



WILL THE REAL PALESTINIAN PEASANTRY PLEASE SIT DOWN?

TOWARDS A NEW HISTORY OF BRITISH
RULE IN PALESTINE, 1917-1936

CHARLES ANDERSON

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Middle East
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OF BRITISH RULE IN PALESTINE, 1917-1936

Charles Anderson

About the Author

Charles Anderson is Assistant Professor of History at Western Washington University. He earned his PhD from New York University's joint programme in History and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in 2013 and has taught modern Middle Eastern history at NYU, Rutgers University, Bard College, and Georgetown University. Broadly interested in the social and political history of the modern Middle East, his research and teaching have concentrated on imperialism, colonialism and anticolonialism, nationalism, social movements, and political economy. His first book project is a history from below of the Great Revolt (1936-39) in Palestine and its social roots.

Abstract

This paper surveys the history of peasant and rural resistance to colonial rule, policies, and law in British Palestine before 1936. Although the Arab countryside and its inhabitants have often received minimal or dismissive treatment in much of the scholarly literature, the study argues that rural Arab struggles against political, social and economic dispossession were integral to the history of British Palestine. Peasant agency and unrest broadly shaped relations between the Arab population and the colonial state and played an important part in forging the rebellious course of the Palestinian national movement in the 1930s. Animated by the struggle to stay on the land and to reject their political and economic marginalisation, peasants and Bedouin resisted the colonial order and its agenda of supporting the Zionist project in both quotidian and spectacular fashions. At the everyday scale, they flouted or blunted British attempts to 'reform' the land regime, while more episodically they rose up in armed or violent insurrections. The British regime responded to the latter through collective punishment, which especially after 1929 came to increasingly characterise its approach to rural discontent and to the Palestinians writ large. As socioeconomic conditions worsened for the rural Arab majority during the first two decades of British rule (1917-36), the restive current that developed in the countryside helped to radicalise the Palestinian national movement while also bringing to the fore class tensions within Arab society. This set of relations culminated in the major peasant-led uprising known as the Great Revolt (1936-39) and the ensuing military suppression of Palestinian society and its independence movement.

Introduction

From its earliest moments, British rule in Palestine confronted the country's Arab peasantry with a series of ineluctable predicaments. With the cataclysm of World War I barely at their back, rural dwellers and their urban compatriots alike found themselves occupied by a new imperial regime. The British empire's declared, if ill-defined, policy was to support the Zionist movement by promoting the creation of a Jewish National Home (JNH) in Palestine, in spite of the fervent and longstanding opposition of the indigenous Arabs to Zionist settlement.¹ Unaware of the internal stresses in Arab society that had been building since the transformations of the nineteenth century, colonial policies and practices quickly exacerbated the rural social order's deterioration, accelerating a growing crisis of destitution and landlessness. Peasants resisted both the 'downward social mobility' they experienced and their political marginalisation in manners both quotidian and spectacular.² Although it has been little acknowledged, their myriad efforts to stay on the land and to reject political effacement and economic displacement were pivotal to forging the restive course charted by the Palestinian national movement in the 1930s and also to stoking the Mandate's increasing recourse to repression, and especially collective punishments, in response. This set of relations culminated in the Great Revolt (1936-39) and the ensuing military suppression of Palestinian society and its independence movement.

Despite the fact that the peasantry was unarguably central to the Great Revolt, the rural Arab majority has seldom been given pride of place in histories of the Mandate era. While to a certain extent this has to do with the famous dearth of sources confronting those who research peasantries, a variety of accounts depict Palestinian rural dwellers in orientalist terms as trapped in a pre-modern struggle for subsistence, void of politics (except perhaps at the village level), incapable of independent action, and hostile to social change. These images appear in the works of self-consciously revisionist critics (such as Tom Segev and Ilan Pappé) as well as those of earlier hands (Yehoshua Porath) and specialists focused on rural society (Ylana Miller).³ By contrast, as Ted Swedenburg has observed, nationalist histories,

¹ Rashid Khalidi, 'Palestinian Peasant Resistance to Zionism Before World War I' in Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens (eds.) *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question* (New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 207-33; Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Abdul Wahab Kayyali, *Palestine: A Modern History* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).

² The apt phrase is that of Mike Davis: *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso, 2001), p. 289, and chapter 9 more broadly.

³ Tom Segev depicts Arab villages as stagnant backwaters and peasants as divorced from politics. Yehoshua Porath contends that in the 1920s *fallahin* generally 'lacked any political consciousness' and were too ignorant to understand nationalism as an idiom of community. Even Ilan Pappé, an avowed critic of Orientalism and proponent of subaltern history, presents a top-down portrait of peasants as mere vessels of Arab elites, while recycling the timeworn, ahistorical cliché that the rural population was 'more or less' caught up in 'an unchanging rhythm and routine'. Ylana Miller, author of one of the most serious studies of the Arab countryside under the British, holds that while they were not passive, peasants suffered from inarticulateness, fatalism, and an inability to reconcile with rapid social change. See Tom Segev, *One Palestine Complete: Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate*, trans. Haim Watzman

while not given to the robotic assumptions of the orientalist imaginary, feature a mythologised image of peasants as ‘heroic, self-sacrificing and always prepared to do battle’, yet still in need of ‘guidance’ owing to deficiencies in their political consciousness.⁴ In short, peasants and rural dwellers have typically received short shrift in most accounts, and the history of their struggles against political, social, and economic dispossession has remained largely unexamined.⁵

This paper outlines an alternative perspective. By combining political economic analysis with attention to the resistant practices and mobilisation of peasants, it demonstrates that peasant responses to the erosion of the rural social order were central to the history of both the Palestinians and British rule prior to the revolt (1917-36).

The Weakness of British Rule in the Countryside

The colonial state’s pursuit of a model of informal rule in Arab Palestine and its plans for the territory’s development had serious negative consequences for the Arab countryside. Despite the fact that Palestine was an agricultural colony, the government often treated the Arab rural sphere – accounting for three-quarters of the Arab population at the outset of the British occupation⁶ – as residual. It focused instead on promoting Zionist economic growth, which it imagined would trickle down to improve Arab living standards and cultivation practices while promoting acquiescence to the JNH policy.⁷ At the same time, it sought to conserve and harness the capacity of Arab elites to discipline and restrain the non-elite majority, thus buttressing the class order of rural society.⁸

(New York: Henry Holt, 2000), p. 271; Yehoshua Porath, *Emergence of the Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1918-1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1974), pp. 39, 307; Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 102-03; Ylana Miller, *Government and Society in Rural Palestine, 1920-1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), pp. x, xiii, 79, 118.

⁴ Ted Swedenburg, ‘The Palestinian Peasant as National Signifier’, *Anthropological Quarterly* 63/1 (January 1990), p. 26. Swedenburg counts in this category Naji ‘Allush, *al-Haraka al-wataniyya al-Filastiniyya amam al-Yahud wa-l-Sahyuniyya, 1882-1948* (Beirut: Palestine Research Center, 1967); Adul Wahab Kayyali, *Palestine* (first published in Arabic in 1970); and Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979).

⁵ Ted Swedenburg has been the most notable critic of these patterns and his works, which have inspired the perspective here, strive to recuperate a more robust view of peasants within Palestinian history. See ‘The Role of the Palestinian Peasantry in the Great Revolt (1936-1939)’ in Albert Hourani, Philip S. Khoury, and Mary C. Wilson (eds.), *The Modern Middle East: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 467-502, and *Memories of Revolt: The 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995). Another partial exception to the tendency to belittle the peasantry is Ghassan Kanafani’s polemical essay, *Thawrat 1936-1939 fi Filastin: khalfiyyat wa-tafasil wa-tahlil*. n.p., n.d. (PFLP, 1972).

⁶ Roger Owen, ‘Economic Development in Mandatory Palestine: 1918-1948’ in G.T. Abed, ed., *The Palestinian Economy: Studies in Development under Prolonged Occupation* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 15.

⁷ Barbara Smith, *The Roots of Separatism in Palestine: British Economic Policy, 1920-1929* (Syracuse University Press, 1993); Sahar Huneidi, *A Broken Trust: Herbert Samuel, Zionism and the Palestinians* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001); Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially chapter 2.

⁸ Sarah Graham-Brown, ‘The Political Economy of Jabal Nablus, 1920-1948’ in Roger Owen (ed.),

In lieu of a proactive agenda, the government was chiefly concerned in rural areas with taxation and the maintenance of public security.⁹ Taxation was emphasised not only as a means to revenue, but also as an ‘expression of imperial power’.¹⁰ This created obvious friction with the population, which had suffered through the destruction and severe economic disruptions caused by World War I, only to endure prolonged economic ‘depression’ in its aftermath.¹¹ Making matters worse, the British amplified the importance of the tithes (*ushr*), a tax on agricultural yields, by allowing the only direct tax on urban dwellers, the *wirku* (an impost on immovable properties), to lapse into insignificance.¹² The Arab Executive (AE), the premier nationalist organ from 1920-34, accused the administration of the first High Commissioner, Herbert Samuel, of building a state apparatus that was eight times the size of its predecessor and funded through ‘heavy taxation’ of the peasantry.¹³ Before the tithes ceased to be a source of collectable revenue in the early 1930s, it wrought havoc on the lives of peasants, who attested that it was much more injurious and iniquitous under the British since, unlike the Ottomans, the colonial state was unabashed about forcing agrarian producers into bankruptcy, seizing their properties, and making them landless.¹⁴

Early peasant discontent manifested itself in two directions: violent assaults on Zionists and Jewish communities, and an autonomist current that sought to flout colonial law and thwart state policy. Clashes between peasants and settlers had accompanied the first waves of Zionist colonisation in the late nineteenth century and both British and Zionist intelligence foresaw correctly that peasants and rural dwellers were the most likely to resist the colonial order by force.¹⁵ They participated in the first instance of intercommunal violence under the British, the ‘Nabi Musa riots’ in spring 1920, as well as in the more dramatic violence the next year at Jaffa and its environs. In the former instance, peasants took part in melees in Jerusalem during a religious festival that claimed nine lives, and the official committee of inquiry into the incidents noted that, among their grievances, Arabs feared that the Balfour declaration and the JNH policy

Studies in the Economic and Social History of Palestine in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), pp. 99-100; Miller, *Government and Society*, p. 164.

⁹ Ylana Miller, ‘Administrative Policy in Rural Palestine: The Impact of British Norms on Arab Community Life, 1920-1948’ in Joel Migdal (ed.), *Palestinian Society and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 129, 143; Miller, *Government and Society*, p. 71; Rosemary Sayigh, *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed, 1979), p. 43.

¹⁰ Martin Bunton, *Colonial Land Policies in Palestine, 1917-1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 159.

¹¹ *Report of the High Commissioner on the Administration of Palestine, 1920-1925*, pp. 4, 7, 18. On the effects of World War I, see Bernard Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine: The Mandatory Government and Arab-Jewish Conflict, 1917-1929* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991 (1978)), p. 2; Bayan Nuwayhid al-Hut, *al-Qiyadat wa-l-mu’assasat al-siyasiyyah fi Filastin, 1917-1948* (Acre: Dar al-Aswar, 1981), pp. 55-56.

¹² Bunton, *Colonial Land Policies*, pp. 140-41. This not only deepened the preexisting inequity in public finance between rural and urban zones; it effectively shrunk the direct tax burden of the Zionists, whose movement, despite its image, was overwhelmingly urban, with no more than a quarter of the total Jewish population living in the countryside during the Mandate. The urban bias of the Zionist movement has been frequently noted, e.g., Owen, ‘Economic Development’, p. 15.

¹³ AE, Memorandum on the White Paper of 1930 (prepared by ‘Awni ‘Abd al-Hadi), December 1930, pp. 3, 29-30, British National Archive (BNA) – FO 371/15326.

¹⁴ Sayigh, *Palestinians*, p. 29.

¹⁵ Khalidi, ‘Palestinian Peasant Resistance’; Kayyali, *Palestine*, pp. 72-74.

would open the way for well-funded settlers, acting with the connivance of the state, to displace them from their lands and convert them into wage labourers.¹⁶ In 1921, the Jaffa ‘riots’, touched off by brawling at a Jewish May Day parade, quickly spread to the countryside. Thousands of Arab villagers attacked Petah Tiqva, Kfar Saba, and Rehovot in the fertile inland plain adjacent to Jaffa, while state security forces prevented a similar assault on Hadera. At least 48 Arabs and 47 Jews were killed and hundreds more injured in the events, which were again partially explained by an official inquiry as an Arab reaction against the economic competition posed by Jewish settlers.¹⁷

The scale of the 1921 violence was alarming to the colonial authorities. To check the potential for further insurrection in the countryside and to punish the peasants and Bedouin for assailing Jewish colonies, a group of towns, villages and tribes were subjected to collective fines under a new statute, the Collective Responsibility for Crime Ordinance.¹⁸ Massive levies on Tulkarm, Qaqun, Kafr Saba (the Arab village) and the tribes of Wadi al-Hawarith and Abu Kishk smothered local militancy. The success of the tactic led to the insertion of extrajudicial collective fine statutes into a series of subsequent laws, including the Collective Punishments Ordinance (1924) and the Prevention of Crime Ordinance.¹⁹ In devising a system of administrative collective punishment, the state’s response to the 1921 rebellion obviated the application to Arabs of key norms and standards of liberal law, such as the right to a trial before a court, and set down an illiberal and repressive template for dealing with Palestinian resistance, specifically with the rural Arab population.²⁰

¹⁶ Kayyali, *Palestine*, p. 76; Huneidi, *A Broken Trust*, pp. 35-36.

¹⁷ Kayyali, *Palestine*, p. 76; Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine*, pp. 101-03; Huneidi, *A Broken Trust*, pp. 134-35. Kayyali notes a higher body count among Arabs, suggesting that the official inquiry, the Haycraft Commission, did not tally all Arab casualties of the suppression operations.

¹⁸ Several Zionists were involved in the birth of collective punishment in Palestine. Two of its proponents were Gad Frumkin, a judge in Palestine, and Chaim Weizmann, who pressed the issue with Colonial Secretary Churchill. See Naomi Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand: British Rule in Palestine 1917-1948*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 197, and Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, p. 195. Advocacy of collective punishment of the Palestinians became a mainstay of the Zionist response to Arab resistance, especially after incidents of violence.

¹⁹ Porath, *Emergence*, p. 132. On the Prevention of Crime Ordinance, see Martin Kolinsky, *Law, Order and Riots in Mandatory Palestine, 1928-35* (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), pp. 110-11 and BNA – CO 733/209/17.

²⁰ Collective punishment ostensibly had a local pedigree: British officials claimed that it embodied practices of corporate responsibility that derived from inter-clan conflict and prioritised group security over individual justice. In truth, whatever local basis can be said to have existed was decontextualised, reformulated and metastasised by the colonial state, which applied collective punishments with wider and wider scope and ever less restraint by the 1930s. Moreover, collective punishments were used in most British colonies and had long been employed against what British military strategists deemed to be lesser peoples. On British justifications, see Miller, ‘Administrative Policy’, p. 132 and Matthew Hughes, ‘The Banality of Brutality: British Armed Forces and the Repression of the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936-39’, *English Historical Review* 74/507 (April 2009), p. 317; and on collective punishment’s wider imperial genealogy and history, see Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand*, p. 199 and Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), chapter 1, especially pp. 20, 27-29.

While the suppression of the uprising in 1921 and the ratification of the mandate in 1923 are commonly depicted as quelling Palestinian unrest until 1929, such a view misses the continuous subterranean or micro-scale resistance of peasants and Bedouin to the colonial order. Rural inhabitants often rejected the authority of the colonial state and transgressed its laws with great regularity and frequency.²¹ Tax avoidance was common, as it sometimes had been under the Ottomans. By one estimate, which may be exaggerated, at the end of the 1920s peasants concealed close to half of their harvests, thereby cutting their tax burden accordingly.²² Bedouin ignored state efforts to regulate and monitor their movement, including through special visas for border crossings, and instead sought to preserve 'their own regular traditional movement' free of external mediation.²³

Another important and persistent arena of contestation – and cause of rural alienation – concerned the government's efforts to revise the land code and to erode the protections it afforded to poor and middling peasants. The colonial authorities looked on the Ottoman land regime that they inherited with a jaundiced eye, and believed that Arab agriculture in Palestine was characterised by low productivity, rampant inefficiency, poor use of land, and technological primitiveness.²⁴ At the heart of this archaism and backwardness was thought to lie the Ottoman land code, which they ill-understood, but endeavoured early on to dismantle.²⁵ Believing that peasants were 'squatting' on what were claimed to be state lands, in 1920 and 1921 the government outlawed the reclamation of vacant public domains (*miri mahlul*) and wastelands (*marwat*), each of which under Ottoman law were available for cultivation by any tenant on condition of payment of the tithes.²⁶ The state further threatened to dispossess a large portion of the peasantry by asserting that *miri* lands, those on which cultivators enjoyed usufructuary rights (*tasarruf*) irrespective of their formal ownership, were state domain.

²¹ Miller, 'Administrative Policy', pp. 129-30, and see herein.

²² This supposition was that of the Johnson-Crosbie Committee (1930), as noted in Amos Nadan, 'No Holy Statistics for the Holy Land: The Fallacy of Growth in the Palestinian Rural Economy, 1920s-1930s', in Rory Miller (ed.), *Britain, Palestine, and Empire: The Mandate Years* (Cornwall: Ashgate, 2010), p. 109.

²³ Ghazi Falah, *The Role of the British Administration in the Sedentarization of the Bedouin Tribes in Northern Palestine, 1918-1948* (Durham: Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Durham, 1983), p. 11.

²⁴ As Zeina Ghandour has sharply observed, these shortcomings were further interpreted as symptomatic of the purported moral decay of precolonial Arab society (Zeina Ghandour, *A Discourse on Domination in Mandate Palestine: Imperialism, Property, and Insurgency* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 44-45).

²⁵ On colonial ignorance of the land code's intricacies and the logics of its operation, see, in brief, Kenneth W. Stein, *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 13; Smith, *Roots of Separatism*, p. 109; Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand*, p. 76; and Huneidi, *A Broken Trust*, p. 212. For extended discussions see Bunton, *Colonial Land Policies*; Amos Nadan, *The Palestinian Peasant Economy under the Mandate: A Story of Colonial Bungling* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2006); and Ghandour, *A Discourse on Domination*.

²⁶ Ghandour, *A Discourse on Domination*, chapter 2; Bunton, *Colonial Land Policies*, pp. 43-45; Jeremy Forman and Alexandre Kedar, 'Colonialism, Colonization, and Land Law in Mandate Palestine: the Zor al-Zarqa and Barrat Qisarya land disputes in historical perspective', *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 4/2 (July 2003), p. 514.

Although documentation of individual title was scarce, *miri* lands had begun to be privatised in the mid- to late nineteenth century and had long been considered by their inhabitants as private and not public properties.²⁷

Peasants resisted these departures from the established rights and conventions of the Ottoman era by ceaselessly laying claim to lands where ownership was in question and by rejecting the state's assertion of prerogative over so-called state lands. After the ordinance on *mawat* was issued, rural residents refused to cooperate with the commission charged with cataloguing such domains, and also occasionally harassed or hampered the work of survey teams preparing a cadaster of the country.²⁸ Moreover, peasants continued to assert claims to *mawat* and *mahlul* lands until well into the 1930s, insisting on their right to cultivate these lands as if the colonial state had not barred them from the same.²⁹ The cultivators' bid to protect customary tenure won a significant early victory in late 1921 when a campaign of public outcry and legal objection by residents forced the government to retreat from its intention to transfer the Beisan lands, a vast fertile area in the northern Jordan valley, to Zionist hands.³⁰ In the aftermath of the compromise brokered in this case (where residents were made to purchase their individual plots from the state), the colonial state was somewhat less cavalier about its ability to control the disposition of lands it claimed as public domain.³¹ Yet it continued to try to reconfigure the land tenure regime in ways that were deleterious for rural inhabitants, as was evident in its programme of privatising and partitioning the Arab commons, or *musha'* lands.

Musha' plots were collectively owned and served to promote a measure of social solidarity and economic security, but the British, who did not much seek to understand this institution, believed it to be a grossly inefficient drag on agricultural productivity

²⁷ See Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), especially pp. 156-57; Haim Gerber, *The Social Origins of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Lynn Rienner, 1987), chapter 5; and Eugene Rogan, 'Moneylending and Capital Flows from Nablus, Damascus and Jerusalem to Qada al-Salt in the Last Decades of Ottoman Rule', in Thomas Philipp (ed.), *The Syrian Land in the 18th and 19th Century: The Common and the Specific in the Historical Experience* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992), pp. 239-60.

²⁸ Huneidi, *A Broken Trust*, p. 216; Ghandour, *A Discourse on Domination*, pp. 65, 70-71.

²⁹ L. Andrews, Memo by the Development Officer on measures taken by Palestine Government for the protection of cultivators, n.d., p. 8, enclosure to Officer Administering the Government to Colonial Secretary, 21.4.34, BNA – CO 733/252/14. With typical colonial condescension, Andrews believed that peasants making these claims were simply daft.

³⁰ The Beisan lands were a sultanic estate (*mudawwara*), and hence more readily identifiable as state domain, but the residents contested this, arguing that their conversion to said status in the nineteenth century had been illegitimate. The dispute over the lands' fate has been discussed by a number of authors, including Stein, *The Land Question*, Smith, *Roots of Separatism*, and Huneidi, *A Broken Trust*, but the greatest depth is offered by in Munir Fakhri Eldin, 'Communities of Owners: Land Law, Governance, and Politics in Palestine, 1858-1948', PhD dissertation (NYU, 2008) and *Ibid.*, 'British Framing of the Frontier in Palestine, 1918-1923: Revisiting Colonial Sources on Tribal Insurrection, Land Tenure, and the Arab Intelligentsia', *Jerusalem Quarterly* 60 (2014), pp. 42-58.

³¹ The notable exceptions where the state forcefully pushed for transfers were Barrat Qisarya and Zor al-Zarqa in the coastal plain and the Huleh valley in the north.

and an exemplar of local backwardness. Estimated to comprise a large proportion of the cultivated land in Palestine,³² the government planned to eliminate *musha'* through a comprehensive cadaster that would delimit parcels, assess ownership claims and assign individual title deeds throughout the country. This process, begun in the late 1920s, proved more formidable than anticipated. Arab cultivators were suspicious that the cadaster's true purpose was to aid Zionist colonisation and reacted to it fearfully in areas near existing Jewish settlement.³³ Given that the settlement of title legally prepared properties for the land market and that the survey almost entirely concentrated on coastal and plains areas of Zionist interest³⁴ – just as Arab bankruptcies and small-holder sales were escalating – this seems to have been a reasonable appraisal. Peasants responded by asserting and disputing ownership on all manner of lands, eventually yielding an avalanche of claims and bringing the operation to a crawl.³⁵ Survey and titling was thus completed on only 11 percent of taxable properties before the revolt in 1936.³⁶ Available evidence further indicates that the plan to partition (*ifraz*) and privatise *musha'* failed, with collective lands only accounting for a small fraction of the already minimal quantity of lands covered by the survey.³⁷ Since rural producers tended to see *musha'* as 'a safeguard against alienation' and were sceptical of the survey, it is difficult not to conclude that peasants aimed not only to bolster their own individual positions but as well acted to defend a collective interest by stalling or halting prospective land transfers.³⁸ While flummoxing the state's grand scheme for surveying Palestine and liquidating *musha'*, peasant assertions also yielded state recognition of their ownership of almost 250,000 dunams that the government had tried to define as state domain.³⁹

³² Estimates of *musha'* in the 1920s ranged between 44-56 percent of lands under cultivation (cited in Nadan, *The Palestinian Peasant Economy*, p. 272).

³³ Kenneth W. Stein, 'The Jewish National Fund: Land Purchase Methods and Priorities, 1924-1939', *Middle Eastern Studies* 20/2 (April 1984), p. 199. This sets the peasant experience of the British survey operation apart from reactions to the previous Ottoman efforts to assign and register titles, which recent scholarship has suggested were generally more positive, if not uncontentious, throughout *Bilad al-Sham*. On the latter, see Eugene Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Martha Mundy and Richard Saumarez Smith, *Governing Property, Making the Modern State: Law, Administration and Production in Ottoman Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

³⁴ Nadan, *The Palestinian Peasant Economy*, pp. 287-88. Only 3 villages in the interior hill regions were surveyed by the time of the Peel Commission, in contrast with some 160 in the plains (of which titling was completed for 107): *Report of the Palestine Royal Commission*, Cmd. 5479 (London: HMSO, 1937) (the Peel Commission report), pp. 230, 244.

³⁵ Unresolved claims grew from 535 in 1932 to 1139 in 1934 to 7843 by the close of 1936 (*Report to the League of Nations, 1933*, p. 47; *Report to the League of Nations, 1934*, p. 48; Peel Commission report, p. 230).

³⁶ Peel Commission report, pp. 229-230.

³⁷ In 1933 and 1934 less than 8 percent of surveyed and titled lands were *musha'* (calculated from *Report to the League of Nations, 1933*, p. 47 and *Report to the League of Nations, 1934*, p. 48), while the annual report for 1935 failed to mention any quantity of *musha'* at all, suggesting an equally small if not smaller extent was covered in the final year before the revolt (*Report to the League of Nations, 1935*, pp. 58-62).

³⁸ Quote from the Peel Commission report, p. 219.

³⁹ The record on the tide of peasant claims is somewhat murky. The Peel Commission suggests that the 250,000 dunams they formally acquired represented only a fraction of the total lands which they had sought possession of, though without providing a full statistical picture (Peel Commission report, pp. 244-45).

The 1929 Uprising and Growing Rural Disquiet

For much of the 1920s the government preferred to disregard indications that its rule was despised and to fantasise that the *yishuv*'s economic development and a parsimonious measure of aid to the peasantry could secure the rural sphere's pacification.⁴⁰ In 1929 the veneer of quiescence and 'tranquility' in Palestine was punctured by a major Arab insurrection.⁴¹ Above and beyond the well-known violence that rocked Jerusalem, Safad, and Hebron, and the massacres of Jews in the latter two cities, over half of the colonies in the country were attacked. At least ten were temporarily evacuated and up to seven destroyed outright. 'Murderous assaults[,] robbery and arson were widespread' and Jews abandoned fledgling settlement efforts inside Acre, Beisan, Beersheba, Tulkarm, Nablus, Ramle and Gaza.⁴² Villagers and Bedouin were central actors in the uprising. Elite leaders, on the other hand, were aghast at the violence, believing it threatened their preferred course of diplomacy, and issued a cross-factional call – which the Arab public ignored – for the immediate restoration of public order.⁴³ At the end of the weeklong tumult 133 Jews and 116 Arabs had been slain, with hundreds more injured on both sides.

Although the insurrection had the appearance of being, and to some extent actually was, religiously inspired, its deeper wellsprings were tied to the increasing political and economic marginalisation experienced by the Palestinians. This was vividly attested to by the Shaw Commission, which was sent to investigate the 'disturbances'. Addressing the peasantry specifically, it expressed the opinion that 'the feelings of the *fellah*' in relating Jewish immigration to 'unemployment and distress' were 'a legitimate deduction from the facts as presented to us'. Further, it tellingly summarised rural anxieties by way of reference to the situation at Wadi al-Hawarith, where poor Bedouin were embroiled in a struggle to retain their lands after their absentee (Lebanese) landlord sold them to the Jewish National Fund (JNF). The commission argued that 'it seems likely that the tribe will lose its identity as a tribe and become a scattered community' and worried that similar situations would follow, necessitating police deployments to enforce mass evictions while facilitating the 'conversion of large sections of those who are now cultivators of the soil into a landless class'.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ The largest outlay of aid was arranged under High Commissioner Samuel, and amounted to ££562,000 of credit to be supplied to the peasantry over five years (*Report of the High Commissioner on the Administration of Palestine, 1920-1925*, p. 16). This sum, which reputedly 'went far to save the situation for the agriculturalists of Palestine' (*idem.*), was less than that collected in direct taxes in the first nine months of the civil administration alone (comparison derived from Smith, *Roots of Separatism*, pp. 39-40).

⁴¹ References to the pacific state of the country appear, for instance, in *Report to the League of Nations, 1927*, p. 3 and *Report to the League of Nations, 1928*, p. 6.

⁴² Avraham Sela, 'The 'Wailing Wall' Riots (1929) as a Watershed in the Palestine Conflict', *Muslim World* 84/1-2 (1994), p. 82; Alex Bein, *The Return to the Soil: A History of Jewish Settlement in Israel* (Jerusalem: Youth and Hechalutz Dept. of the Zionist Organization, 1952), p. 427; quote from Bein.

⁴³ The appeal, signed by Musa Kazim Pasha al-Husayni (head of the AE), Grand Mufti al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni, and Raghbi Bey al-Nashashibi (head of the Opposition), appears in Israel State Archive (ISA) (65), 985-22p.

⁴⁴ *Report of the Commission on the Palestine Disturbances of August, 1929* (the Shaw Commission report), Cmd. 3530 (London: HMSO, 1930), pp. 111, 119, 123-24, 150-57, 163-64.

The violence of 1929 caused Britain to revisit its policy and to issue restrictions on the development of the JNH in the form of the short-lived 1930 White Paper, which was, however, quickly abrogated after Zionist lobbying.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, in the short term the state's blanket repression did much to stir anti-British sentiment. Over 1,300 Arabs were arrested (virtually a tenth of whom were arraigned on murder charges) and onerous collective fines were levied on at least 22 villages and urban centres.⁴⁶ In the case of Be'er Tuvia in the Gaza subdistrict, which was destroyed during the uprising, 11 nearby Arab villages were assigned collective fines ranging individually from £P400-3,000.⁴⁷ Villagers and the popular classes took two critical lessons from these events: that 'Zionism and the JNH depended, ultimately and inevitably, on British bayonets', hence confrontation with the Mandate was inescapable, and that Palestinian elites would not provide the leadership requisite for a frontal challenge to colonial rule.⁴⁸

Events in northern Palestine continued to be unsettled for months after the uprising, and offered a preview of future rural collective mobilisation. Relying on the support of villagers in the Safad and Acre subdistricts, a small guerrilla band called the Green Hand (*al-Kaf al-akhdar*) repeatedly attacked Safad's Jewish quarter as well as British military and police patrols. The insurgents were suppressed in early 1930 following the imposition of collective punishment on Arab Safad and military 'raids' on a host of villages.⁴⁹

After 1929 the British belatedly turned their attention to propping up the crumbling rural order, but their efforts were too little, too late.⁵⁰ While peasants demanded the establishment of an agricultural bank (such as the Ottoman Agricultural Bank, which had been shuttered by colonial authorities), the Palestine government pushed a plan for the reform of the peasantry through participation in cooperative societies.⁵¹

⁴⁵ The scuppering of the White Paper is usefully recounted in Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, chapter 15.

⁴⁶ Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, revised ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 48; Rana Barakat, 'Thawrat al-Buraq in British Mandate Palestine: Jerusalem, Mass Mobilisation, and Colonial Politics, 1928-30', PhD dissertation (University of Chicago, 2007), p. 293; *Report to the League of Nations*, 1930, p. 8. Charges were laid against some 53 Arab population centres for actual or alleged offences.

⁴⁷ Bein, *The Return to the Soil*, p. 427; Akram Zu'aytir, *Bawakir al-nidal: min mudhakkirat Akram Zu'aytir, 1909-1935* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 1994), p. 71.

⁴⁸ Kayyali, *Palestine*, pp. 145-46.

⁴⁹ High Commissioner to Colonial Secretary, 22.2.30, BNA – CO 733/190/5.

⁵⁰ A number of scholars contend that the mandatory authorities strenuously exerted themselves in the 1929-36 period to protect the peasantry. Such an idea is highly erroneous and greatly misrepresents or overestimates the value of various British initiatives, as I suggest herein. For examples see Kenneth W. Stein, 'One Hundred Years of Social Change: The Creation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem' in Lawrence J. Silberstein, ed., *New Perspectives on Israeli History: The Early Years of the State* (New York: NYU Press, 1991), pp. 57-81; Nadan, *The Palestinian Peasant Economy*.

⁵¹ For a sampling of peasant sentiment on the necessity of an agricultural bank, see Political Reports, Tulkarm district officer, 3.3.30 and 13.4.30, ISA (112) 5170-4m. On the Ottoman Agricultural Bank, see Bunton, *Colonial Land Policies*, pp. 103-05. A special committee under High Commissioner Samuel had recommended the reestablishment of just such an institution, but to no avail (*ibid.*, p. 111).

In the event, however, the cooperatives venture was too undercapitalised, modest in scale and tardy to be of much assistance.⁵² Peasants were left largely without affordable credit and sank deeper into debt.⁵³ The administration only began to tackle the widespread problem of usury – a major contributor to indebtedness and impoverishment – in 1934, after two decades of acute economic instability and declining conditions for smallholders.⁵⁴ The tithe was cancelled the same year, following years of mounting remissions, but by then the relief was small solace for the increasingly impoverished and bankrupt agrarian sector.⁵⁵

Equally unavailing was the colonial state's almost exclusive concentration on the fate of tenant farmers and its general disregard for other classes of agrarian producers. This had been its preoccupation since the passage of the first Land Transfer Ordinance (LTO) in 1920, which reopened the land market after World War I, and was subsequently the focus of the various Protection of Cultivators Ordinances (POCO, 1929-33). Even after the Shaw Commission warned of the growth of Arab dispossession and expressly criticised both the LTO and the 1929 POCO as ineffectual, if not exacerbating this trend, the colonial state continued myopically down the same path; its legislation failed to keep sharecroppers on the land while excluding smallholders from consideration for protection.⁵⁶

Coupled with a string of terrible harvests in the early 1930s, the generally regressive regime superintended by the mandate brought about burgeoning Arab landlessness. According to the 1931 census, at least 26.8 percent of Arab agricultural earners were

⁵² See figures provided in Nadan, *The Palestinian Peasant Economy*, pp. 226-27. See also conflicting British evaluations cited in Bunton, *Colonial Land Policies*, p. 122. The failure of the mandate to capitalise the cooperatives system it initiated is particularly ironic given that the government ran considerable annual budget surpluses by FY1932, which subsequently led to an enormous accumulated surplus. Over fifteen months from 1 January 1932 to the close of FY1932 (31 March 1933), for example, the government ran a budget surplus of £P645,156, roughly equal to twenty-six times the startup capital for the cooperatives. By FY1934 the accumulated surplus totaled £P2,510,932, on par with the government's entire annual budget, before peaking at £P6,267,810 at the close of FY1935, just weeks before the beginning of the uprising. For the cooperatives' initial funding, *Report to the League of Nations, 1933*, p. 13; all other sums and calculations derive from *Report to the League of Nations, 1934*, p. 153; *Report to the League of Nations, 1936*, p. 46; Peel Commission report, pp. 206-7.

⁵³ As Barbara Smith succinctly sums up with regard to the credit situation, 'The failure of the Administration in this area was... tantamount to a total withdrawal of active efforts to aid the local population in economic activity' (Smith, *Roots of Separatism*, p. 114).

⁵⁴ Graham-Brown, 'The Political Economy', p. 98.

⁵⁵ The growing stream of remissions after 1929 was indicative of the fact that, in consequence of the rural crisis, the tax had passed into obsolescence. The tithe was replaced with a graded system of taxation on land. For a brief description of its origins and workings, see *Report to the League of Nations, 1935*, pp. 55-58.

⁵⁶ Shaw Commission report, pp. 114-17, 162. On the failure of the Protection of Cultivators legislation see also Kenneth W. Stein, 'Legal Protection and Circumvention of Rights for Cultivators in Mandatory Palestine' in *Palestinian Society and Politics*, pp. 233-60. Only in February 1936 was legislation mooted that was intended to prevent sales of subsistence lots by most owner-cultivators, but the revolt prevented it from becoming law. For more on this, see *Report to the League of Nations, 1936*, p. 21 and Charles Anderson, 'The Crisis of Palestinian Landlessness, 1929-1936', forthcoming.

wage labourers, yet no firm data was gathered on sharecroppers.⁵⁷ If the High Commissioner's estimate the following year that 20 percent of cultivators were sharecroppers was accurate, that would mean that no less than 38.8 percent of Arab agriculturalists were legally landless; on the other hand, Lewis French, the first Director of Development, believed that upwards of half of cultivators were tenants, which would equate to a landless rate of 56.8 percent.⁵⁸ Land sales by smallholders subsequently mushroomed in the early 1930s at such an alarming pace that by January 1936 Colonial Secretary J.H. Thomas envisioned the possibility that they might continue 'until practically the whole of the agricultural land of the country which it is profitable for the Jews to buy has passed into Jewish hands'.⁵⁹

As the old rural order decayed and peasant dispossession grew, rural dwellers fought back using a variety of means that had significant impacts on the Palestinian national movement and the mandate. What the British labeled 'agrarian crime' – sabotage and material subversion – was a popular method of protest. Tree-cutting, arson, damage to crops, and the theft or killing of animal stocks were all components of the 'petty wars' of the late Ottoman era between rival neighbouring communities.⁶⁰ The rise of sabotage after 1929 often correlated to the expansion of Zionist settlement, and in some areas grew rife. For this reason the administration scheduled the Northern District *en masse* (comprising 206 villages) in 1933 for potential fines under the Collective Punishments Ordinance, should they be found to commit offences. Statistics collected by the government show a significant pattern of protest by sabotage that mostly tapered off with the increasing deployment of collective punishments.⁶¹ Additionally, the administration also emplaced police billets, officially dubbed 'punitive police posts', in selected communities that were subjected to special surveillance while being compelled to foot the bill for the units.⁶² The recourse to collective punishments to check property crimes against Jews in the 1930s, as opposed to their previous use in connection with attacks on persons, illustrated a coarsening of the state's position towards the rural population.⁶³

⁵⁷ *Census of Palestine 1931* 1, prepared by E. Mills (Government of Palestine, 1933), p. 289.

⁵⁸ Stein, 'Legal Protection', p. 236; Lewis French, First Report on Agricultural Development and Land Settlement in Palestine, 23.12.31, p. 36, BNA – CO 733/214/5. The latter tabulation above does not include those engaged principally in animal husbandry, estimated in 1931 at approximately 5 per cent of the rural Arab population (*Census of Palestine 1931*, pp. 289-91). All calculations herein are derived using the census figures.

⁵⁹ Memorandum by the Colonial Secretary, 10.1.36, p. 2, CP 3 (36), BNA – CAB 24/259. Large-scale intra-Arab transfers were taking place at this time as well (Graham-Brown, 'The Political Economy', p. 104), but on sales to Jews, see Stein, *The Land Question*, pp. 180-81.

⁶⁰ James Reilly, 'The Peasantry of Late Ottoman Palestine', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10/4 (Summer 1981), p. 91.

⁶¹ *Report to the League of Nations, 1932*, p. 4; *Report to the League of Nations, 1933*, p. 7; *Report to the League of Nations, 1935*, p. 7; Peel Commission report, p. 80. The Assistant District Commissioner at Nablus took credit for the expansion of collective fines and related its origins to resistance to 'what amounted to a gradual transfer of the fertile [coastal] plain from Arab to Jewish ownership': Hugh Foot, *A Start in Freedom* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964), pp. 45, 47.

⁶² The first mention I have found of such a post is in *Report to the League of Nations, 1932*, p. 4.

⁶³ By comparison, the low priority given to intra-Arab murders (such as blood feuds) was noted in 1932

The early 1930s also witnessed a growing volume of fractious boundary disputes as rural Arab resolve to remain on the land stiffened. According to Zionist land purchasers, 'the Palestinian peasant believed that, if he seized land purchased by Jews, he could somehow manage to keep it; or, failing to keep it, he could at least blackmail the Jewish purchaser for payment to vacate the land'.⁶⁴ To remedy the situation and curtail violent altercations between Jewish settlers, Bedouin and other Arabs, the government promulgated the Land Disputes (Possession) Ordinance in 1932, which gave District Commissioners power to circumvent the land courts and determine the disposition of any piece of contested land they judged liable to cause a breach of the peace.⁶⁵ Whatever effects the law may have had, it did not stem the spread of land struggles before 1936 or their tendency to risk or to produce violence.

Besides the Wadi al-Hawarith affair, public struggles against the displacement of Arab residents and communities occurred in numerous locations, including the Tulkarm, Beisan, Haifa, and Acre subdistricts, and on a larger scale in the Huleh valley on the Syrian border.⁶⁶ As the Shaw Commission had feared, police detachments became essential to completing many eviction orders, and in at least one case, at al-Harithiya in the Carmel hills, they killed a resident resisting the proceedings.⁶⁷ The increasing determination of peasants and Bedouin to resist eviction and dispossession attracted great attention from the national movement, and the myriad youth societies that became its largest, most organised element in the first half of the 1930s often tried to offer them material and moral support in their struggles.⁶⁸

Regardless of their individual outcomes, the profusion of land contests ultimately played an energising role within the national movement, as each fight over an eviction or land transfer symbolised in miniature the greater Palestinian fear of dispossession at the hands of Jewish colonists backed by the British regime.

by H. P. Rice, the new head of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the police (cited in Kolinsky, *Law, Order and Riots*, p. 100).

⁶⁴ Kenneth W. Stein, 'Rural Change and Peasant Destitution: Contributing Causes to the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936-39' in John Waterbury and Farhad Kazemi, (eds.), *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991), pp. 159-60.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 156, and on Huleh, see Charles Anderson, 'From Petition to Confrontation: The Palestinian National Movement and the Rise of Mass Politics, 1929-1939', PhD dissertation (New York University, 2013), chapter 3. Perhaps the fullest account of the Wadi al-Hawarith episode is Raya Adler (Cohen), 'The Tenants of Wadi Hawarith: Another View of the Land Question in Palestine', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20/2 (May 1988), pp. 197-220.

⁶⁷ CID, 5.2.35, periodical appreciation summary 4/35, BNA – FO 371/18957; Kayyali, *Palestine*, p. 179.

⁶⁸ These subjects are taken up in Anderson, 'From Petition to Confrontation', chapters 1-3.

The Breakdown of the Ancien Régime and the Crystallisation of Rural Class Conflict

The threat to the Palestinians presented by Zionism and British rule did little to assuage class tensions within Arab society. While it has frequently been taken for granted that peasants were aligned to their 'patrons', including the landed elements at the helm of the AE, rural producers were often increasingly alienated from and at odds with their own upper classes. The British observed early on in meetings in the villages that their residents were deferential towards the upper classes, but when elites weren't present the villagers complained more freely about their malaise.⁶⁹ After the ratification of the mandate, segments of the public turned against the elite national leadership, believing that its agenda was, in the words of one District Governor, 'in no way calculated to raise the country from the state of economic depression in which it finds itself'.⁷⁰ National elites tried paternalistically to represent and defend peasant interests against some of the colonial state's most damaging policies, calling for the tithe to be cancelled, for example, while steering well clear of promoting social reform or questioning their own power.⁷¹ Although the fullest extent of peasant grievances with the upper classes took time to manifest itself, peasant distance from elites – and from their diplomatic pretensions for the national movement – was readily visible in the 1929 uprising and in the vigorous and independent repertoires of anti-colonial direct action that followed.

The decomposition of the peasantry and the spread of bankruptcy and landlessness was an uneven process and varied by region or even locality. Crisis hit the Northern District hardest initially.⁷² Displacement and weakness were also apparent in the coastal areas where Zionist settlement had spread and Arab plantation agriculture (based in wage labour) had taken root in the nineteenth century, whereas in the interior hill country bonds between the landed elite and poor peasants remained stronger, as was evident in the local co-farming and sharecropping arrangements (as well as wage labour) that helped keep more producers on the land.⁷³

⁶⁹ Miller, 'Administrative Policy', pp. 127-28.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Huneidi, *A Broken Trust*, p. 172.

⁷¹ AE minutes, 17.2.32 and undated session (appears to be March 1932), ISA (65) 984-5pe. This rather belated stance against the tithe recalls a proposal made, but not adopted, almost a decade earlier for a tax strike (Kayyali, *Palestine*, pp. 119-20). In general elite nationalist politicians insisted on the imposition of state-driven protections for the agrarian producing classes while occasionally advancing motions that called for such things as peasants to be educated about the national question and about finance. On this last, see al-Hut, *al-Qiyadat wa-l-mu'assasat*, pp. 163-64, and Khairia Kasmieh, 'Economic Aspects of the Arab-Zionist Confrontation in Mandatory Palestine' in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett, eds., *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspective* (Boston: Brill, 2004), p. 448.

⁷² A number of indicators point to this conclusion, not least the fact that the north owed over 75 per cent of all tithe arrears in 1931 while simultaneously an enormous number of persons were being taken to Haifa's courts for debt proceedings. Respectively: *Report of Committee on Arrears of Werko, Tithes and Agricultural Loans*, pp. 3-4, BNA – CO 733/227/5 (my calculation) and Sir John Hope Simpson, *Report on Immigration, Land Settlement and Development*, Cmd. 3686 (London: HMSO, 1930) (Hope Simpson report), p. 51.

⁷³ Salim Tamari, 'From the Fruits of their Labour: the Persistence of Sharetenancy in the Palestinian

British actions both of omission and commission only exacerbated the growing class divide in rural society. On the one hand, the 1929 uprising led colonial authorities to try to preserve and reinforce existing patterns of social hierarchy as a means of trying to control the peasantry (hence the inertia on dealing with the problem of usurious credit).⁷⁴ Yet when they finally did attempt to better the conditions of the lower classes, their efforts were liable to backfire and provoke conflict and dissension in Arab society. For instance, some landlords reacted to the Protection of Cultivators Ordinance (1933), which prevented tenants in residence for one year from eviction by sale, by shuffling peasants to prevent them attaining residency, choosing to leave plots fallow, or by removing tenants altogether or even selling land to the JNF.⁷⁵

In the main, the inability of the notables to offer the rural lower classes protection from the state or to secure gains that might offset or reverse the declining position of much of the rural public, while at the same time refusing to provide their peasant partners with substantive debt relief, led to an accumulating crisis of confidence in the fundamentals of the rural order. Peasants didn't have to be dispossessed in droves for the impression to spread that the old social compact – under which elites styled themselves as patrons and maintained the peasants on the land – was unwinding. The position of many was doubtless summed up by one *fallah* in 1930: 'I sell my land and my property because the government forces me to pay taxes on it while I cannot even get the basic needs for my own and my family's sustenance. So I am forced to go to the rich people for a short-term loan at 50-per cent [sic] interest.'⁷⁶

The consequences of the triangular relations between peasants, landowning notables, and the state were stark. The rural lifestyle cherished by many was diminishing as peasants were converted into rural proletarians or migrant labourers in the urban slums that expanded from the late 1920s onwards. The growing ranks of the dispossessed were apt to see the large Arab proprietors and wealthy merchants who still dominated the changing rural scene as agents of dispossession and exploitation. While before 1936 the rural lower classes focused on opposing Zionism and the British regime, this soon changed dramatically. When masses of peasants rose in rebellion during the Great Revolt, seeking an end to colonial rule and Zionism, they simultaneously embarked on a project of Arab social renewal. Though at first rural partisans attempted to rebalance the scales with elites, when peasants and their allies reached the peak of their political and military power in 1938 they launched an incipient, but ultimately abortive, social revolution.

Agrarian Economy' in Kathy Glavanis and Pandeli Glavanis (eds.), *The Rural Middle East: Peasant Lives and Modes of Production* (London: Zed, 1990), pp. 85-87; Graham-Brown, 'The Political Economy', especially pp. 114-15.

⁷⁴ Graham-Brown, 'The Political Economy', p. 100. To be sure, the official position was that the cadastral survey and settlement of title would provide the proper basis for a modern credit system (Bunton, *Colonial Land Policies*, p. 102; Nadan, *The Palestinian Peasant Economy*, pp. 267-68). Yet in the meantime it did little to enforce the existing legal interest rate cap of 9 percent.

⁷⁵ Stein, 'Legal Protection', p. 239, pp. 249-53; Nadan, *The Palestinian Peasant Economy*, p. 195.

⁷⁶ Quote from the newspaper *Filastin*, cited in Mahmoud Yazbak, 'From Poverty to Revolt: Economic Factors in the Outbreak of the 1936 Rebellion in Palestine', *Middle Eastern Studies* 36/3 (July 2000), p. 103. The peasant was referring to the common '*ashara-khamsta*' arrangement, by which a £P10 loan before harvest was payable as £P15 three months later, equal to an APR of 200 percent (Hope Simpson report, p. 49).

Rural Anticolonialism between Autonomism and Revolt

During the first two decades of British rule, Palestinian peasants and rural dwellers can hardly have been said to conform with the crude and passive images of rural society found in many scholarly accounts and the primary sources upon which they are based. Contesting the dismissive treatment of peasants in the literature, Swedenburg has invoked the Gramscian notion of ‘common sense’, and Ranajit Guha’s understanding of it, to apprehend the conceptual tools used by rural producers to survive, negotiate and resist the domination they experienced.⁷⁷ In his deft hands, Gramsci’s rubric for locating the intellectual and ideological moorings of the lower classes yields a supple and polyvalent look into the peasant imaginary, sifting through its ‘ambiguous, contradictory... [and] multiform’ dimensions to reveal the crucial set of anti-elitist articulations of national identity, belonging, and commitment that underpinned the Great Revolt.⁷⁸ To its great credit, *Memories of Revolt* shows ample sensitivity to its subjects and does not fall prey to the temptation to misread and exaggerate the localist dimensions of rural identities and mobilisation, which have often been blamed for the downfall of the insurgency. Instead, Swedenburg produces a layered understanding of indigenous territoriality that linked the village, its smallest unit, to the nation and the national struggle through an insurgent geography that was flexible and decentralised but nevertheless aimed at the liberation of Palestine as a whole.⁷⁹

Certainly there is much to recommend itself in Swedenburg’s work, not least that circumstances under the mandate catalysed a kind of everyday anticolonial sensibility among the swelling numbers of struggling, bankrupt and dispossessed rural producers who exerted themselves against the state’s corrosive policies. Yet his discussion of peasant discourse and common sense is also reliant on Guha’s notion of ‘negative class consciousness’, which seeks to explain the drive of peasants to defend their interests and repel their exploitation or manipulation by elites and the colonial state while simultaneously identifying their failure to develop and coalesce into a class-for-itself with its own coherent self-identity and class orientation.⁸⁰ Where Swedenburg mostly avoids the non-dialectical tenor of Guha’s focus on peasant practices of negation (directed at elites and exploiting classes), a closer examination of rural activism in mandate Palestine shows that it was anything but reducible to a purely negative array of individual and collective actions.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt*, pp. 27-30 and chapter 3.

⁷⁸ Quote from Gramsci in *ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, especially chapters 3 and 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28, pp. 114-16. Swedenburg compares negative class consciousness with Gramsci’s idea of ‘subversivism’, but Guha’s conception that he cites is explicated foremost in Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), chapter 2. The category ‘consciousness’ as employed in early Subaltern Studies scholarship such as Guha’s has of course been roundly criticised. On this see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’ in Guha and Spivak (eds.), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 3-32, and Rosalind O’Hanlon, ‘Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia’ *Modern Asian Studies* 22/1 (1988), pp. 189-224; and for a riposte, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 15.

⁸¹ Guha holds to the idea that peasant insurrections during the period he studies in *Elementary Aspects*

Broadly defined, peasant practices cluster into what can be distinguished as two different modes, the first describing the many small-scale and atomised resistances to the colonial state and its impositions, and the second consisting of wider episodes of collective mobilisation such as the 1929 uprising. The former constituted an essentially continuous stream of dissidence. The latter punctuated the former current, first in the early 1920s, and then in a thickening fashion from 1929 to 1936. In the period bracketed by the 1929 rebellion and the Great Revolt the accelerating decomposition of the rural order and the political deadlock faced by the national movement together gave rise to more vociferous anticolonial campaigning, the greatest symbols of which were the land struggles that dotted the era and became synonymous with the plight of the lower classes and, more generally, the Palestinians as a whole. If we attend to the resistant practices of rural producers, and particularly the amplified frequency and increasingly mass character of their mobilisations and activism in the early 1930s, it may further be observed that the commonplace contention that the Great Revolt emerged ‘spontaneously’ – itself a product of the literature’s fixation on elites who were in disarray at the time – is rather erroneous.

Peasant activism did not arise from a ‘negative class consciousness’, nor for that matter was it animated, as other popular models of peasant and Arab peasant mobilisation would have it, primarily by either a peasant culture somehow distinct from that of elites or, on the other hand, by the resurgent cultural particularism of Islamic populism.⁸² Instead peasant activism sprung from a tradition of communal autonomism – in a context in which the state was often identified with surplus extraction and military conscription – in conjunction with the national-indigenist response that was triggered primarily by Zionist settlement and British colonialism. If peasant autonomism – both atomistic and collective – described a defensive impulse, for instance rejecting the erosion of customary tenure or the development of the JNH at the expense of Arab villages, it also conjured images of village identity, self-regulation, and more generally, the lifestyle(s) of rural dwellers. In other words, the rural lower classes were not simply fighting a series of greater or lesser battles *against* colonial encroachment; they were struggling *for* the preservation of their patrimony and the multiple senses of community, attachment, and identity enfolded within it. This manifold process was more than an act of conservation. It entailed both critique of the class order and the development of new translocal identities (as impoverished cultivators, the dispossessed, urban workers, and migrant labourers) – as well as struggling to hold the line in the countryside and not become severed from the land. At the heart of the peasants’ common sense, as shaped by the colonial encounter before 1936, was a desperate cry for the defence of community and patrimony, from the smallholder to the village to the nation itself, while urging – if subtly and inchoately at times – the refiguration and reform of social bonds within Palestinian society.

(1783-1900) were devoid of any constructive aspect or dimension, preferring to consider their tactics and repertoires as instances of a will to negate elite class power and identity. While Swedenburg does not completely follow this line, he does not seem to register its profoundly dismissive character or that it contradicts elements of the peasant culture he depicts.

⁸² Classic arguments in these veins are, respectively, James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and Nels Johnson, *Islam and the Politics of Meaning in Palestinian Nationalism* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1982).

This fearful and apprehensive sensibility, stoked by years of joining political with economic pressures and combined with the increasingly coarse treatment of the rural public by the colonial regime, ultimately underwrote the insurgent charge across the hills and valleys and into the villages and cities during the Great Revolt, as many rural dwellers reached the conclusion that there was no other path to redemption except through the force of arms.

Postscript

There is much to be learned about the ways in which everyday resistance against forms of economic dispossession morphed into more overt and collective challenges to the mandate, and as well about organising by peasants, rural dwellers, and the dispossessed. Nevertheless, this paper has attempted to illustrate that political economic change and the declining position of the Arab countryside were integral to fomenting rural unrest in its various and sundry manifestations, and in turn to shaping both the course of the Palestinian national movement and the history of the Palestine mandate. The fact that such a view has been all too absent from the relevant scholarship⁸³ might well be understood as symptomatic of the weakness of diplomatic history as a lens for comprehending key dynamics of the era of British rule in Palestine and of the pitfalls of reflexively imagining elites to be the dominant historical force within Palestinian society.

At the same time, the present study raises further questions with regard to both the broader literature on interwar revolutionary and nationalist struggles in the Arab Middle East and that concerned with the study of social movements and contentious politics. Somewhat mirroring Palestine's historiography, the former has too often neglected socioeconomic change as a political factor and as a driver of anticolonial mobilisation.⁸⁴ Adopting a framework that derives from Hourani's 'politics of notables', many studies of interwar anticolonial movements fail to adequately analyse and explore the repertoires of popular contention developed by non-elite constituencies.⁸⁵ In fact, despite James Gelvin's laudable engagement with social movement theory in studying Faysali Syria, and his scepticism toward widely influential elitist historiographies of nationalism across the interwar Middle East, the study of the region's independence movements and anticolonial struggles has developed largely in isolation from the wider

⁸³ Notable exceptions that take this matter seriously include Yazbak, 'From Poverty to Revolt' and Issa Khalaf, 'The Effect of Socioeconomic Change on Arab Societal Collapse in Mandate Palestine', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29/1 (February 1997), pp. 93-112. See also Kanafani, *Thawrat 1936-1939*. Curiously, despite her great care in surveying the changing political economy of the Jabal Nablus region and of the countryside, Graham-Brown ('The Political Economy') has little to say about associated impacts on the political behaviour of rural dwellers.

⁸⁴ E.g. Michael Provence, 'Ottoman Modernity, Colonialism, and Insurgency in the Interwar Arab East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43/2 (May 2011), pp. 205-25. While Provence's *Great Syrian Revolt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005) has much to recommend it, his more recent theorisation of interwar anticolonialism almost totally obscures systemic political economic change and crisis.

⁸⁵ Albert Hourani, 'Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables' in Richard L. Chambers and William R. Polk (eds.), *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 41-68.

literature on social movements.⁸⁶ Of course, this cannot entirely be laid at the feet of Middle East scholars, for social movement theory has long woefully neglected the study of colonialism and anticolonialism. Equally problematic from the point of view of the present study, the literature on social movements has also frequently avoided the study of political economy, capitalism, and class. In light of the present findings, it would appear that there is much to be gained by beginning to redress these various lacunae and to bring these strands of scholarship into greater contact.

⁸⁶ James Gelvin, 'The Social Origins of Popular Nationalism: Evidence for a New Framework', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26/4 (November 1994), pp. 645-61; and *Ibid.*, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Scholarship that has engaged with the social movement literature has tended to focus on more contemporary struggles and developments, such as in Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel (eds.), *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

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