Sinanoglou, Penny. *Partitioning Palestine: British Policymaking at the End of Empire.*

Reviewed by Caroline Kahlenberg

Penny Sinanoglou’s *Partitioning Palestine* is a study of roads not taken—or more precisely, plans not implemented. The study traces British policies regarding the partition of Palestine beginning in the late 1920s and culminating with the UN Partition Plan of 1947. All of these plans went unrealized. And yet, as Sinanoglou argues, partition was a constant thread in British policymaking in mandatory Palestine (1920–48). The book speaks to many recent historiographical discussions about colonial policymaking at the end of British rule, the widening Jewish-Arab divide in mandatory Palestine, and the role of international organizations in decolonization.

Sinanoglou succeeds in her goal of “writ[ing] Palestine back into British imperial history and vice versa” (14). She urges historians to study partition not only in the context of decolonization and the 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine, but also within the framework of earlier British partition plans beginning in the late 1920s. Doing so allows us to grasp partition’s deep imperial roots. The UN Plan itself strongly resembled earlier versions of British partition plans. But instead of drawing a straight line from early British partition plans in the 1920s to the UN Plan in 1947, Sinanoglou masterfully illuminates how British policy on partition comprised an uneven process. As she writes, “partition had become imaginable by the late 1920s, desirable by the mid-1930s, impossible by the late 1930s, and seemingly unavoidable by the mid-1940s” (12). This uneven process echoed British policymaking in the interwar period beyond Palestine, as British officials wavered between incorporating interwar Wilsonian ideals of self-determination, on the one hand, and falling back on nineteenth-century imperial models that prioritized British interests, on the other. Using the lens of partition, Sinanoglou successfully narrates a larger story about the tensions inherent in maintaining British imperial control at a time of global transition and international scrutiny.

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The book comprises a clear introduction, four chronologically organized chapters, a conclusion, two appendixes, and a number of helpful partition maps. Chapter 1 provides the context for examining British policymaking on partition by outlining shifting British views on Palestine and Britain’s role as the mandatory power. Chapter 2 analyzes partition schemes for Palestine that emerged in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Here, Sinanoglou offers an important corrective to the historiographical tendency to begin discussions of partition with the 1937 Peel Commission Report. In reality, informal policies of partition and cantonization were proposed years earlier by both British and Zionist thinkers.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the activities of the Peel Commission from its arrival to Palestine in November 1936 until the publication of its report eight months later. The report is the first public and clearly articulated British proposal for the partition of Palestine. While historians tend to focus on the last 14 pages of the Peel Commission’s 400-page report—the section that details recommendations for partition—Sinanoglou delineates the Peel Commission’s broader activities in Palestine. The Commission took oral testimonies from both Zionist Jewish and Palestinian Arab representatives in Palestine on a variety of issues, including land acquisition and immigration, economy and labor, education and health, the definition of a “Jewish National Home,” and the meaning of the mandate. The Commission did not take public testimony on the question of partition. Sinanoglou’s description of evidence-gathering largely reinforces what is well-known about the imbalance of resources and political power between the Zionist community represented by the Jewish Agency, on the one hand, and the Palestinian national community represented by the Arab Higher Committee, on the other.

While the Jewish Agency submitted strategic and well-organized statistical reports and informally lobbied British representatives, the Palestinian Arab leaders made no informal efforts to lobby British officials. Palestinian leaders boycotted the Commission until its last week in Palestine. The evidence presented by Zionist and Arab representatives generally confirmed that there existed two separate and unequal communities in Palestine. In turn, the Peel Report framed the problem in Palestine as a clash of two national communities and argued that partition was the only and inevitable solution. While Sinanoglou successfully incorporates the Jewish and Palestinian Arab testimony in this chapter, she could have strengthened her analysis by reading the testimonies against the grain and incorporating recent literature that challenges the “dual society” narrative of two entirely separate communities.

Chapter 5 investigates why the Peel Commission’s recommendations were never implemented. Sinanoglou turns to the period between the publication of the Commission’s report in 1937 and the White Paper of 1939 that famously reversed
the recommendation for partition. She carefully enumerates the opposition to partition coming from a variety of sources. Ironically, it was opposition to the specifics of partition coming from pro-Zionist British officials and organizations that eventually halted the planning. For example, pro-Zionist members of the League of Nations’ Mandates Commission rejected the British plan because they viewed the Zionist project as capable of flourishing only under the existing terms of the mandate. This, along with the fact that Arab actors almost unanimously opposed partition (with the exception of Emir Abdullah of Transjordan), led British policymakers to deem partition impractical and contradictory to British imperial interests.

The book’s concluding chapter treats the period between 1939 and 1947. In 1947, after Britain turned Palestine over to the UN, the UN proposed its Partition Plan for Palestine. The UN Plan was quite clearly influenced by earlier British partition plans, especially the Peel Commission’s proposal. Of course the main difference was that British interests were not explicitly written into the UN Plan as they had been in British plans.

The British wavering over partition, as the book makes clear, reveals the tensions between British imperial ideals and practice in the interwar period. British officials were attracted to partition in Palestine because they viewed it as compatible with principles of self-determination and self-government that were spreading in the region. Partition would simultaneously secure Britain’s continued presence in Palestine. And yet, the execution of partition proved extremely difficult. For one, partition would likely involve forced population transfer (including the forced removal of 225,000 Palestinians from the Jewish State, as articulated in the Peel plan), and it would cause regional instability due to strong Arab opposition.

Sinanoglou makes the study of partition come to life by presenting colorful portraits of British policymakers. The biographies of these policymakers reinforce the importance of writing British imperial history back into Palestine. Many held previous posts across the empire from Cyprus to India, and they shared their knowledge from these different geographies. They drew on imperial analogies to inform their policies. For example, in the 1920s the British policymakers described the conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine using the terms of white settlers versus native Africans. British officials also looked to policy elsewhere when drawing up partition plans. For example, they pointed to the Greco-Turkish population exchanges of the early 1920s when drafting the Peel plan that included forced population exchange.

Ultimately, *Partitioning Palestine* reinforces a narrative of British imperial bungling in mandatory Palestine. But the British failure was not for lack of commissions, meetings, and reports, as Sinanoglou’s vast use of such archival sources confirms. Indeed, she quotes the last Chief Secretary of the Palestine Government
who remarked, “If all the books of statistics prepared for the nineteen commis-
sions that have had a shot at the problem [of Palestine] were placed on top of one
another they would reach as high as the King David Hotel” (28). The same might
be said of the number of books published today on British-mandate Palestine. And
yet, Sinanoglou has found an important way to intervene in the literature. This
book will appeal not only to historians of Palestine, but also to scholars working
more broadly on partition, decolonization, and the end of the British Empire.