

The British Mandate *Shutting the Gates* Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question: Why did Britain gradually cut off Jewish immigration to Palestine?

Materials:

- Shutting the Gates PowerPoint
- *Shutting the Gates* Video
- Copies of *Documents A, B, C, D, E, F, G.*

Plan of Instruction:

The PowerPoint, video and supporting documents reinforce lesson content through purposeful repetition and the gradual addition of new material.

1. Pass out Documents A, B, C, D, E, F, G.

2. Mini-lecture with PowerPoint:

- Slide: Passfield White Paper: *The 1930 Passfield White Paper, calling for the suspension of Jewish immigration and the restriction of land purchases, is issued by Britain in response to the 1929 Arab riots. Historian Walter Laqueur writes, "While it was not said in so many words, the general impression created by the White Paper was that the building of the Jewish national home had more or less ended as far as Britain was concerned; its continued growth was to depend on Arab consent."*

The Passfield White Paper tries to establish that British obligations under the League of Nations Mandate are equally applicable to Arabs and Jews, which is not the case. In his formal protest to the British government, Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann writes, "I must take issue, as energetically as I can, with the formulation of the obligation of the Mandatory Power as an identical obligation toward both sections of the Palestine population."

The White Paper is met with indignation by Jews worldwide. British officials in the Conservative and Liberal parties attack it as a breach of contract and betrayal of trust. Even within the ruling Labour Party there is concern over its provisions.

- Slide: MacDonald Letter: *British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, caught off guard by the adverse reaction, seeks to distance his government from the White Paper. Unable to rescind the White Paper, he decides to revise it in the form of a letter to Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann. The letter is sent on February 13, 1931 after nearly three months of negotiations between members of the government and the*

Jewish Agency. It restores in principle the right of Jews to settle and immigrate to Palestine. It reads in part: "The obligation to facilitate Jewish immigration and make possible dense settlement of Jews on the land is still a positive obligation of the Mandate, and it can be fulfilled without jeopardizing the rights and conditions of the other part of the Palestine population."

- Slide: British Policy Remains: *However, key requests by the Zionist leadership are not accepted by the British, such as rejection of the White Paper's call for a Legislative Council, which, with the Arab majority in the Land of Israel, would give Arabs veto power over Zionist policies. Also, no changes are made to British personnel in Palestine, leaving the administration in the hands of people hostile to Zionism.*

Weizmann is deeply concerned by this and writes to the British colonial secretary on the eve of the publication of the MacDonald Letter: "Were the cabinet to leave the decision on problems of future policy to those responsible for the White Paper of October 1930, it seems certain that they would revert to their previous policy and methods, with results even more serious and more difficult to repair. ..."

Weizmann's fears are borne out as British officials in Palestine who are obligated under the Mandate to encourage Jewish immigration, settlement, and industry, actively discourage all three. Just one example of this is a new report the British produce in 1932, shortly after the MacDonald Letter. Called the French Report after Lewis French, the Palestine Land Commissioner, it recommends excluding Jews from purchasing any new land.

It is these restrictions on land sales that are particularly frustrating to the Jews. Labor Zionist leader Menachem Ussishkin lashes out in 1937. "Since you have given your consent to the establishment of a Jewish National Home, you must have realized that it is impossible to build on anything but on the land. We have paved every field and marsh with gold, but you, instead of helping us, have piled stones in our way and have made the country into a hell."

- Slide: Rise of Nazism: *With the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s, Palestine's importance as a haven for Jews becomes critical. For the first time, large numbers of German Jews come to the Land of Israel. Jews also come from Eastern European countries that have a high level of antisemitism, such as Poland, Hungary and Romania. Between 1932 and 1935, the Jewish community in Eretz Israel doubles to almost 400,000. Jerusalem Mufti Haj Amin El-Husseini, the leader of the Arabs in Palestine, is*

determined to destroy Zionism. An admirer of Hitler, Husseini assures the German consul in 1933: "The Muslims inside and outside Palestine welcome the new regime of Germany and hope for the extension of the fascist, anti-democratic governmental system to other countries."

- Slide: 1936 Riots: *Seeking to stop further Jewish immigration, the Arabs turn to violence, the culmination of a campaign of incitement orchestrated by the Jerusalem Mufti Haj Amin El-Husseini. Historian Howard Sachar relates, "Haj Amin loosed a series of grim warnings of the 'revenge of God Almighty.'" By midsummer, Arab fighters are pouring into the hill country around Jerusalem. They are soon joined by volunteers from Syria and Iraq, led by Fawzi al-Qawukji, a former officer in the Ottoman Army.*
- Slide: Mass Strikes: *The initial outburst of Arab violence is followed by a mass strike against the government's immigration policy. Enforced by the Mufti's strong-arm men, the work stoppage lasts for nearly seven months, paralyzing government and public transportation services, as well as Arab business and much of Arab agriculture. Howard Sachar notes, "Ironically, one of its most decisive effects was to stimulate the Jewish economy. For the first time large numbers of Jewish workers supplanted cheaper Arab labor in Jewish citrus groves, and Jewish produce replaced Arab fruit and vegetables in the markets. On the other hand, the cost of the strike to the Arabs themselves became increasingly punitive." The Arabs look for a face-saving way to end the strikes. The British mandatory government offers them a way out. It agrees to send a royal commission to Palestine which will hear the Arabs' complaints.*
- Slide: Peel Commission: *The Peel Commission, named after its chairman, Lord Robert Peel, arrives in Palestine on November 11th, 1936. Arabs and Zionists make their case at the commission's many hearings. There were several memorable speeches, including by Chaim Weizmann, who said that there are in Europe 6,000,000 Jews ... "for whom the world is divided into places where they cannot live and places where they cannot enter." Vladimir Jabotinsky, giving testimony in London, says, "It is quite understandable that the Arabs of Palestine would also prefer Palestine to be the Arab State No. 4, No. 5, or No. 6 — that I quite understand. But when the Arab claim is confronted with our Jewish demand to be saved, it is like the claims of appetite versus the claims of starvation."*

In July 1937 the commission issues its final report. It proposes as a solution to the Arab-Jewish conflict the partitioning of the land into 3 parts: a Jewish state, a much larger Arab state, and a British enclave which would include Jerusalem and a corridor to the sea. The Arabs reject the plan promptly. The Zionist leadership takes longer to debate it. While

favoring the idea of partition, it becomes clear that the tiny borders that the British propose for the state are even less than the minimal borders the Zionists demand. The Zionists also learn they will not be given control of immigration. This is hardly a state. Nothing comes of the partition proposal.

- *Slide: Arab Revolt Renews: The Nazis take note of the Peel Commission report. Howard Sachar writes that on July 1, 1937, when the general outline of the Peel Report becomes known, the German foreign minister issues special instructions to German diplomatic missions in the Middle East: "The formation of a Jewish state or a Jewish-led political structure under a British Mandate is not in Germany's interest, since a Palestinian state would not absorb world Jewry, but would create an additional position of power under international law for international Jewry, somewhat like the Vatican state for political Catholicism or Moscow for the Comintern. ... Germany therefore has an interest in strengthening the Arab world as a counterweight against such a possible increase in power for world Jewry."*

In keeping with this policy, the Nazis begin sending arms to the Arabs. Rearmed, the Arab Revolt resumes in 1937. While Arab attacks are directed against both British and Jews, this does not make the British feel closer to the Jews, as a jingle popular among British soldiers makes clear. "Arab! Don't Shoot me / Shoot the man behind the tree. / He is a treacherous Jew / I am an Englishman true. / Arab! Don't shoot me / Shoot the man behind the tree."

- *Slide: Special Night Squads: Nevertheless, the Arab revolt leads to a brief period of military cooperation between British and Jews. The most notable example is the Special Night Squads led by Captain Orde Wingate. Unusual for a British officer, he is pro-Zionist. His Special Night Squads become an effective counter-insurgency force. Among his recruits are some who will make up Israel's future military elite, including Yigal Allon and Moshe Dayan. But Wingate's superiors in the British military take a dim view of his Zionist lobbying. They eventually shut down the Special Night Squads and send Wingate back home to England.*
- *Slide: British Fears: As the shadow of war with the Nazis looms, the British make winning Arab goodwill a priority. They fear that the Arabs will make trouble if war comes and their forces are already stretched thin.*

Slide: St. James Conference: The British call for a Round Table Conference at St. James Palace in London in February, 1939 to decide the future of Palestine. The conference is orchestrated by Colonial

Secretary Malcolm MacDonald. Both an Arab and Jewish delegation attend. The tone of the conference is decidedly anti-Zionist. Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann implores the British not to cut off Jewish immigration in the “blackest hour of Jewish history.” But the decisions have already been made. The conference is merely meant to give a semblance of legitimacy to Britain’s determination to abandon its obligations to the Jews. As historian Norman Rose says:

“There was something inherently false about the entire spectacle. The magnificent setting of the royal palace, the punctiliousness of the opening sessions, the stiff formality of the occasion – all served to mask the distasteful fact that the main decisions had already been taken, in principle if not in detail. As the Arabs refused to sit down with the Jews, two conferences proceeded simultaneously with the British passing messages back and forth. This, too, placed the conference in a most peculiar light in Zionist eyes, since it made the British take on the role of Arab spokesmen, leaving the Arabs as silent spectators, in a sense content to watch the verbal battles fought between the Jews and the British.”

As the conference ends, Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald submits the details of the new policy: Jewish immigration restricted to 75,000 for the next five years only to be renewed with Arab approval; severe restrictions on land sales to Jews.

- *Slide: Weizmann Pleads: In the two months between the end of the London Conference in March and the issuance of a new White Paper based on its proceedings, the Zionists make frantic efforts to keep the immigration lifeline open. Weizmann visits Neville Chamberlain at 10 Downing Street: “I pleaded once more with the Prime Minister to stay his hand. The Prime Minister of England sat before me like a marble statue. His expressionless eyes fixed on me, but he said never a word.”*
- *Slide: 1939 White Paper: The British publish the White Paper in May. It confirms the Zionists’ worst fears. The White Paper says: “His Majesty’s Government therefore now declares unequivocally that it is not part of their policy that Palestine should become a Jewish State.” It includes the decisions announced at the St. James Conference, limiting Jewish immigration to 75,000 over the next five years. World Jewry expresses outrage at Britain’s betrayal. The League of Nations agrees, finding the White Paper incompatible with British obligations under the Mandate.*
- *Slide: Trapped in Europe: The White Paper locks the Jews in Europe on the eve of the Nazi takeover. Other nations have already barred their doors to Jews. Britain has now cut off the last haven, trapping European Jews in Germany, Austria and Poland months before the outbreak of war.*

3. Play video: Shutting the Gates

Introduce inquiry question: Why did Britain gradually cut off Jewish immigration to Palestine?

4. Whole class discussion:

- Why do you think pressure worked in forcing the government to rescind most of the 1930 Passfield White Paper when it did not work when Jewish need for a homeland was much greater at the time of the 1939 White Paper?
- What do you think of the Arab use of violence and was it an effective or ineffective way of achieving their aims?
- At the St. James Conference, the British cared what the Arabs wanted but little for what the Jews wanted. The reason isn't hard to see. As war loomed, there were millions of Arabs in the Middle East opposed to Zionism vs. a small Jewish Yishuv. Did the British overlook some things and if so what?
- If you were to take the British point of view, what arguments could you make for and against the course they followed?

5. Hand out Review Questions (may be used as end of class Quiz).

Document A: “A History of Zionism”, Walter Laqueur (1972)

While it was not said in so many words, the general impression created by the [Passfield] White Paper was that the building of the Jewish national home had more or less ended as far as Britain was concerned; its continued growth was to depend on Arab consent. The Zionist executive, with rare understatement, said the White Paper was a reinterpretation of the mandate in a manner highly prejudicial to Jewish interests...

The publication of Lord Passfield’s statement of policy provoked intense indignation throughout the Jewish world. Weizmann tendered his resignation from the Jewish Agency, as did Felix Warburg and Lord Melchett. For the first time the Jewish leaders had not been kept informed of London’s plans, and while it was known that Passfield was totally out of sympathy with Zionism, they had thought that there was at a least a certain measure of goodwill among some of his colleagues. ...

When the White Paper was discussed in Parliament on 18 November, Passfield found the going rough. Conservative and Liberal spokesmen attacked it as a breach of trust and contract. ... Under pressure from all sides, the government decided to modify its policy. It could not, for obvious reasons, withdraw the White Paper but the bureaucrats knew a way out of the dilemma; just as the White Paper had been an interpretation of the Churchill declaration of 1922, it was decided to issue a new document to serve as an authoritative interpretation of the Passfield White Paper. A committee composed of members of the government and representatives of the Jewish Agency, after lengthy deliberations, reached agreement on essential points, and made the outcome public in the form of a letter from Ramsay MacDonald to Weizmann.

Source: A History of Zionism, Walter Laqueur, Schocken Books, New York, 1976 (originally published 1972), p. 492-493.

**Document B: “Excerpt of Letter to J.H. Thomas,
British Secretary for the Dominions”, Chaim Weizmann
(February 6, 1931)**

Were the government to stop at the point now reached, the work of the first cabinet committee would, at the very best, have served to rectify a mistake of the Colonial Office. And I say “at the very best” – for were the cabinet to leave the decision on problems of future policy to those responsible for the White Paper of October 1930, it seems certain that they would revert to their previous policy and methods, with results even more serious and more difficult to repair. They have been overruled by the cabinet and by the first cabinet committee; this has not made them feel any more friendly towards us, and we have had by now some unmistakable signs of what we have to expect from them in the future ...

“I beg you to use all your influence to secure a further cabinet committee to deal with the big problems of policy in Palestine.”

Source: Lone Wolf: A Biography of Vladimir “Ze’ev” Jabotinsky Vol. 2, Shmuel Katz, Barricade Books, New York, 1996, p.1242.

Document C: “*The Rape of Palestine*”, William B. Ziff (1938)

The Administration's sympathy for 'landless' Arabs went an amazing distance. ...

Even when Jews bought areas on which the Government felt it had a lien, it exacted its pound of flesh. A case in point is the Huleh basin, consisting of 12,000 acres of miasmatic swamp. This suppurating area had polluted the country, for generations back, with malaria and dysentery. The job of draining it would ordinarily be regarded by any other government as a task incumbent on itself. Instead, the Palestine Administration granted concession rights for reclamation of the area to two Syrian merchants, renewing the concession in 1924 and again in 1927, though the Syrians made no attempt to proceed with the work and were evidently not in a position to undertake a development project of this magnitude. It was only after years of procrastination on the part of the Government that the Jewish Palestine Land Development Company was able to secure official approval to take over the concession rights. As the price of its consent the Government stipulated that when the work was finished, one-third of the new land would have to be handed over for Bedouin settlement. It was necessary to pay the original foreign concessionaires £200,000, a sum which could only be considered in the light of a gift. This was in 1935. In 1938 the Government was still quibbling over the text of the concession. It also has mysteriously withheld decision on a number of minor points arising from an engineering report made several years previously. These dilatory tactics have effectually prevented any progress being made in the work of reclamation, which is thus shunted into the indefinite future. ...

Having devised the 'landless Arab' thesis, it was only a short step to the principle that the Arab must be protected against himself and saved from exploitation by the Jew who would take his land away from him. For this purpose there was introduced a series of ordinances so plainly meant to prevent Jews from acquiring land in their National Home that were ten percent of them introduced into England, and directed at Englishmen, an armed revolution would follow.

But Zionist spokesmen had been used to the rope's end too long to be able to react with anything resembling normal indignation. They recognized helplessly that they were being victimized, but saw nothing else to it but to smirk ingratiatingly on their tormentors. Once more it is grizzled old Menachem Ussishkin who growls like a lone wolf to the British Government : "Since you have given your consent to the establishment of a Jewish National Home, you must have realized that it is impossible to build on anything but on the land. We have paved every field and marsh with gold, but you, instead of helping us, have piled stones in our way and have made the country into a hell." [JTA News, January 27, 1937]

Source: The Rape of Palestine, William B. Ziff, Longmans, Green and Co., New York, 1938, p. 259-261

Document D: “A History of Israel”, Howard Sachar (1976)

On July 1, 1937, when the general outline of the Peel Report was known, although before it was actually published, [German] Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath issued special instructions to German legations in the Middle East:

The formation of a Jewish state or a Jewish-led political structure under a British Mandate is not in Germany’s interest, since a Palestinian state would not absorb world Jewry, but would create an additional position of power under international law for international Jewry, somewhat like the Vatican state for political Catholicism or Moscow for the Comintern. ... Germany therefore has an interest in strengthening the Arab world as a counterweight against such a possible increase in power for world Jewry.

In July, the Mufti visited the local German consul-general in Jerusalem to declare his own admiration for the new Germany, and to solicit German friendship in return. In September, Syrian nationalists approached Franz Seiler, the German consul in Beirut, with a request for German weapons to be shipped to the Arab rebels in Palestine. ... These appeals did not go unanswered. Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, chief of German military intelligence, allocated limited subventions to the Mufti. Quantities of weapons from the Suhl and Erfurter Gewehrfabrik works were dispatched to Palestine by way of Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Vocabulary

Subvention: the furnishing of aid.

Source: A History of Israel From The Rise of Zionism to Our Time, Howard Sachar, Alfred A. Knopf, 3rd ed., New York, 2007 (First published 1976), p. 210-211.

**Document E: “Orde Wingate: Father of the IDF”,
Michael Oren (2006)**

[Capt. Orde] Wingate urged Britain to “advance the foundation of an autonomous Jewish community with all the means in its power,” adding portentously: “For pity’s sake, let us do something just and honorable before it [world war] comes. Let us redeem our promises to Jewry and shame the devil of Nazism, Fascism, and our own prejudices.” ...

With [Gen. Archibald] Wavell’s approval, Wingate set up the Special Nigh Squads, a mixed force of British officers and Jewish supernumeraries. Headquartered at Kibbutz Ein Harod in the Jezreel Valley, close to the spring where the biblical Gideon – Wingate’s hero – had his camp, the SNS succeeded in all but ending Arab attacks in the north. An entire generation of future IDF commanders would learn their tactics from Wingate...

For the British army, though, it was not Wingate’s excesses that proved insufferable but his advocacy of, and success with, the Jews. Thus, when Wingate requested home leave to London a few weeks after he was wounded at Dabburiya (and in the wake of narrowly escaping assassination at the hands of Arab assailants), his superiors were only too happy to comply. It was October 1938, the time of the Munich Conference and Britain’s sellout of Czechoslovakia, and of the beginning of Britain’s final retreat from the promises of the Balfour Declaration. Wingate took advantage of his time in London to lobby tirelessly for the Zionist cause. He urged the Zionist leadership to present Britain with an ultimatum – either honor its pledges or forget the Jews’ loyalty – and argued the Zionist case in the press and before Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald. Returning to Palestine in December, he found himself barred from further contact with the SNS, which was disbanded soon thereafter, and transferred back to Britain.

Source: New Essays on Zionism, Edited by David Hazony, Yoram Hazony and Michael B. Oren, Shalem Press, Jerusalem, 2006, p. 395-396.

**Document F: “A History of Zionism”, Walter Laqueur
(1972)**

The White Paper, published on 17 May 1939, consisted of a preface and three main sections dealing with constitutional issues, immigration and land respectively. It repeated that it was the objective of H.M. government that an independent state should come into being within the next 10 years. Some 75,000 immigrants were to be admitted over the next five years. After that, from 1 March 1944, immigration was to be permitted only with the consent of the Arabs. Moreover, Jewish settlement was to be prohibited altogether in certain parts of Palestine and to be restricted in others. In all essential points the White Paper thus followed the British plan communicated to the Zionist leaders during the St James conference. Reacting immediately, the Jewish Agency said that the White Paper was a denial of the right of the Jewish people to rebuild their national home in their ancestral country, a breach of faith, a surrender to Arab nationalism.

Source: A History of Zionism, Walter Laqueur, Schocken Books, New York, 1976 (originally published 1972), p. 344.

**Document G: “Chaim Weizmann”, Norman Rose
(1972)**

Ever since the German absorption of Austria in March [1938], the Germans, through their surrogates, the Sudeten German Nazi Party, had been threatening the unity of Czechoslovakia by demanding greater autonomy, in fact annexation to Germany, for the Sudeten areas of Czechoslovakia, which bordered on Germany and which contained some three million ethnic Germans. The danger that the Czech crisis might spill over into a European war was uppermost in the minds of the [British] cabinet, and to avert that catastrophe they had not hesitated to pressure the Czech government into making concessions to the Nazis. Within this context, the Palestine problem was more than just a minor irritant, for the British were holding down almost as many troops in Palestine as they could offer to France in the event of European war. Moreover, in the Mediterranean the Italians were undermining the British position, while in the Far East the Japanese, now at war with China, were threatening vital British interests. British resources were stretched dangerously thin. The imperatives of imperial policy dictated cutting obligations outside Europe to a bare minimum at the least political cost. Naturally, the British would have preferred to reach an agreement with their disputatious partners, but if this should prove impossible – and by now it was clear that the obstacles were virtually insurmountable – they would not balk at behaving toward the Zionists as they had behaved toward the Czechs. ...

[The Zionists] suffered no illusions as to the intentions of the British government, and they comprehended fully the motives pushing it forward – though they rejected them outright. They argued cogently that the British consistently exaggerated the Arab threat to their security and underestimated the contribution the Zionists could make to imperial defence.

Source: Chaim Weizmann, Norman Rose, Elisabeth Sifton Books, Viking Penguin, New York, 1986, p. 337-351.

Guiding Questions

Name _____

1. Why did Ramsay MacDonald retreat from the Passfield White Paper?
2. What did the Peel Commission propose?
3. Why did the British disband the Special Night Squads?

In the space below answer the following: *Why did Britain gradually cut off Jewish immigration to Palestine?*