twentieth century, did people conceive of the relation between Jews, empire and modernity?

On 12 October 1899 the contentious relations between the British government and the Republic of the Transvaal descended to a state of war. Ostensibly, the British were fighting to secure political rights for 'Uitlanders' – settlers who had been attracted to the Rand following the discovery of gold there in 1886. The war was a shambles. It led to military embarrassment, it was costly and it led to Britain's isolation internationally. Only in the spring of 1900 did the war turn decisively in Britain's favour, though the Afrikaners' guerrilla tactics managed to embarrass the world's pre-eminent empire for another two years.<sup>28</sup> The war divided the Liberal party. Many Liberals were critical of the diplomacy that had led to the war and of the methods by which it was fought but most supported the government once the Boers had invaded the Cape Colony. Nevertheless, within parliament a group of forty-five MPs (reduced to thirty after the 1900 'khaki' election) sustained their consistent and unqualified opposition to the war and a vociferous minority of Liberals, radicals and socialists in the country supported them.<sup>29</sup>

The view that the war was a Jewish war was commonplace among its opponents. In February 1900 John Burns declaimed in the House of Commons that 'the British army which used to be for all good causes, the Sir Galahad of history, has become the janissary of the Jews ... Wherever we examine, there is the financial Jew operating; directing, inspiring the agonies that that have led to this war'. Later the same year, the Trade Union Congress passed a resolution condemning the war as one 'to secure the gold fields of South Africa for cosmopolitan Jews most of whom have no patriotism and no country'. *Justice*, the newspaper of the Social Democratic Federation, blamed the war on 'unscrupulous Jewish financiers' and the 'Semitic-capitalist press'.<sup>30</sup>

The connection between the war and finance should not lead us to think that all these critics connected the war to the logic of capitalism and in this way to modernity. Most of these writers and speakers expressed a longstanding radical critique of imperialism that associated empire, not with modernity and progress, but with aristocracy and with the decay of representative government. In this vein, Francis W. Hirst, Gilbert Murray and J. L. Hammond feared that 'possibilities are brought near to us which may involve in vital danger even a commonwealth so massively stable as our own'. A. R. Wallace MP, a member of the South African Conciliation Committee, asserted, 'every triumph of expansionism is a rebuff to democratic Liberalism. Expansionist imperialism means

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<sup>28</sup> Bill Nasson, *The South African War, 1899–1902*, London, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> J. W. Auld, 'The Liberal Pro-Boers', *Journal of British Studies*, May 1975, p. 80; see too *The Anatomy of an Antiwar Movement*, ed. Steven Koss, Chicago, 1973.

<sup>30</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, fourth series, vol. 78, 6 Feb. 1900, col. 785; *Justice*, 7 Oct. 1899, pp. 4–5; Auld, 'The Liberal Pro-Boers', pp. 106–7; Claire Hirshfield, 'The British Left and the "Jewish Conspiracy": a Case Study of Modern Anti-Semitism', *Jewish Social Studies*, spring 1981, pp. 98–9.

more despotism abroad and more aristocratic recrudescence at home'.<sup>31</sup> For these writers and speakers, the financiers had thrown in their lot with the traditional governing class and so had aligned themselves with the radicals' customary gallery of rogues: John Burns complained 'the financial elements, the military caste, the society set have dictated African policy too long with fatal results'.<sup>32</sup>

The most elaborate denunciation of the war as a Jewish war was made by J. A. Hobson, first in a series of newspaper and magazine articles and then in his book *The War in South Africa: its Causes and Effects*, published in 1900. Here Hobson confessed 'it is difficult to state the truth about our doings in South Africa without seeming to appeal to the ignominious passion of the *Judenhetze*'.<sup>33</sup> But as we know Hobson was not deterred. He pointed to the 'practical paramountcy' exercised by financiers, the recognized leaders of whom were foreign Jews, over the economic interests of the Transvaal. The development of the mining industry, he argued, meant they required the constant aid of the State to control the labour supply, mineral rights, railway tariffs and trade barriers. It was for this reason that the war was being fought. We are fighting, he concluded, 'to place a small international oligarchy of mineowners and speculators in power at Pretoria'.<sup>34</sup>

As Peter Cain has argued, Hobson's understanding of imperialism in general and of the South African war in particular was original in ways that remain hidden if we focus only on the ways in which Jews and finance figure in his analysis. For Hobson, imperialism was not a malign growth generated by traditional elites and their allies, it was an outgrowth of capitalist society itself. By 1898 Hobson had come to the view that the grossly unequal distribution of property led to excess savings that found an outlet in foreign investment and international trade that in turn promoted imperialism.<sup>35</sup> In his commentaries on the war in South Africa Hobson did not pursue this emphasis on under-consumption and the domestic roots of imperialism, though he returned to the theme in his influential study *Imperialism*, published in 1902. In writing about South Africa Hobson focused instead on the power of finance capitalism. But here too, Hobson insisted on the modernity of the phenomenon. In his essay 'Capitalism and Imperialism in South Africa', published in the *Contemporary Review* in 1900, Hobson set out the broader context of events. 'The full significance of this evil business in South Africa is only understood when it is recognised as a most dramatic instance of the play of modern forces which are worldwide in their scope and revolutionary in their operations.' These were 'international capitalism and imperialism' and the interplay between the two.<sup>36</sup>

The modernity of the phenomenon was emphasized further when Hobson turned to explain how the group of international financiers imposed their will on the nation. Hobson's emphasis on Jewish ownership of the press in South Africa and in London was less innovative than his use of the work of the French psychologist and sociologist

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<sup>31</sup> Francis W. Hirst, John L. Hammond, Gilbert Murray, *Liberalism and the Empire*, 1900, p. xvi; Peter Cain, *Hobson and Imperialism: Radicalism, New Liberalism and Finance, 1887–1938*, Oxford, 2002, p. 88.

<sup>32</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, fourth series, vol. 78, 6 Feb. 1900, col. 783

<sup>33</sup> J. A. Hobson, *The War in South Africa*, 1900, p. 189

<sup>34</sup> Hobson, *War in South Africa*, pp. 190–6.

<sup>35</sup> Cain, *Hobson and Imperialism*, pp. 72–6.

<sup>36</sup> J. A. Hobson, 'Capitalism and Imperialism in South Africa', *Contemporary Review*, January 1900, p. 1.



Gustave le Bon. Le Bon's *La psychologie des foules* was first published in 1895 and translated into English a year later. Paradoxically, Le Bon proposed that crowds were not only a feature of modernity but, in their behaviour, were also atavistic expressing 'the unconscious needs and aspirations of the race'.<sup>37</sup> In *The Psychology of Jingoism*, published in 1901, Hobson acknowledged Le Bon's work. He characterized jingoism as 'primitive passion, modified and intensified by certain conditions of modern civilisation', namely, the degenerative effects of urban life. City life, he argued, debilitated individual rational judgment and created a populace that craved excitement and sensation. This was the setting in which the mob could be manipulated by the yellow press and the music hall to produce support for race domination and an imperial war. Here Hobson gave a decisively modern twist to the time-honoured radical lament that empire corroded political liberty and civic virtue.<sup>38</sup> In short, what was innovative in Hobson's writings between 1898 and 1902 was his association of empire with modernity, and in 1900 the Jews were right there at the heart of it.

In general, it was not the modernity of empire but the modernity of Jewish emancipation that framed the Anglo-Jewish response to the Boer War. At the core of Jewish emancipation was the Jews' admission to citizenship on terms equal with non-Jews. There was, of course, an implicit assumption here: namely, that Jews had the capacity to act as citizens or subjects and that their particular practices, beliefs and aspirations did not disqualify them from doing so. Opponents of Jewish emancipation, of course, and later anti-Jewish polemicists contended just the opposite. In the words of Goldwin Smith they claimed that Jews could not be patriots.<sup>39</sup>

It was in this context of recurrent if intermittent debate on the Jews that Nathan Adler preached a sermon at the North London Synagogue on 4 November 1899 in which he loudly aligned religious doctrine with imperial patriotism. He pointed out that while, for Jews, the aspiration for peace was second only to their belief in the unity of God it was fully recognized in Jewish teachings that 'certain wars are inevitable', and this war to sustain the interests of 'England's sons in distant lands' was just such a conflict. The *Jewish Chronicle* reported prominently the numbers of Jewish volunteers, printed pages full of photographs of Jews in uniform and reported whenever a Jew was mentioned in dispatches. It calculated that the casualty rate among Jewish troops was nearly double the losses among the troops as a whole. According to the newspaper these figures attested to the exceptional 'zeal and courage' of Jewish troops.<sup>40</sup> Military service in defence of empire was both vindication and the highest expression of Jewish emancipation. The newspaper editorialized that 'no finer object lesson has been displayed to the world of the success which waits upon a policy of wise toleration and justice'. This view was repeated in sections of the immigrant press too. *Der Yidisher Ekspres*, a voice of religious orthodoxy and of political Zionism, urged its readership that 'Jews now have the opportunity to show thanks to the country which has taken them in and given them freedom'.<sup>41</sup> Alongside these declarations,

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<sup>37</sup> Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: a European Disorder*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 91.

<sup>38</sup> J. A. Hobson, *The Psychology of Jingoism*, 1901, p. 2. On Jews and the press see *The War in South Africa*, pp. 215–27.

<sup>39</sup> On Goldwin Smith and the Jews see Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, pp. 90–3. It is significant that in 1898 *Reynolds News* repeated parts of Smith's argument; specifically, that the Jews are an Asian people who worship a tribal god. Hirshfield, 'The British Left and the "Jewish Conspiracy"', p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 23 March 1900, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> *Der Yidisher Ekspres*, 5 Jan. 1900, p. 2; see too J. Jung, *Champions of Orthodoxy*, 1974, p. 59.

however, there was in both newspapers an undercurrent of uneasy concern that at any moment emancipation might be brought into question.<sup>42</sup>

Jewish emancipation, its legacies and anxieties, created a structure within which English Jews responded to the politics of empire. The British Empire provided a field of activity in which Jews were able to justify their emancipation. At the same time, as we have seen, radical opponents of imperial policy vivified criticisms of the Jews as a malign and self-interested minority. This criticism in turn reinforced the anxieties that led Jews to believe that they had to justify themselves. The demands of empire and of emancipation were two of the fundamental elements that framed the politics of Jewish integration at the beginning of the twentieth century. A third, and equally significant element, was the existence of more than five million Jews in the Russian Empire and Romania: here what was important was both the conditions of their life in eastern Europe and also the rising number of East European Jews – two million between 1880 and 1914 – who emigrated to the United States, Britain, the Cape, Argentina and Palestine. For East European Jewry also collided with the politics of the British Empire.

Most obviously, the campaign for the Aliens Act, a campaign for legislation to stem the flow of Jewish immigrants to Britain, expressed imperial imperatives. It was, perhaps, the most successful synthesis of imperialism and social reform. When the Liberal imperialist Lord Rosebery set out his vision of the imperial future in 1893 he stated,

if there is one certainty in the world it is this – that with the growth of emigration and the continual closing of the confines of States to the destitute emigrants of other countries, there is no country in the world that will not be compelled to reconsider its position with regard to pauper immigration, unless it wishes permanently to degrade the status and condition of its own working classes.<sup>43</sup>

What Rosebery set out in decorous and general terms, Henry Norman MP expressed in more particular and offensive language. He wanted ‘to see at the mouth of our great river a notice erected in unmistakable terms, "No rubbish shot here", this is England, the heart of the Empire’.<sup>44</sup>

Proposals to restrict immigration from eastern Europe first arose as one response to the unemployment and riots that marked winters in London in the mid 1880s. The early advocates of restriction – Arnold White in *Problems of a Great City* and John Burnett, the labour correspondent of the Board of Trade – came to focus on the issue as a corollary of their pre-existing interest in supporting emigration to the British colonies. Even at this point, therefore, the imperial dimension was significant. But after 1900 this was still more the case. The immigration issue had faded in the 1890s but it re-emerged in 1900, stimulated by an interaction of the local housing crisis in the East End of London and the crisis of imperial confidence occasioned by the war in South Africa. The poor stature and physical condition of volunteers to the army

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<sup>42</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 24 April 1900, pp. 14–15; 11 May 1900, p. 18; *Der Yidisher Ekspres*, 2 Feb. 1900, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Bernard Gainer, *The Alien Invasion: the Origins of the Aliens Act of 1905*, 1971, pp. 109–10.

<sup>44</sup> *East London Observer*, 18 Jan. 1902. p. 1.

seemed both to confirm fears that the national stock was degenerating in the face of city life, and to dramatise the urgent need to attend to the health of the working classes if the nation was to produce a race capable of defending the empire. In this light the annual immigration of thousands of Russian Jews was unwelcome. The immigrants were represented as unskilled, physically feeble, but resilient and willing to work for a pittance. The language of national efficiency in the cause of empire was employed by street orators in the East End, Conservative Members of Parliament and candidates, and by the Home Secretary in the House of Commons. These advocates of an Aliens Act to restrict immigration aligned their cause with other reforms designed to adjust to a world in which Britain's imperial pre-eminence was now being challenged. Germany and the United States, Britain's key competitors, they pointed out, had introduced laws restricting immigration. The advocates of free immigration, they claimed, were sentimentalists, out of date, hanging on to inappropriate ideals and unwilling to face new realities.<sup>45</sup>

This accusation was only a partial truth. In these years there was a growing tendency for English Jews to defend free immigration in imperial terms. In effect, this meant a shift from a focus on the work ethic and Smilesian virtues of the male immigrants, to the sturdy physique, keen intelligence and loyal patriotism of their English-born children.<sup>46</sup> This re-evaluation of the immigrants can be traced to the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration in 1904. The creation of the committee was a direct response to the condition of volunteers during the Boer War. One member, Colonel Fox, gathered evidence in the East End of London, asking head-teachers their opinion of the children of Russian, Polish and Romanian Jews. He reported, 'all agreed that they were of good physique, that they were of higher intelligence than our children, and that they were better fed by their mothers, who were more thrifty, and understood the art of feeding and bringing up the children much better than the English mothers'.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the child-rearing skills of Jewish mothers were much praised by the committee. This was particularly important because the committee witnessed a significant victory of environmentalists over eugenisists. It was not the determinations of heredity but the contingencies of social conditions that produced degeneracy.<sup>48</sup> Above all, the Committee's report highlighted the importance of nutrition among children. One outcome was the legislation in 1906 that provided free school meals to children from poor families. General Sir Frederick Maurice, who had been instrumental in revealing the poor health of volunteers, praised Jewish mothers for the greater length of time they breast-fed their children. Of course, male virtue underpinned female good conduct. The figure of the hardworking Jew was used to berate the British working man. Jewish husbands, it was said, only reluctantly sent their wives to work, whereas their Gentile counterparts were happy to loaf around and live off their wives' earnings. The implication was clear: if only the British working man were more like his Jewish counterpart, the safer the empire would be. Empire had

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<sup>45</sup> This paragraph draws on Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, pp. 268–76.

<sup>46</sup> See for example Myer Jack Landa, *The Alien Problem and its Remedy*, 1911, p. 141.

<sup>47</sup> PP1904 XXXII, *Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration*, q. 3,427.

<sup>48</sup> On the politics of the committee see Jay Winter, *The Great War and the British People*, 1985, pp. 10–15; on Jewish mothers and babies see Lara Marks, *Model Mothers: Jewish Mothers and Maternity Provision in East London, 1870–1939*, Oxford, 1994.

become central not only to the assault on Jewish immigrants but also to their defence.<sup>49</sup>

Thus far we have examined the ways in which the British Empire, Jewish emancipation and both the presence and shadow of Russian Jewry, set the terms for the interpolation of Jews in British political controversy at the onset of the twentieth century. All these elements came together in August 1903 in a plan to establish a Jewish settlement in British East Africa. Here, in a territory that was sometimes imagined as the size of Ireland and sometimes as equivalent to Yorkshire, the Jews would enjoy something like 'Home Rule': domestic self-government, within the British Empire.<sup>50</sup> The plan was the outcome of negotiations between Theodor Herzl, the Zionist leader, Leopold Greenberg, his lieutenant in Britain, on one side, and the Foreign Office on the other.

On 14 August 1903, Sir Clement Hill, head of the Africa section at the Foreign Office, wrote to Greenberg to inform him that Lord Lansdowne, the Foreign Secretary, would entertain favourably proposals for a settlement in East Africa in which Jews would be able to observe their national customs, if the Zionists and the British government could agree on a site. The letter was timed so that Herzl would be able to read its contents to the Sixth Zionist Congress that was due to meet in Basle at the end of the month. The offer, or more precisely Herzl's favourable consideration of the offer, proved deeply divisive among Zionists. A large part of the Congress supported the argument that Zionists had no business pursuing any goal other than a Jewish national home in or near Palestine. In the words of Moses Gaster, the *haham*, the religious head, of Britain's sephardi Jews, 'Zionism is not called upon to provide temporary measures of relief'. Ultimately, however, Herzl won majority support for a commission of inquiry into the British proposition.<sup>51</sup>

The British offer of a piece of East Africa originated in informal conversations in April and May 1903 between the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, and first Herzl and then Greenberg. Initially, in April 1903, Herzl had rejected Chamberlain's suggestion.<sup>52</sup> However, two crucial events operated to change his mind. First, there was news in mid May of the horrific pogrom at Kishiniev, the capital of Bessarabia, that had occurred at Easter and, second, the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration prepared the report which eventually it submitted in August. According to the official reports the events at Kishiniev left forty-nine dead, 500 injured and 2,000 families rendered homeless. It was not merely the barbarity of events in Kishiniev that had an impact on Jews, but also the apparent complicity of the Russian authorities in the slaughter and mayhem. At that moment, the idea that there could be a liberal solution to the Jewish problem in Russia required Herculean optimism.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, it

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<sup>49</sup> *Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration*, q. 327.

<sup>50</sup> Israel Zangwill used the term 'Home Rule' in a speech at the Great Assembly Hall in Mile End in September 1903. *Speeches, Articles and Letters of Israel Zangwill*, ed. Maurice Simon, 1937, p. 182; see too FO 2/807/324, 11 Aug. 1903, Jewish Colony in East Africa; FO 2/845/32, January 1904.

<sup>51</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 28 Aug. 1903; an indispensable account of the pre-history, history and aftermath of the East Africa offer can be found in Robert G. Weisbord, *African Zion: the Attempt to Establish a Jewish Colony in the East Africa Protectorate, 1903–05*, Philadelphia, 1968; David Vital, *Zionism: the Formative Years*, Oxford, 1982, pp. 267–443.

<sup>52</sup> Julian Amery, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, vol. iv, 1951, pp. 259–66; Weisbord, *African Zion*, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 22 May 1903, pp. 8–9.

was a foregone conclusion that the Royal Commission would recommend a measure of restriction. These events provided the terms in which Herzl presented the British offer to the Zionist Congress. 'The countries to which ... immigration has hitherto been chiefly directed have begun to close their doors while, or because, Jewish distress in Eastern Europe is on the increase.'<sup>54</sup>

Herzl had been a witness before the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration. Here he had connected the spread and development of the Jewish problem in western Europe to the impact of immigration from the east. He quoted from his book *Der Judenstaat*, published in 1896. 'The Jewish question exists wherever Jews live in perceptible numbers. Where it does not exist it is carried by Jews in the course of their migrations. We naturally move to those places where we are not persecuted, and there our presence produces persecution.' In 1903 he was able to tell his interlocutors that he saw this process currently at work in France, in the United States and in Britain.<sup>55</sup> The English Zionist Israel Zangwill agreed. Anti-Semitism, he observed, was beginning to appear in the countries associated with freedom. The solution, they argued, was to provide the Jews with a legally recognized home. Ideologists of Jewish emancipation such as the journalist Lucien Wolf maintained that anti-Semitism was, as Wolf wrote in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'a mere atavistic revival of the Jew-hatred of the middle ages'. Zionists such as Zangwill echoed this when they said that 'anti-Semitism was a survival from the dark ages'. But, Zangwill argued, anti-Semitism was more than this; it was also an authentic product of the modern world, fuelled by 'commercial jealousy' and 'the crude logic of Demos and demagogues'.<sup>56</sup>

Israel Zangwill was by this time a novelist and playwright, popular both in Britain, where he lived, and in the United States.<sup>57</sup> He was a whole-hearted advocate of Jewish settlement in East Africa. His speeches and journalism on the subject provide an illuminating instance of the ways in which the politics of emancipation, empire and Russian Jewry all came together in reactions to the East Africa offer, one inflecting the other. First, Zangwill was glad to align the cause of Zionism with the interests of the British Empire. In part, this was because the East Africa offer meant that the world's pre-eminent power had recognized the Zionist Congress and was willing to deal with it. In part, too it was because he was a British imperialist as well as a Zionist. Zangwill pointed out that the British Empire was in its infancy and though vast on the map its white colonists numbered just twelve millions.<sup>58</sup>

The attraction was not only colonization but also commerce, profit and modernity. According to Zangwill, the Zionist answer to these problems was in tune with the new times. In his 1899 lecture on Zionism, Zangwill set forth his vision of modernity. 'The world's childhood is passing, with all its charming fantastic visions of fairies and fiends, and even in Jerusalem Whitman's "years of the modern, years of the unperformed", must have their tardy turn.' 'Steam and electricity must transform the

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<sup>54</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 28 Aug. 1903, supplement, p. ii.

<sup>55</sup> *Royal Commission on Alien Immigration*, q. 6,244.

<sup>56</sup> For Zangwill see, *Speeches*, ed. Simon, p. 153; Israel Zangwill, 'The Return to Palestine', *New Liberal Review*, December 1901, p. 617; *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 Feb. 1903, p. 12; Lucien Wolf, 'Anti-Semitism', reproduced from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edn, 1911, in *Essays in Jewish History* by Lucien Wolf, ed. Cecil Roth, 1934, p. 413.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Udelson, *Dreamer of the Ghetto. The Life and Works of Israel Zangwill*, 1990, pp. 106–10.

<sup>58</sup> *Speeches*, ed. Simon, pp. 181–2, 193–5.

problem of Israel', he announced.<sup>59</sup> Zangwill delighted in the advanced communications that, he imagined, the East African highlands enjoyed. The land was connected to the world beyond by regular steamers on Lake Victoria, by the telegraph and most important by the railway. The railway line from Mombasa had yet to make a profit. What the country needed was an influx of Jews to render East Africa as prosperous and profitable as the Cape.<sup>60</sup>

But if this was one dimension of Zangwill's enthusiasm for East Africa it was not the only one. In April 1905, as the Zionist movement retreated from the East Africa offer, Zangwill founded the Jewish Territorial Organisation to continue its pursuit. In doing so he pointed to 'the vital needs of the Jewish people at the present time'. He told his audience in Manchester:

A few months ago you might have seen our prisoners of the Pale celebrate their feast of Chanukah, their Thanksgiving or Independence Day. The irony of it! These downtrodden cringing victims of the Ghetto celebrating the victory of Judas Maccabeus. ... What a shadow-world the Jew lives in! Is it not about time Rip van Winkle woke up and took stock of things and himself?

Since the land of Israel was unobtainable, 'any territory which was Jewish', Zangwill argued, 'under a Jewish flag would save the Jews' body and the Jews' soul'.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, well before Zangwill made this speech the East Africa proposal had ceased to be attainable. By the end of 1903 neither the Foreign Office nor the Colonial Office nor the British High Commissioner in East Africa could muster any enthusiasm for the project. But before accounting for this turn we need first to ask why the British government had entertained the proposal in the first place. It is at this point that the history of Zionism collides with the history of colonialism and specifically with the history of expropriation and settlement. Earl Percy, Parliamentary Secretary at the Foreign Office, was explicit on this point when the matter was debated in Parliament in 1904. When the offer was made to the Zionists, he explained,

There was a great dearth of applications from settlers for land in East Africa. It had been stated over and over again in debates on the financial position of the Protectorates that if they ever were to pay their way and if this country was ever to get back anything like value for the vast sums that had been expended on these territories, the first requisite was to attract settlers and capital to the country.<sup>62</sup>

Above all, the British government was anxious to recoup the £5m it had invested building the railway from Mombasa to Nairobi and then on to Lake Victoria, and this was to be achieved by the allocation of land to farmers and from tax revenues. To this end, the Crown Land Ordinance of 1902 had proclaimed all vacant land to be Crown land, which could be sold to Europeans so long as it was not occupied. However, since

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<sup>59</sup> *Speeches*, ed. Simon, p.151.

<sup>60</sup> *Speeches*, ed. Simon, p. 215.

<sup>61</sup> *Speeches*, ed. Simon, p. 199.

<sup>62</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, fourth series, vol. 136, 20 June 1904, col. 572; see too Lord Lansdowne's comments in PP 1904 LXII, *Correspondence Relating to the Resignation of Sir Charles Eliot*, p. 525.

the Masai and Kikuyu inhabitants were mobile pastoralists any narrow understanding of occupation would inevitably undermine the indigenous economies.<sup>63</sup>

The High Commissioner for East Africa, Sir Charles Eliot, was concerned at the slow pace of settlement. He wrote to Lord Lansdowne asking him to combat 'the widely spread impression that it [East Africa] is a pestilential swamp'. Contrary to those officials who wanted Indian settlement in East Africa (that, in the words of Sir Harry Johnson, it should become the America of the Hindu), Eliot insisted to Lansdowne that 'the East African highlands are for the most part a White Man's country'.<sup>64</sup> But the politics of land in the highlands reflected not only different visions of the future there but also overlapping jurisdictions within the government and different priorities held by the High Commissioner, some of his officials, the Foreign Office and the Treasury. Eliot remonstrated that his efforts to promote settlement were hindered by the rule that required him to refer to London any proposals to grant a tract of land larger than 1,000 acres. A number of settlers, he reported, had withdrawn their interest when confronted with officialdom in this way and he wrote home asking for 'more discretion in selling land'. This was something Lansdowne could not have allowed even had he wanted to do so. The Treasury regarded the land as an asset that would increase in value with the development of British East Africa. Accordingly, it opposed the sale of more than the minimum required to attract permanent settlers. Under pressure, Lansdowne instructed Eliot to offer for sale no more than a quarter of the land within the railway zone.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, Lansdowne's caution was reinforced by some of Eliot's subordinates, as well as by Liberals in Parliament such as David Lloyd George, all of whom were more sympathetic than the Commissioner to the Masai's need for grazing land.<sup>66</sup>

To attract white settlers as best he could, in May 1903 Eliot publicized his intention to issue grants of unoccupied land at a nominal rent for ten years. The land he had in mind was located one mile each side of the railway and, significantly, it encompassed the Mau Escarpment, the area which Chamberlain (unbeknown to Eliot) had encouraged Greenberg and Herzl to consider as suitable for Zionist colonization.<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, the Foreign Office discussed the possibility of bringing in Finns as well as Jews. It also issued 500 square miles to a private company, the East Africa Syndicate, allowed a grant of 100,000 acres to Lord Delamere, and entered into negotiations for a similarly large territory with two South African investors who

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<sup>63</sup> National Archives, FO 2/807/30, Treasury to Under Secretary of State Foreign Office, 14 May 1903; FO 2/785/155, Eliot to Lansdowne, 7 Oct. 1903; Robert L. Tignor, *The Colonial Transformation of Kenya: the Kamba, Kikuyu and Masai from 1900 to 1939*, Princeton NJ, 1976, pp. 26–30; A. Fiona D. Mackenzie, *Land, Ecology and Resistance in Kenya 1880–1952*, Edinburgh, 1998, 63–7.

<sup>64</sup> Gordon Hudson Mungeam, *British Rule in Kenya, 1895–1912*, Oxford, 1966, p. 103.

<sup>65</sup> National Archives, FO 2/807/30, Treasury to Under Secretary of State Foreign Office, 14 May 1903; FO 2/807/284, Eliot to Lansdowne, 29 July 1903 refers to a despatch from Lansdowne to Eliot setting out the rule regarding how much land could be sold; FO 2/807/308-13, Eliot to Lansdowne, 10 August 1903.

<sup>66</sup> PP1904 LXII, *Correspondence Relating to the Resignation of Sir Charles Eliot*, pp. 6–7; *Parliamentary Debates*, fourth series, vol. 136, 25 May 1904, col. 579.

<sup>67</sup> FO 2/807/29, 14 May 1903; FO 2/807/142, Free grants of land – Sir C. Eliot, 12 June 1903.

wanted then to sell on the land to settlers in smaller parcels. The offer to Herzl, was thus made in the context of other attempts to recruit white settlers to East Africa.<sup>68</sup>

When news reached Nairobi of the offer to the Zionists the existing settler community reacted with extreme hostility. Although no precise offer had been made, it was universally assumed that the land in question was the highly desirable well-connected Mau escarpment south east of Nairobi. Lord Delamere immediately sent a telegram to *The Times*: 'Feeling here very strong against introduction of alien Jews. Railway frontage fit for British colonisation 260 miles. Foreign Office proposes give 200 miles best to undesirable aliens.'<sup>69</sup> This reference to undesirable aliens was, of course, an echo of the contemporaneous debate on Jewish immigration to Britain. At a protest meeting held in Nairobi on 29 August these connections became still clearer. Dr Atkinson, who had been voted to chair the meeting, rose to say that 'it had been proved that Jews rendered themselves quite obnoxious to the people of every country they went to'; and, rhetorically, asked whether it was fair of the government to flood the land with 'pauper aliens'. Another speaker had anticipated trouble with the natives if the Jews came. This was because the natives would soon realise that the Jews were 'not white men according to their own ideas but would be influenced by them and their low code of morals'.<sup>70</sup>

Eliot's concerns, at one level, were more pragmatic. First, if the Protectorate did not begin to pay its way there was a risk that a radical government would cut its grant in aid. If that happened, he explained, 'We should simply collapse, and it is better to be supported by Jews than to do that'. He advised Delamere, 'the best way of practically defeating the Jewish scheme is to increase the number of British immigrants'.<sup>71</sup> Eliot now set out both to provide the better sort of white person he wanted and also to dish the Jews' project. In the autumn of 1903 he sent a representative to South Africa in a successful effort to recruit settlers, many of them Boers, fleeing the economic depression and social dislocation that followed the South African war.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, Eliot proposed to the Foreign Office that if there were to be a Jewish settlement it should be located at a greater distance from the railway line. This, he suggested, would prevent 'friction between the Jews and other European settlers' and would help 'open up' new districts, stimulate trade and so make them 'profitable for revenue'. By October this idea had solidified into the proposal to offer the Jews the Uasin Gishu plateau in the north-west of the protectorate. Eliot conceded that he found the place disagreeably cold but, he imagined, the East European Jews would not.<sup>73</sup>

In an essay published a year later Eliot explained the reasons for his opposition to Jewish immigration to East Africa.

the scheme ... was tantamount to reproducing in East Africa the very conditions which have caused so much distress in eastern Europe – that is to

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<sup>68</sup> Mungeam, *British Rule in Kenya*, p. 104.

<sup>69</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 4 Sept. 1903, p. 15. This was a widespread assumption. See the *African Standard*, published in Mombasa, quoted in the *Jewish Chronicle*, 2 Oct. 1903, p. 13.

<sup>70</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 Oct. 1903, pp. 11–12

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Julius Carlebach, *Jews of Nairobi 1903–62*, Nairobi, 1962, p. 19.

<sup>72</sup> Brian M. Du Toit, *The Boers in East Africa: Ethnicity and Identity*, 1998.

<sup>73</sup> National Archives, FO 2/785/53 Eliot to Lansdowne, 10 September 1903; FO 2 785/155-161, Eliot to Lansdowne, 4 Oct. 1903.



say the existence of a compact mass of Israelites, differing in language and customs from the surrounding population, to whom they are likely to be superior in business capacity but inferior in fighting power. To my mind it is best to frankly recognise that such conditions can never exist without danger to the public peace.<sup>74</sup>

Once again, we find the debate on the legacy of Jewish emancipation and on Jewish immigration transposed to East Africa. There were similar concerns in London. Here officials deliberated whether the projected settlement would constitute an 'imperium in imperio', they commented on the 'low level of civilisation' among East European Jews, and the apparently inevitable (and regrettable) appearance of anti-Semitism wherever Jews settled in large numbers. Reflecting these discussions Lord Lansdowne echoed Eliot's concerns. He wrote: 'I am not surprised that you should be reluctant to give up to a colony of Jewish settlers some of the most valuable portions of the Protectorate.'<sup>75</sup>

By the end of 1903 the prospects for white settlement looked far better than they had in the preceding spring. In November the officer commanding British troops in the Protectorate noted the 'rush for land' while asking for 1000 acres for himself.<sup>76</sup> Percy reflected this new reality when he reported to the House of Commons that all the most valuable land near the railway had been taken up. This was the land which in August and September 1903 many people had assumed to have been marked down for the Zionists. Greenberg was told as much in an interview at the Foreign Office in January 1904. The only offer on the table now, he was informed, was a territory in 'the remoter regions of the protectorate'.<sup>77</sup> This was Eliot's idea of the Uasin Gishu plateau. The new Colonial Secretary, Alfred Lyttleton, was consulted at this point. He had no enthusiasm for the project but he was also complacent. He thought 'it highly probable that the promoters, when they realise the enormous expense in planting a colony in so remote a district will scarcely desire to attempt it'.<sup>78</sup> And so it came to pass. The Zionist commission sent to East Africa to survey the land in 1904 returned with a negative report.<sup>79</sup>

The history of the British offer to the Zionists points the way to some answers to the two questions with which we began this essay: how does the postcolonial perspective change our understanding of the Jewish past? and, what happens to postcolonial studies when it encompasses the Jews? Jewish historiography has placed the East Africa offer in relation to internal debates within Zionism and as an episode during which British attitudes to the Jews were played out. The problems of colonization and settlement and the ways they impinged on the relationship in Europe between the British government and the Zionists are peripheral concerns, if they are addressed at

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<sup>74</sup> Charles Eliot, 'The East Africa Protectorate as a European Colony', *Nineteenth Century and After*, September 1904, pp. 384–5.

<sup>75</sup> National Archives, FO 2/785/59, Minutes. Sir C. Eliot No.430, 10 Sept. 1903; FO 2/785/125 Lansdowne to Eliot, 15 Oct. 1903.

<sup>76</sup> National Archives, FO 2/807/622, E.G. Harrison to Sir C. Eliot, 17 Nov. 1903.

<sup>77</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, fourth series, 136, 20 June 1904, cols 573–4; National Archives, FO 2/845/32; FO 2/845/63 Draft Colonial Office, 12 Jan. 1904

<sup>78</sup> National Archives, FO 2/845/133, Under Secretary of State, Colonial Office to Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office, 19 Jan. 1904

<sup>79</sup> Weisbord, *Africa Zion* provides a full account of the slow death of the proposal.

all.<sup>80</sup> It is a perspective which fails to account for some simple but central questions raised by the episode: why the offer was made, why it was changed and why it failed. As we have seen, British policy towards the Zionists in Europe, in all its phases, was shaped by their overriding aim to expropriate, alienate and settle the land in East Africa. Moreover, Zionists such as Zangwill and Greenberg aligned themselves enthusiastically with the imperial project in East Africa. Strikingly and conveniently, Zangwill imagined East Africa simply as empty: 'we need a land [and] East Africa needs a population', he asserted.<sup>81</sup> His concern to rescue Russian Jewry and his identification with the imperial project led him literally to disregard the native inhabitants. He was not alone in doing so. An anonymous journalist wrote in the *Jewish Chronicle* in September 1903: 'It is land without a people to be offered to a people without a land ... The only inhabitants are a few nomadic Masai. The Masai are not a formidable element.'<sup>82</sup>

These are ways in which the East Africa offer is illumined by some of the preoccupations of postcolonial historiography. It brings together the politics of Zionism in Europe with the dynamic of early colonial settlement in East Africa. But the history of the offer also exceeds this framework. In Britain and East Africa the presence and activities of Jews continued to provoke hostility and debate. We have seen this in the radical critique of the war in South Africa, in the agitation against Jewish immigration and in the response of white settlers to the prospect of Jewish settlement in East Africa. At the same time as Jews vaunted British traditions of liberal toleration those traditions remained under threat and their victory could not be taken for granted. In this vein, Zangwill denounced the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration as 'tyrannical and unEnglish'. It was, therefore, not only because of the predicament of Russian Jewry but also on account of their own dilemmas, discomforts and fears that the relationship of English Jews to colonialism remained in some respects a particular relationship which led them to face particular choices.

However, the predicament of Russian Jewry was crucial. Zangwill, Greenberg and Herzl sought to bring the British Empire into play as a refuge for persecuted Jews in the Russian Empire. Indeed, it was for this reason that the East Africa scheme briefly captured the imagination of the immigrant and first-generation Jewish population in the East End of London.<sup>83</sup> The contrast between the treatment of Jews in the Russian Empire and the constitutional and civil freedoms they enjoyed in Britain and the Empire was blindingly obvious and strikingly significant for Jews and non-Jews alike. Indeed, the notion of a backward and medieval Russia was, arguably, as significant as that of Darkest Africa in validating Britons' sense of their own modernity at the start of the twentieth century.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> See for example Vital, *Zionism*, pp. 267–443.

<sup>81</sup> *Speeches*, ed. Simon, p. 193.

<sup>82</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 25 Sept. 1903, p. 14.

<sup>83</sup> The East End Jews, Chaim Weizmann sneered when he visited in 1903, were in the throes of 'East Africa fever complicated by a Herzl mania'. *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, ed. Meyer W. Weisagal, vol. iii, series A, 1972, p. 50.

<sup>84</sup> Carol Peaker, 'We are not Barbarians: Literature and the Russian Emigré Press in England 1890–1905', <http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/ThisIssuePage.htm#carolpeaker>, pp. 1–2.

The ambiguous toleration of Jews in the British Empire and their physical security there provides a vivid contrast with the systematic discrimination and episodic violence which Russia imposed on its Jews. The eruption of East European Jews in the history of the British Empire prompts this juxtaposition and comparison. The cases examined in this essay suggest that the relationship of British society and the British Empire to the claims of toleration, representative government and the rule of law was uneven and subject to debate. The contours of that relationship, the outcomes of those contests and a comparison, from this standpoint, between the British Empire and other European empires all require further historical research and analysis. What seems clear, however, is that the sweeping contempt of some scholars for the 'western way of seeing things' and their scorn for 'the language of rights and obligations' constitute a poor starting point for this enquiry.

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