

Landscape and Power in Mandate Palestine, 1917–1948

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My dissertation argues that man-made landscape changes are crucial for understanding human relationships in colonial/imperial spaces, including nascent conflict zones such as Palestine-Israel. Landscape changes in mandatory Palestine influenced both Zionist-Arab and Zionist-British relationships by manifesting and transferring power and revealing underlying cultural convictions and political goals. Both Zionist ideology and the British imperial worldview became imprinted onto the Palestinian environment through, for example, afforestation and soil erosion policies. I show this based on four different case studies: land reclamation techniques, forestry, the Dead Sea development, and botanical gardens.

1. Land Reclamation Techniques: British views of the Palestinian environment can be summarized as “environmental orientalism.” These views expressed themselves as assumptions about the allegedly degraded state of the land, and fears of further degradation through soil erosion, overgrazing, and ‘neglectful’ landownership. British policies aimed at restoring the Palestinian landscape to an imagined former, more fertile state. These policies directly affected local life, for example when the British singled out the Palestinian goat as the country’s most destructive animal and, as a result, targeted nomadic Arab pastoralists and their flocks through sedentarization policies.

2. Forestry: Selective afforestation played an important role in mandatory Palestine, altering the landscape significantly. Zionist afforestation practices made Jewish claims to land possible, helped to demarcate future Israeli state borders, and helped Jewish immigrants to adjust to their new environment. Colonial British forestry practices and their underlying rationalization reveal British perceptions of progress and modernization and their application in Palestine. Moreover, British colonial forestry officers were part of a network of “experts” traveling throughout the Empire, thereby contributing to the globalized spread of a specific canon of environmental knowledge.

3. The Dead Sea Development: The Dead Sea concession for mineral extraction was given to a Russian Jewish immigrant and mining engineer, Moshe Novomeysky, in 1930. His company, Palestine Potash Ltd. (PPL), grew into one of the most important industrial endeavors in mandatory Palestine. Setting up an industry to extract the minerals from the Dead Sea significantly altered the landscape of the lake and its immediate surroundings. Wider PPL-built infrastructures influenced the construction of Haifa’s port and industrial zone and negatively impacted local Bedouin’s grazing rights and Arab farmers’ lands, which could be expropriated if needed by PPL.

4. Botanical Gardens: The final chapter emphasizes colonial networks running through the British Empire by focusing on a small scientific community at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, namely the Jewish botanists. While traveling for research purposes, they established an extensive network spanning six continents. In Palestine, they created the (self-proclaimed) first botanical garden of the Middle East. Its twofold goal was to educate future generations in scientific botany and to recreate a small part of the Holy Land in the image of biblical times.