

# Israel's Birth Pangs

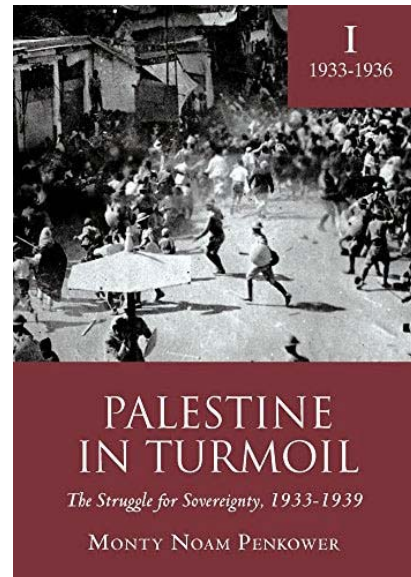
by Rafael Medoff

**Palestine in Turmoil: The Struggle for Sovereignty, 1933-1939 (2 vols.)** By Monty Noam Penkower. New York: Touro College Press and Academic Studies Press, 2014. 719 pp. \$59 (\$39, paper).

What Penkower calls “the crucial nexus that exists between the rise of the State of Israel and the Holocaust, the most significant events in the contemporary Jewish experience” has been at the heart of his scholarship for more than four decades. In critically-acclaimed books and seminal scholarly essays, the professor emeritus of Jewish history at the Machon Lander Graduate Center of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, has demonstrated an unparalleled grasp of the diplomatic, political, and social circumstances that shaped Jewish fate in the years 1933-39. His remarkable research and analytical skills are on full display in his new, two-volume *Palestine in Turmoil*.

Rather than depict Israel's establishment solely as a consequence of the Holocaust, Penkower's narrative describes how the basis of Jewish statehood in British Mandatory Palestine was established long before the onset of World War II. Instead, the prerequisites for a Jewish Palestine grew, slowly but inexorably, during the half century and more preceding 1948: the rise of cities, towns, and kibbutzim; the development of social and cultural institutions; the creation of a political infrastructure in the form of the Asefat Hanivharim (assembly of representatives) and the Va'ad Leumi (national council); the underground militias.

Although the yishuv had its share of



internal divisions, which Penkower ably chronicles, he makes the important point that for all the well-known conflicts—the Histadrut versus strike breakers, the Hagana versus the Irgun, the occasional tensions between secular and religious Jews or between religious factions—Jewish society overall not only held together but grew and prospered.

By contrast, Palestinian Arab society became deeply fragmented during this same period. Penkower points out that during the “Arab Revolt” of 1936-39, Arabs killed many more fellow Arabs than Jews or Englishmen. The internecine political, religious, and tribal rivalries that raged among Arabs in mandatory Palestine in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s helped pave the way for the complete collapse of the Palestinian Arab community during the 1948 war.

However, the Arabs enjoyed an important advantage in their numbers. While German Jewish immigration to Palestine increased dramatically following Hitler's rise to power, the Arabs were able to offset those Jewish gains through illegal immigration, which Penkower reports proceeded "unabated." Citing internal Zionist and British memoranda, he demonstrates how Arabs from Egypt, Syria, and Transjordan, attracted by employment opportunities (created by Zionist development), flowed across the Palestine border with little or no interference from the British authorities.

Still, the Arabs continued to resent Jewish immigration bitterly even when that immigration was reduced. The Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin Husseini, exacerbated the situation by, as Penkower puts it, "reviving at this same moment the religious issue that had figured so prominently in the Arab riots of 1929" (riots which Husseini had helped instigate). Then in 1936, the mufti's tirades about alleged Jewish plots to destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque again helped incite the mobs of his day, as similar accusations do now.

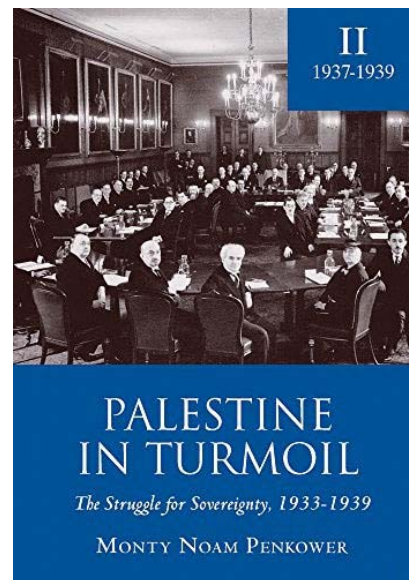
Soon the Holy Land was engulfed in battles between Arab gangs and British troops, Arab terrorist attacks against Jews, and Jewish retaliation strikes. The British pulled few punches in their fight against the mufti's gangs. They routinely demolished homes in Arab villages where terrorists had been sheltered and forced Arabs to drive ahead of British vehicles in areas where they suspected land mines had been planted.

But as Penkower recounts, these tough British military measures were quickly followed by British political concessions to the Arabs. Jewish immigration was restricted; Jewish land purchases were limited, and finally, in May 1939, a draconian British white paper was implemented, which provided for "the admission, as from the beginning of April [1939], of some 75,000 immigrants over the

next five years.... After the period of five years, no further Jewish immigration will be permitted unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce in it."

Where were U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration as Palestine was going up in flames? Contrary to the many biographers who have portrayed FDR as strongly pro-Zionist, Penkower shows Roosevelt to have been lukewarm at best. Even in boilerplate greetings to Zionist events, FDR found the term "homeland" too strong for his taste; he spoke only of "creating in Palestine a home" for the Jews.

American Zionists tried but failed to persuade the president with memoranda on Jewish legal rights and Palestine's capacity to absorb many more immigrants. They were up against critics such as Isaiah Bowman, renowned geographer and senior adviser to the president on refugee issues, who was an important source of anti-Zionist influence. Bowman insisted that there were no countries to which large numbers of Jewish refugees could immigrate and that Palestine was incapable of absorbing any significant number. FDR agreed; he repeatedly told



Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, the foremost Jewish leader of the era, that Palestine already had “reached the point of Jewish saturation.”

**Roosevelt, reluctant to annoy his British ally, refused to press the Palestine issue.**

Penkower brings to light a 1938 plan apparently inspired by Bowman, which Roosevelt endorsed, to spread one million German, Polish, and Romanian Jews around the globe. He suggested that, during a five-year span, 20,000 Jews could enter the United States annually (although that was 25 percent less than what the existing quota laws permitted); assorted African and South American countries and colonial territories would take some; and just 15,000 would be admitted to Palestine, which was exactly the benchmark that the forthcoming white paper would establish for the Holy Land. Five years later, Roosevelt would recommend to Winston Churchill a similar plan to “spread the Jews thin all over the world.” If allowed to concentrate too much in any particular locale, FDR believed that Jews would soon try to dominate the local economy and culture.

Expectations of war with Germany increasingly shaped the great powers’ decisions on Palestine. Fears about the Arabs

siding with Hitler drove London to retreat from the Zionist pledge, made in the Balfour declaration and incorporated into the League of Nations

mandate. Roosevelt, reluctant to annoy his British ally—and nervous about isolationists accusing him of getting involved in overseas conflicts—refused to press the Palestine issue.

With war on the horizon, “HMG’s imperial strategic priorities trumped all of [the Zionists’] heartrending appeals to moral values, to British honor, to history, and to international obligations,” Penkower concludes. “European Jewry’s singular calamity ... carried scant power in a world girding for global war.” The abandonment of the Jews had begun.

**Rafael Medoff** is founding director of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies. His most recent book is *The Anguish of a Jewish Leader: Stephen S. Wise and the Holocaust* (Wyman Institute, 2015).

