Zionist identity and the British Mandate: Palestine's internment camps and the making of the Western native

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between British police officers, Jewish guards, and German internees in Palestine's internment camps during World War II. Using the reports of the Jewish guards, the paper investigates the role of Western-identified actors in the Zionist identity-making project. The reports evince a surprising rapport between the British and their German prisoners and the mistreatment of the Jewish guards by their British superiors. The paper analyses these Jewish accounts in the context of identity- and ethnic boundary-making and argues that they illustrate Zionism's intent to construct itself as a Western but noncolonial movement and Zionists in Palestine as natives but not “Orientals.” The reports also reveal a breach between the formal hierarchy—British officers, Jewish guards, German internees—and the ethnic order, which situated British and Germans at the apex and the Jews at the bottom. The paper highlights the utility of researching group-making interactions in different contexts to develop a more nuanced understanding of identity-making processes.

KEYWORDS

boundary, colonialism, ethnicity, nationhood/national identity, Palestine, Zionism
We have come here as Europeans. Although our origin is in the East and we are returning to the East, we bring with us European civilization.—David Ben Gurion.1

1  INTRODUCTION

The exigencies of the Second World War produced a very curious encounter in Palestine, one that brought together British officers, Jewish guards, and German internees in the Mandatory territory’s internment camps. Away from the theatre of war, the camps housed Palestine’s German residents, in the main, members of the Templar Community under the supervision of a small British command and a large cohort of Jewish guards. Paradoxically, at the same time that European Jewry faced extinction at the hands of Nazi Germany, Jewish guards watched over German pro-Nazi inmates in Palestine.2

Palestine’s internment camps present a unique opportunity to examine the Zionist project of creating a new identity from a new perspective. Heretofore, critical studies have mainly described Zionism in terms of it functioning as a framework for European Jews to assimilate themselves into the narrative of the West (Hirsch, 2009; Shafir, 1989; Shamir, 2000; Shenhav, 2006; Shohat, 1999, 2003).3 This was achieved, in part, through a mechanism that Khazzoom (2003) eloquently describes as “the great chain of Orientalism.” This mechanism incorporates a triangular relationship: the subject of transformation (European Jews); a Western model to emulate (the British in Palestine, European Christians), and a seemingly subordinate actor whom they could project “negative” “Oriental” traits upon (mainly Palestinian Arabs but also Diaspora [European] Jews and Middle-Eastern Jews).

The case of the internment camps, engendering the encounter of British, Jews, and Germans, is unique because it presents an ethnic composition that differs from that assessed in earlier studies. The key new factor here is the absence of a predefined Oriental actor to facilitate the “Westernization” of Palestine’s Jews. Drawing on contemporaneous reports written by Jewish guards and Zionist officials, the current study seeks to determine the impact of interactions with Western-identified actors on the Zionist identity-making project. To be more specific, how did the Jews situate themselves with respect to the British and Germans? What interpretations and meanings did they ascribe to their treatment by the two Euro-Christian actors?

The Jewish reports from the camps reveal a distinctly biased, at times manifestly discriminatory attitude on the part of their British superiors, alongside close relationships between the British and the German internees. The Jewish guards understood these attitudes as stemming from a number of negative qualities on the part of the British: anti-Semitic sentiments, incompetence, the perception of Jews as inferior natives, and a general preference for the German internees. These Jewish experiences and interpretations, the present study argues, should be understood in the broader context of the Zionist identity project. In this context, the accounts of the Jewish guards reflect the dual, perhaps conflicting, ambitions of Zionism: to establish the Jews in Palestine as both Westerners (but not colonizers) and as natives (but not Asiatic or Orientals).

The study also offers an analysis of the relationships in the internment camps in the context of Lamont and Molnár’s theory of social and symbolic boundaries (2002). The accounts of the Jewish guards uncover a rupture between the formal order of the camps (the social boundaries—British officers on top, Jewish guards in the middle, and German internees at the bottom)—and the ethnic order (symbolic boundaries—the attitudes, preferences, and prejudices of actors on the ground). According to the latter, the British and Germans shared mutual respect and approval; both regarded and treated the Jews as inferior. Whereas the formal order followed official classifications based on national affiliations, the ethnic order reflected widespread, and deep-rooted ethno-cultural views. The dual position of the Jewish guards, as enforcers of the law and as the targets of ethnic assaults, allowed Zionism both to claim native status and belonging on the one hand and to depict British Mandate rule as fundamentally incompetent on the other—thus, allowing Zionism to forward the claim of being better custodians of Western values.
The article will begin by providing some context about the camps, the German internees, the overarching political circumstances, and the general relationship between the British officers and Jewish servicemen of Palestine’s police force. The next section will flesh out the theoretical considerations of this study, in the main concentrating on issues of boundary- and identity-making. The third section will explore the triadic setting through which Zionist identity is often studied (Zionism between East and West), the shortcomings of this approach, and the hypothetical presumptions of the analysis of the present case. The results section is divided into four interrelated subsections, arranged thematically rather than chronologically. A short opening subsection introduces the Jewish guards and their relationship with the Haganah—the Zionist paramilitary organization to whom they owed a fundamental loyalty. The second subsection describes the partial picture that we can discern from the formal pecking order in the camps and the importance of the symbolic and informal ethnic order. The third subsection presents the ways in which the Jewish accounts questioned the British capacity to rule: depicting them as sluggish, biased, and disloyal, and themselves as the impartial and informed guardians of law and order. The last section focuses on Jewish interpretations of the abusive attitude of the British and how this supported their identification as native, colonized subjects suffering at the hands of an abusive colonizer.

2 | CONTEXTUALIZING THE CASE

Around 2,300 German citizens lived in Palestine on the eve of the Second World War. A majority—about 2,000—were members of the Templer community, a pious religious group who had settled in Palestine over the course of the last third of the 19th century. The Templers retained their German citizenship and heritage: They spoke German and celebrated national holidays, maintained a separate education system, and kept strong ties with the motherland (Carmel, 1973; Mann, 2009; Sauer, 1991; Wawrzyn, 2013). The Templers established three urban colonies (in Jaffa, Haifa, and Jerusalem) and four farming colonies, the latter introducing modern farming methods and technologies to the region (Talman, 1995). Following Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, Nazi sentiments emerged in the community. Templers joined the Palestine chapter of Hitler’s NSDAP in large numbers and enlisted in the Wehrmacht. On August 31, 1939, alone, 232 German draftees left Palestine to join the German army (Wawrzyn, 2013, p. 98). Their stand with Nazi Germany devastated the Templer’s longstanding relationship with the Jewish community, with whom they had hitherto shared strong cultural, industrial, and commercial links (Sauer, 1991; Wawrzyn, 2013).

Following the outbreak of the Second World War, all the German residents in Palestine were classified as enemy aliens by the British authorities and incarcerated inside the Templer farming settlements, which the British turned into internment camps. The largest of the camps were operated in the farming colonies of Sarona, Wilhelma, and Waldheim. Despite the end of the war in 1945, the last internment camp only closed its gates in 1948—mainly because it protected its German residents from Jewish retaliation.

The camps were guarded by Jewish police officers, supervised by a British commandant and a small staff. The Jewish guards were members of the Supernumerary Police Force. A subsection of the Palestine Police, the force was commanded by British officers and tailored mainly for Jewish defence needs (Horne, 1982; Rivlin, 1962). One primary flashpoint between the British and Jewish servicemen, in the internment camps as elsewhere, concerned the perceived dual loyalties of the Zionist police officers. Thousands of Jewish servicemen across the various police branches were in parallel members of the Haganah, the proscribed Jewish paramilitary organization, which surreptitiously planted its members in the ranks of the Mandatory regime’s police force (Dekel 1959; Knight, 2011; Rivlin, 1962; author). Once inside police lines, the Haganah operatives were able to provide the organization with valuable intelligence and manipulate British resources for Zionist military and economic needs. The Jewish guards in the camps, as will be detailed later, followed the same practices—many of them served both the Mandate’s police force and the Haganah.
In a broader context, it is important to note that this was one of the calmer periods of the British Mandate. None of the open struggles that generally accounted for the animosity between the British and the Zionists occurred during this period. The Arab Revolt of 1936–1939 had subsided; aside from a handful of violent anti-Mandate acts by Jewish extremists, the official Zionist institutions by and large sided with Britain in its fight against Nazi Germany. The unrest of mainstream Zionism (including the Haganah) with respect to British rule would only surface from late 1945 onwards (for more on Zionist militarism, see Ben-Eliezer, 1998).

3 | SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES, IDENTITY MAKING, AND ETHNIC CATEGORIZATIONS

Lamont and Molnár (2002) discuss the differences and interplay between social and symbolic boundaries. Social boundaries represent the “objectified forms of social differences,” that is, the unequal distribution of power, resources, and opportunities. This conceptualization of social boundaries coalesces with what I call the “formal order,” that is, the official pecking order of British officers—Jewish guards—German internees. Symbolic boundaries, on the other hand, represent the conceptual distinctions employed by social actors for purposes of categorization and differentiation. Symbolic boundaries are the nuanced means through which actors compete over meanings, prestige, and definitions of reality. Lamont and Molnár’s theory opens a path for the interpretation of the ethnic order in the camps—that is, actions driven by considerations of ethnicity—as a site of conflict over symbolic boundaries and the ascription of ethnic attributes. Social and symbolic boundaries, it is important to note, are not mutually exclusive. Social boundaries can be employed to reinforce symbolic boundaries, while symbolic boundaries can be utilized to normalize social boundaries—or, conversely, to challenge them.

What Lamont and Molnár offer goes hand in hand with relational and contextual understandings of identity- and boundary-making processes. The gist of these approaches is that identity categories are not fixed, stable, or binary. They are mutable social constructions, shaped constantly both from above (by powerful actors and official classifications) and “from below” (by ordinary actors, both insiders and outsiders), in a variety of means and everyday settings (Barth, 1969; Brubaker, 2004; Cerulo, 1997; Jenkins, 1994, 1996; Omi & Winant, 1986; Wimmer, 2008, 2013).

The decision to prioritize “ethnicity” as a key category for examining symbolic boundaries also warrants explanation. Ethnicity is not narrowly conceptualized here, as is sometimes the case in North America (see Wimmer, 2013, p. 8). On the contrary, following Wimmer (2013), ethnicity is conceived here in a broad and encompassing way: as a concept that stands for the conflation of cultural, spatial, and biological features, and therefore including, among other categorizations, race, religion, and nationhood in its subtypes. The framework of the ethnic order, consequently, seeks to capture categorization and boundary-making processes as derived from the ethnic (including racial, religious, cultural, and national) views and preferences of the various actors.

4 | SHIFTING THE LENS

4.1 | The familiar framework: British Mandate, Zionism, and the Orient(al)

Two Arabs, in traditional dress, lean against a solid rock, surveying the horizon. Thus, a 1946 recruiting film of the British Palestine Police begins. “Palestine. A country of rarity and contrast,” the narrator intones. “Where the glories of the kingdoms of David and of Solomon, the life and passion of Christ, and the coming of the Prophet still can light a fire in the mind of men as events of only yesterday.” The 19-min film goes on to depict a backward Arab lifestyle. The Arab peasants, according to the film, worked their fields with horses and “primitive machines ... in much the same way as their biblical forebears did.” The Jewish cultivators, on the
other hand, used “modern machines” and constituted a “highly organized communal life.” Tel Aviv, according to the film, is “an entirely European style city, of small shops, flat cinemas, hotels, and factories.” White Jewish girls in swimsuits are shown running on the beach and smiling to the camera. “Almost incredible,” the narrator concludes, “is the contrast between Tel Aviv ultra-modernity and the biblical atmosphere of the lovely old Arab town of Nazareth.”

These reflections from the film capture quite succinctly the commonplace British opinions and conceptualizations of Palestine, the Arabs, and the Jews. British officials largely espoused and reinforced the distinction between the Oriental and backward Arabs, and the modern, enlightened Jews—especially Jews of European origin. Some of the British political elite, including Winston Churchill (Gilbert, 2007, pp. 60, 91) and Herbert Samuel (Segev, 2000, p. 34), regarded Jewish Europeans as the natural bearers of European civilization and modernity to the Orient. At the policy level, accordingly, Mandate laws gave preference (at least until the late 1930s) to Jewish immigration, land acquisition, settlement, and industry—often at the expense of the indigenous Arab population (Banko, 2016; Halamish, 2010; Shamir, 2013).

However, having been for centuries the "Asiatics of Europe," the European Jews did not ease smoothly into the "European civilizer" narrative (Kalmar & Penslar, 2005). They may have been “European” enough to “civilize” the Orient; but they were still Jews and mainly from Eastern Europe, two attributes implicitly linked to inferiority (Friesel, 1993; Sherman, 1997). To paraphrase Bhabha (1984): The Jews were white but not quite. Many of the British servicemen in Palestine, especially those in the rank-and-file, regarded the Jews as arrogant and ungrateful natives who do not know their place. Such views often had anti-Semitic undertones (Abadi, 1947; Ben-Ze'ev 2011; Friesel, 1993).

The Zionist movement showed no hesitation in embracing of the presumption of a civilizing mission. Most Zionist leaders subscribed to a “Europe versus Asia” narrative, one in which Zionism had shouldered the “burden” of introducing civilization to the underdeveloped Orient (Segev, 2000, p. 150; Shamir, 2000, p. 21). Theodore Herzl had described the future Jewish state in Palestine as Europe's bulwark against Asia, the “vanguard of culture against barbarism” (Segev, 2000, p. 150). Chaim Weizmann, chair of the World Zionist Organization, described the Arabs in terms of a primitive demoralized race and the Jews of Palestine as the natural intermediaries between Great Britain and Arabia. “There is a fundamental difference in quality between Jew and native,” he stated; he demanded that Palestine’s Jews not be referred to as a “native population,” amidst the preparations of the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine of 1922; the natives, as far as he was concerned, were the Arabs (Segev, 2000, pp. 109, 154).

On the ground and beyond this rhetoric, the Jews of Palestine had still a lot to learn from the British. They could hardly ask for better mentors from whom to learn both the craft of state-building and the core values of European civility. However, they displayed an ambiguous mix of attitudes in their interactions with British officials. On the one hand, Zionists were more than willing to accept British guidance and assistance on issues of public security, policing, and the development of state institutions. But on the other hand, they resented being grouped with the Arabs as natives and sought reassurance with regard to their self-perceived unique and superior status. For some, even the British were not Western enough, Jewish intellectuals sometimes looked down on British officers from rural and working-class backgrounds. The Jewish police officers in particular were scornful of their British superiors’ inferior capabilities and bragged about how easily they could be manipulated (Yohanani, 2017).

Critical studies of Zionism are predominantly occupied with denaturalizing the Western characteristics that the Zionist Jews of European origin laid claim to. Collectively, these studies illuminate the various practices and discursive means that Zionism employed to create a certain image of the Orient—one that Zionist Jews could distance themselves from, enabling their reinvention as a Western, enlightened people (Eyal, 2006; Gluzman, 2003; Hirsch, 2009; Khazzoom, 2003; Raz-Krakotzkin, 1993, 2005; Shamir, 2000; Shohat, 1999, 2003). The Orient—as manifested by either the Palestinian Arabs, Middle Eastern Jews, Diaspora (European) Jews, or all together—was a category that Zionist Jews sought to distance themselves from. The Western narrative of
Enlightenment and the modern nation-state was the light at the end of the tunnel that the Zionist project oriented itself toward.

4.2 Moving away from the British-Jewish-Oriental triad

Situating Zionism between the Orient and the Occident does indeed yield many merits with regards to understanding the pillars and construction of Zionist identity. However, one issue that these studies did not succeed in fully addressing was how Zionism was able to claim the roots of the Jewish people in the Orient, while—or despite—expend great effort in trying not to become a part of it. How could one lay claim to the land as a native, but at the same time demand preferential treatment from the European (and non-Jewish) colonizers by virtue of a shared heritage?

The objective of this paper is to offer new insights into the Zionist identity-making project by focusing on a different ethnic composition, one in which the Arab actor (the subaltern Oriental) is replaced by a German actor (European/Western). This tripartite comparison embraces the Simmelian understanding of the triad (Simmel, 1950, p. 135, Chapter 4), according to which the relationship between actors A and B is largely mediated by actor C. It is C’s identity that dictates the conditions, limits, and opportunities that actors A and B use to construct boundaries and assert desired attributes.

In the common triad, the presence of the Arab allowed the European Jews to assert “Western” characteristics, by highlighting essential differences between themselves and the “Oriental” actor. This mechanism allowed the European Jews to obscure long-lasting differences—real or imagined—between them and Euro-Christian actors (Bar-Yosef, 2002; Eyal, 2006; Hirsch, 2009; Khazzoom, 2003). However, Zionist efforts to ascribe native and Oriental attributes to the Arab contradicted a fundamental Zionist tenet, their historical right to the land that was Palestine. These efforts highlighted just how foreign and misplaced the European Jew was in Palestine, compared to the indigenous Arab. In the triad that this study constructs, the absence of an Oriental actor presents new opportunities and limits for the actors to categorize themselves and others. Due to the nature of the data—Zionist archival materials—the focus of this study is on how the Zionists interpreted the exchanges in the camps and what this knowledge may contribute to scholarly understanding of the broader Zionist identity project.

5 DATA AND METHOD

Documents for this study were sourced from two archives: The Central Zionist Archive (CZA) and the Haganah Historical Archives (HHA). The data include contemporaneous reports submitted by the Jewish guards to the Haganah, memoirs composed subsequently, and correspondence between Zionist officials.

At this point, I should acknowledge that I stumbled across the story of Palestine’s internment camps almost by accident. While working on another research project, I came across a misplaced and crumbling note, concerning Jewish guards complaining about German internees. This unexpected scenario piqued my curiosity, and I started to look for more material on the topic. Locating relevant data on the internment camps was not an easy task, as no files were designated to the camps specifically. Some data were recovered from general files about the Supernumerary Police and from files named after former Zionist activists.

The documents were sorted into two main categories: security-oriented and relations-oriented. The security-oriented items include information—often very detailed—about British personnel, German internees, security protocols, security vulnerabilities, weapons, storage, and so on. These reports provide crucial evidence regarding the dual loyalties of the Jewish guards but scarcely mention internal relationships in the camps. The relations-oriented items are the part and parcel of the current study. These items include all references and indications of personal preferences and relationships. For the most part, these items portray the discriminatory and dismissive attitude of both the British officers and German internees to the Jewish guards; grievances
regarding arbitrary uses of power for the purpose of humiliation; and misgivings about close relationships between
the British and the Germans.

Lastly, a word of caution. The archival materials present a Zionist point of view and therefore only cover one
aspect of a complex and multi-faceted story. Furthermore, since the reports focus on negative aspects and events
—to some extent, this explains their very existence—it is hard to determine to what degree they represent the
experience of the Jewish guards as a whole. Despite, or perhaps because they are partial, the reports are nevertheless
an excellent source for considering what the guards did choose to report about and how they understood and
interpreted their position with regard to the British and the Germans. Nevertheless, the caveat above justifies a
cautious analysis of the data. My primary guiding rule was, therefore, to separate “facts” from interpretations and
to stick with the latter. Thus, for instance, in cases in which the Jewish reports ascribe motives and meanings to
British and German actions, the focus is on the interpretation, not the interpreted.

6 | INTERNMENT CAMPS IN PALESTINE

6.1 | The Jewish guards and the Haganah

Who were the Jewish guards? Rivka Sapiro, one of the few women in the unit, served at Wilhelma. She recalls:

*We were about one hundred Jewish guards. We lived in three buildings and had our own telephones,
kitchen, and canteen. The guards came from all walks of life: farmers, sailors, port workers; natives,
Yemenites, Ashkenazi, and Sephardi. The British personnel was replaced every year but we stayed …*

The Haganah was deeply involved in the camps … We had two commanders from the Haganah.9

However, and contrary to Sapiro’s recollection, the Jewish Agency10 and the Haganah records of the camps’ Jewish
personnel make it clear that the vast majority of the guards were of European origin.11 However, irrespective of the
ethnic composition of the guard unit, it was not a homogenous, Hebrew-Zionist organ. While many did support Zion-
ism and maintained ties with the Haganah, others were only loosely connected to the committed nucleus of Zionism.
Some had only recently arrived in Palestine; others had been recruited by British officers to counter Haganah hege-
mony.12 One report from 1943 illustrates this difficulty. The report asked for assistance from the Jewish Agency in
funding a Hebrew teacher for Wilhelma’s guards:

*There are about one hundred Jewish guards at Wilhelma, of whom a large percentage do not know how to
read [Hebrew] and are far away from Zionist matters … Such a step will be the first of its kind, but,
considering the overall human material, we will soon have to take similar steps in other camps as well.13*

As Sapiro noted, serving in the camps created for many of the Jewish guards a dual, and at times conflicting, commit-
ment to both the British police and Zionist organizations (mainly the Haganah). The number of guards associated with
the organization remains unclear. However, based on indications from contemporaneous reports and accounts, a
cautious assessment suggests that at least 50% of the guards were either Haganah members or “loyalists.”14 This
issue did not, however, preclude them raising the issue of British loyalties.

6.2 | Inferior allies, privileged adversaries

The camps were opened on September 4, 1939. Right from the beginning, the Jewish guards complained about a
demeaning attitude of their British officers, and the close relationships formed by the British officers and German
internees. Sergeant Thoms, a British sergeant at Sarona camp, was repeatedly mentioned for his propensity to
harassing and plotting against Jewish guards. Reports described him as a “Jew-hater” and “the Germans’ friend.”15
Jewish guards also noted his negative influence on the camp commander, Inspector Mackey, and their shared love of German women.¹⁶

Sergeant Stockpole, who supervised the Jewish guards in Sarona, was portrayed as "hot-tempered and vulgar," with a tendency to "insult the Jewish guards personally, saying that they should know their place as Jews, and used to yell and hit the table angrily."¹⁷ Wilhelma's camp commander, Inspector Gibson, was accused of discriminating against the Jewish guards. After meeting with him, a Jewish Agency official described him as "a narrow-minded officer with whom cooperation will be hard."²⁸

Another common complaint concerned the rapport between British officers and German internees. In one case, several Templer men, supposedly with special skills, were transferred from Acre prison (where male German internees were initially held) to Sarona, ostensibly to assist with the maintenance of agricultural machinery. "They have nothing to do with farming," one Jewish guard reported. "They stay here doing nothing, and from time to time Sergeant Thoms asks them to pretend like they are busy so that he could back up their stay."¹⁹ Thoms' name also featured in another report, highlighting his close friendship with a Templer named Fritz Lipman. Lipman was imprisoned in Acre; in the meantime, Thoms made use of Lipman's private car.²⁰ Another report bitterly described British officers dining in German homes, photographs of Hitler and swastika flags hanging on the walls.²¹

Another common concern of the Jewish guards was the unfettered sexual liaisons between British officers and German women. More than merely another indicator of the affinity between the British and the internees, the Jewish guards were concerned that the Germans would capitalize on this specific form of fraternization for more nefarious ends. A report from 1940 described the warm welcome received by the Frishle family, recently transferred to Sarona:

The German internees seem to really respect the head of the family and I recently found out why ... It appears that Frishle has two daughters, known for their outstanding beauty ... both are known for being first class prostitutes with a profound influence on English officers, and the Germans are using their influence in many ways.²²

Another report warned from the severe consequences of such relations:

The Germans leave the camp, ostensibly to watch their fields. But, in fact, they really go to Arab villages, unsupervised and illegally, to spread Nazi propaganda. The Arabs tell us that the Germans move freely because of the relationships of their women with British officers. These relations run across the entire chain of command, starting with the camp commanders and ending with the most junior Sergeants. In return, the British overlook German misdeeds and turn a blind eye when needed. The Arabs, who farm the German fields, can pass notes and messages undisturbedly. The British police surrender the security interests of the country for German interests.²³

The above-mentioned cases reveal how partial the story that the formal order tells can be. The reports demonstrate the remarkable influence of ethnic views and individual preferences on shaping everyday life in the internment camps. Despite the wartime circumstances and the formal partnership engendered by the authority of the Mandate, the Jewish guards felt cornered, mistreated, and oftentimes even humiliated by their British superiors. The reports depict a friendly and warm relationship between British officers and German internees, the British sometimes turning a blind eye to the infractions of their acquaintances. This narrative will be further unfolded in the next sections.

6.3 | Loyalty, integrity, competency

More than mere grievances regarding their mistreatment, the reports also raised questions about the essential integrity of the British: their capacity to impose law and order, indeed their loyalty to the broader British interests. The
current section delves further into these questions, providing evidence of how the Jewish guards perceived the British officers, in terms of perceived motivation and suitability for the task at hand.

Even though many of the Jewish guards served both as police servicemen and—clandestinely—as Haganah informants, they nevertheless questioned British loyalty on an ongoing basis. Jewish guards raised the suspicion that some of the British officers may be in cahoots with German internees. In Sarona, reports described “suspicious signals” at night, between Templer houses inside the camp and British buildings outside. In Acre, Inspector Pike, the camp commander, was accused of backing Nazi activities and covering up the intelligence efforts of the Nazi inmates to support the German war cause. In one report, a Jewish guard wrote “Pike himself is a Nazi who maintains secret ties with the Germans.”

In other reports, the British was described as incompetent for the task at hand, sluggish and indifferent to their responsibilities. The Jewish guards accused the British of turning a blind eye to security measures. These included allowing the entrance of unchecked wagons, loaded by Arab workers, into the camps; and German illegal actions, such as radio signalling and late-night gatherings in the basements of their homes. Rivka Sapiro recalled how German women were allowed to leave the camp to go shopping and to what end:

**While going shopping at Tel Aviv, they used to buy wool thread to knit thick blankets, which they later sent to Germany. In Germany, the blankets were unravelled and re-knitted as hats and sweaters for the German soldiers. This way they could help the German war effort.**

According to another report:

*Our reports [to the British authorities] did not receive the proper attention and the situation has remained the same. Even though we demanded the removal of all the antennas [from the German houses] at Sarona and Wilhelma, nothing was done and they remained intact. In Sarona, a signal is seen every night from one of the German houses. As for Wilhelma, a few points are noteworthy: the distance between Wilhelma and the airport is one and a half kilometre and you can see everything from there. Part of the camp is unguarded, and the Germans can easily go out between 4 and 6 AM without being noticed. We also suspect that the Germans have the keys to one of the gates. Also, all the surrounding Arab villages are in contact with the Germans, and because Wilhelma’s residents helped the Arabs during the riots [the 1936–39 Arab Revolt], now the Arabs are helping them back. The British officers Owen and Gibson should be held accountable for this predicament.*

In other incidents, Jewish guards accused their British superiors of taking bribes. After the successful jailbreak of German inmates from the prison at Acre, the Jewish guards reported that they had warned the British officers about the suspicious behaviour of the Germans and of a breach in the prison’s perimeter fence. Nevertheless, the British disregarded the warnings.

**Negligence, breach of trust, and probably large bribes are certainly the case ... Escaping without inside help is impossible. One British sergeant already said, 'I'm sure the Jewish guards are behind it' ... it seems like the British are already looking for a scapegoat.**

We should remember that the general focus of this study is on interactions between the Jews, the British, and the Germans in the internment camps. However, Arab actors should not be overlooked in the context of the broader relationships. This is because one aspect of the suggested bias and incompetence of the British is evinced through their response—or lack of response—to (alleged) collaboration between the Germans and the Palestinian Arabs. A 1941 report from Sarona said:

*There has not been a single time that they [the Germans] asked for something and have been refused ... the Germans walk out to their fields, escorted by people who do not speak Arabic and meet their Arab workers. The [Jewish] guards suffer frequently from German insults ... the British loyalty to the Nazis and their fans extended beyond all limits.*
Aside from providing further evidence of British incompetence, these reports also report frictions between Jewish guards and Arab workers, events used by the British and Germans to be little and subordinate the Jewish guards. The same report continues:

A special permit from the CID [Criminal Investigation Department] allows eleven Arab workers to reside inside Sarona ... They are absorbing Nazi ideas from the Nazi youth in the camp. One day, one of the Arab workers approached the gate and wanted to go out. The guard told him to stay away. The Arab responded: ‘Do not you dare to speak to me that way, you should treat me like any other person here. I am not English, I am not a Jew, I am a German, and I am not afraid of you or your police, you lousy Jew.’ The guard took him to the camp office but the British sergeant sent him free. The same occurred the next day with another guard. In most cases, the guards remain silent as they know that the British officers will not hurt the Nazis.

... Here is another incident: another Arab worker came to the gate. The guard, Tzvi Levin, told him that there is no one available to escort him outside. The Arab went down the wagon, and started to shout ‘You dog, you liar, you do not want me to go out.’ He was asked to go back but refused. Levin pushed him away. The Arab hit Levin, who then pointed his gun at him, and ordered him to go with him to the camp office. The Arab tried to reach for Levin’s gun. He surrendered only when another guard pointed his loaded gun at him ... the British officer threw Levin’s report in his face and yelled: ‘You’re a liar! The Arab tells the truth’ ... The whole incident took place in front of the Arab worker and a few Germans who stood nearby and made fun of Levin.

The British, the evidence argues, gave preference to the requests and interests of the German internees, ignoring the warnings of the Jewish guards and at the expense of broader security-related considerations. The demeaning treatment meted out to the Jewish guards by the British was often manifested through interactions with third actors—usually, in this context, German internees, but also through Arab workers. Beyond their face value, the reports can also be seen as part of an effort, conscious or not, to draw symbolic boundaries. The suggestions that the British officers were anti-Semitic and corrupt distance them from the image of the ideal colonial civil servant. The Jewish guards positioned themselves as filling this vacuum: the real protectors of law and order, obliged to cope not only with the German internees and the Arab workers, but also with British anti-Semitism and ineptitude.

Many of the reports from the camps were filed in a special Haganah file, tellingly called Police Failures and Negligence. The file was intended “to prove when the time will come ... how immoral the police really is, to such an extent that it cannot supervise and enforce the law. Police failures, or the attempt to establish a body of evidence that could undermine the legitimacy of British rule in Palestine, show that Zionist organizations clearly understood that effective colonial rule depended on its successful identification with ideas of integrity and incorruptibility.

6.4 | “Once a native always a native”

The progress of the German Army over the course of 1941 prompted the Mandate administration to consider the deportation of able-bodied Germans—members of a community already suspected of being a fifth column—to a part of the Commonwealth outside the theatre of war (Sauer, 1991, p. 235). On July 31, 1941, escorted by a dozen British officers and 67 Jewish guards (including three sergeants), 665 Germans began the 3-day trip to Suez, where they embarked on a 3-week journey to Sydney by boat (Wawrzyn, 2013, p. 105). For the Jewish guards, the opportunity to go abroad, to a distant and unknown land, was almost magical; but in the event, the trip ended up a huge disappointment. The Jewish guards were to return home full of anger, after being subjected to “a humiliating and anti-Semitic tyrannical attitude” from the British officers.
Signs of disorder appeared from the start, the Jewish guards accusing the British of being indolent and detached. Avraham Friedlander, one of the guards, wrote:

Not a single drop of water was loaded onto the train. Could women and children be sent on a long ride like that? ... The British officers went to sleep early and left us with the guarding arrangements. They did not fill their canteens with water, but rather with booze. Soon after, it was felt. No sign of British presence after ten, perhaps the policewomen are responsible for their absence?35

Another guard, M. G., described a humiliating incident on one of the train stops:

We were out of food and water ... At one stop, the British brought food and the inmates were told to eat. We were told to stay and watch the wagons. When one of us approached to pick up a bottle of water, he was stopped and humiliated by Mansfield and his sergeants. We could eat only after the Germans had finished. We approached the food containers but there was no cutlery left ... We were told to put the food in the hats and eat with our hands. We decided to return to the wagon hungry. The British sergeants mocked us. It was utterly humiliating.36

Another major conflict arose in the Egyptian city of El-Qantara. The Jewish guards were ordered to transfer the German belongings to the ferry but refused to do so. Friedlander, remarkably, noted in his report: “Is a policeman supposed to carry the inmate's cargo? For the British, once a native always a native.”37 Tzuri, the Jewish sergeant who led the disobedience, noted that several Germans stood by and mocked the Jews; “ordering the Jews to serve the Germans is really not a bad idea at all,” he recorded them saying.38 The Jewish response illustrates how a controversial order was quickly interpreted in a way that framed the Jews as native subjects.

The Jewish guards complained of repeated experiences of segregation and discrimination during the journey. They were barred from smoking in the designated areas that the British and Germans smoked. They were given inconsistent and contradictory orders, impossible to fulfill. By the end of the journey, the Jewish guards had been fined more than 400 "stop-pay days." One guard noted that the German themselves were surprised by the attitude of the British, some commenting that "even Hitler did not treat the Jews so badly."39 M. G. described the experiences of the first days on the ship:

It is hard to even describe the chaos of the first days. Orders were given and cancelled capriciously; the officers did not know what was going on, and the guards, stuck in the middle, suffered. The inmates were accommodated in nice cabins, while the guards were placed in a narrow hall, into which we were barely able to squeeze. We had been punished and mistreated from the outset of the journey. One sergeant decided to appoint a guard to a hallway; another sergeant then come and yelling at the guard for standing in the wrong place and sentencing him to seven 'stop-pay' days ... one sergeant ordered us to make the beds in this way; then another one gets mad about how the beds are made and punish everybody.40

The ship had several dining rooms, and the Jewish sergeants were supposed to dine in the sergeants' hall. However, some of the British sergeants refused to dine with the Jews. Eventually, the Jewish staff was ordered to dine in the inmate dining room. Friedlander wrote: "A strange feeling—we were in the middle of this big hall, our enemies singing and dining around us." M. G. added: "Dining with the Germans brought some unpleasant moments. I will only mention one incident when we found a letter on our table which said: 'Soon you will all be hanged.'"41

Australian soldiers who joined the boat for the return journey to Palestine fraternized with the Jews. But the British constantly tried to incite the Australians against them. One guard wrote:

The British sergeants humiliated us in front of the Australians at every chance they had. They warned them from hanging around in Jewish areas, depicting them as teemed with thieves and scalpers, and to stay away from Jewish women and sluts who carry sexually transmitted diseases ... they warned them
against trusting the Jews, who overcharged Australian soldiers in Palestine, taking advantage of their ingenuousness.42

In conclusion, the hostility that the Jewish guards faced during the journey was interpreted as being driven by anti-Semitism, disorganization, and indolence. Furthermore, as in the last incident, the Jews were also associated with classic Oriental features—disease, dishonesty, prostitution, the exploitation of naïve outsiders. (The attributes ascribed to the Oriental and anti-Semitic insinuations are often remarkably similar.) As related earlier, here too the interpretative tendency of the Jewish reports was to lump together British and Germans into one Jewish-hatred Euro-Christian organ. More than a mere tendency, it was a reaction that by itself reinforced Jewish otherness, distinguishing them from the slot of the Western colonizer. Pushed away from the European or Western brotherhood, the Jews sought to position themselves as colonized subjects and natives; serving the colonial regime but nevertheless suffering from the colonizer’s abuse use of power. In this way, the Jews not only distanced themselves from the label of the colonizer but also leveraged the presence and attitude of the British to emphasize their own native roots.

7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article seeks to lay the foundations for a more nuanced and encompassing understanding of the Zionist identity project. Rather than describing the Zionist orientation as a unilateral path toward Westernization (modernity, enlightenment), research of the Zionist identity project should also examine the means through which Zionism was able to lay claim to the status of the native, and hence belonging in Palestine. Indeed, some studies have explored early Zionist streams that sought greater assimilation and engagement in the Orient—streams that eventually succumbed to mainstream Zionism (Gertz, 1995; Hever, 1999). However, the issue at stake is not the alternative trajectories of Zionism. Rather, we are interested in how Zionism negotiated, simultaneously, two seemingly contradictory paths, in claiming both the status of the native and a European stratum. While previous studies have convincingly portrayed Zionism as the Westernization project of European Jews, they fall short in addressing the paths through which Zionism distinguished itself from colonialism and how European Jews constituted themselves as an inherent organ of Palestine (“Eretz-Israel”).

The present article tries to address this duality, of becoming both Westerners and natives, by employing a triadic-oriented standpoint sensitive to both social and symbolic group interactions. It explores a new composition of actors, one that presented the participants with new opportunities and barriers to assert claims of identity and to distinguish themselves from the inferior other. While situating Zionism next to the Arab actor—as is common in critical studies—amplifies the Jewish foreignness and association with colonialism, in this new setting, these associations become obscured. In the (methodological) absence of the Arab Oriental actor in the internment camps, the Jewish guards found themselves pushed into this slot. The British and Germans, regardless of the formal pecking order, acted as the gatekeepers of a members-only club—one where Jews were not welcome. The attitude meted out to them amplified the Jewish experience of colonized subjects and facilitated their identification as natives suffering from the discriminatory behaviour of the European colonizers—the British and the German.

But at the same time, depictions of the British as incompetent and disloyal, corrupt and inherently anti-Semitic, underscored how the Jews—and not, as they saw it, the British overlords—remained loyal to core values of law and impartiality, safeguarding the broader political and security interests of the Mandate against the German–Arab menace. The Jewish reports, thus, situate the Jews as better representatives of Western values than the British. While previous studies have described Zionist Westernization as a process of adoption and imitation of Western tropes, in this case, the claiming of Western qualities relies on denuding the colonizer of such merits. It is a moment of aberration that inverts Khazzoom’s classic chain of Orientalism (2003); a moment of reverse-Orientalism, in which the colonizer—the enlightened—is targeted and Orientalized.
These two narratives, of colonized natives but also the guardians of Western values, show how the interactions with the British and the Germans were harnessed by Zionism. They demonstrate parallel attempts to constitute Zionism as a Western but noncolonial movement, and the Jews in Palestine as natives and locals who should not to be mistaken, degradingly, as Orientals.

Analytically, the case demonstrates the interplay between formal relations and symbolic claims, what Lamont and Molnár’s coined as social and symbolic boundaries (2002). But the relationships in the camps go further than this, by illustrating the embedded interdependence of the two dimensions. Had it not been for their in-between position in the formal order, the Jewish guards would not have been able to assert the symbolic claim of being both colonized natives and representatives of the West. And it was through these symbolic claims that Zionism could push back at the social boundaries constituted by British rule. Although the British and the Jews were ostensibly on the same side, the British preferred the company—and at times, the interests—of the German internees. Despite their positioning between the British and Germans, the Jewish guards suffered from ethnicity-driven humiliations from both British supervisors "above" and German internees “below.” Because these everyday alliances ran counter to the formal positions (social boundaries), the Jewish guards could differentiate themselves from the British and the Germans by coupling the two and depicting them as foreign colonizing groups—while cultivating an identity for themselves of a native people under the yoke of colonialism (symbolic boundaries).

In much the same way, the capacity of the Jewish guards to model themselves as the true guardians of law abidance and incorruptibility, at the expense of their British superiors, rested on their social position under the British officers. Their position in the pecking order (social boundaries) already situated the Jewish guards as the representatives of the colonial power; but it also allowed them to collect evidence of “police failures” and to tarnish the ideal image that the British laid claim to (symbolic boundaries). This, in turn, allowed Zionism to challenge the social boundaries by claiming that the British rule was incompetent and that the Jewish guards were the true custodians of law and order.

Did the British, as the Jewish guards claimed, deliberately use their power to humiliate the Jews? Did the British officers use their superior position to mark stronger ethnic symbolic boundaries, thus normalizing existing social boundaries? Reaching such a conclusion on the basis of the available data—and reliance on Zionist sources alone—would be presumptive. A future study that accounts more fully for the motives and preferences of the British personnel may succeed in pushing this analytical point further. Holding together in the same analysis, the social and symbolic understandings and strategies of two actors (even three, if to consider the German standpoint) bear a great potential. It could, for instance, illustrate the dynamism of the interplay between symbolic and formal means: How actors employ these means in response to one another and how social relations are shaped by these ongoing negotiations.

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ENDNOTES

1CZA S25/16/1/7.29–30.1934

2Besides the three primary actors, a fourth actor in the internment camps were the local Arabs, who worked the fields of the Germans. This study does not incorporate the Arab actor in its analysis. This is not out of neglect or a suggested lack of relevance but rather because this study is directed as a methodological exercise, seeking to investigate how British–Jewish relations in Palestine were influenced by the presence of a third group with a very different set of associated characteristics.
The Jewish population of Palestine also included tens of thousands of Jews of non-European origin, the majority of whom had lived in Palestine for generations. However, these non-Europeans were outnumbered by the hundreds of thousands of European Jews who immigrated to Palestine after the 1880s and especially during the 1920s and 1930s. Under the British rule, the Jewish population in Palestine increased from 83,790 people in 1922, roughly 11% of the total population, to 553,600 people by 1944, about 32% of the total population (Survey of Palestine, 1946, p. 141, Volume 1). It is difficult to determine what portion of the Jewish population viewed itself as Zionist, or indeed to agree on a single meaning for the concept. In this paper, irrespective of internal divisions, organizations that identified themselves with the establishment of a Jewish nation state, and the individuals who supported or were associated with such organizations, are regarded as Zionists.

Established in 1920, the Haganah (Hebrew for "defence") was the principal and the largest of the Jewish-Zionist paramilitary organizations operating in Palestine during the Mandate era. It had the support of the Jewish Agency (see footnote 10), the Labor Movement, and a majority of the Jewish population of Palestine. It remained illegal during the Mandate period and was absorbed into the Israeli army in 1948. For further reading see Slutzky (1978).

Besides the Templers, a few hundred German clergymen resided in Palestine.

The level of support for National Socialism among the Templar community remains contentious. Some researchers (Kanaan, 1968, pp. 52–59; Mann, 2009, pp. 40–41) assert a complete identification with NS; others (Sauer, 1991, pp. 219, 234; Schmidt, 1952, p. 469) less decisive, partly exonerate the Templers from such harsh accusations. During the work on this research, I encountered two incidents that support the perspective of the latter camp. These reports describe two fractious events between German internees from two ideological camps: Nazi supporters and opponents. One case described the existence of different huts for Nazi supporters and opponents in the Acre prison (CZA S25/22428/N.D); the other reported a massive brawl between the two sides during a transfer from Acre to Jaffa (CZA S25/22428/11.20.1940).


See examples in the writings of Jewish intellectuals: Reuveni (1937, p. 175) described the "mediocre" British officer "from a tanners family with a working-class cockney accent." Or Nahum Gutman, who dismissed the British haughtiness: 'They watched us from above, as though we were 'natives,' when in fact they themselves were of the lower class" (in Bar-Yosef, 2002, pp. 117–118). See similar descriptions in Storrs (1937, p. 432) and Lazar (1990, p. 41)

The Jewish agency was the official and recognized organization for the coordination of Jewish needs and liaison with Mandate authorities about. In practice, its legal status was sometimes used to disguise and whitewash illicit actions of the Haganah and other organizations.

In a report from Waldheim, July 1942, a Haganah man who visited the camp wrote that at least one-third of the guards were "from our lines" and another half was "loyal" (to the Haganah; S25/10892/7.14.1942). However, this number could be much higher, as the ratio of Jewish supernumeraries (including other units) who were Haganah members was arguably much higher (Dekel 1959; Rivlin, 1962).
The Templers had long been accused by the British and Zionist organizations of conspiring with the Arabs against British rule. Although these accusations remained unproven, they were nevertheless blamed for assisting Arab insurgents during the 1936–39 Arab Revolt and for touting Nazi propaganda in the Arab community during the Revolt and, later, during the war (Gelber, 1992, p. 277; Kanaan, 1968, pp. 35, 89; Sauer, 1991, p. 223; Schmidt, 1952, p. 467; Wawrzyn, 2013, pp. 82, 94, 118).

During the war, the British Mandate took deliberate steps to reduce Palestine's German population. These included three prisoner exchanges with Germany, totalling 400 internees (in 1941, 1942, and 1944) and the deportation of an additional 665 to Australia in 1941 (Sauer, 1991, p. 246; Wawrzyn, 2013, p. 108). The last Templers were deported from Palestine in April 1948, weeks before the termination of the British Mandate (Mann, 2009, p. 49).

It is interesting to see the different perspectives of the Jewish guards and German internees. Paul Sauer, who worked with German sources, describes the German cabins differently: “The cabins, originally equipped with two beds, had been provisionally refitted to accommodate five or six persons ... In the cabins, the thermometer climbed to 35°C. During the night, the temperature dropped by only a few degrees” (Sauer, 1991, p. 236).

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