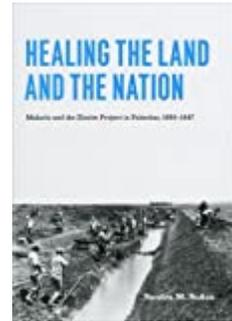




Sandra M. Sufian. *Healing the Land and the Nation: Malaria and the Zionist Project in Palestine, 1920-1947.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. xviii + 385 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-77935-5.



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The Politics of Malaria Eradication in the Holy Land

In this meticulously researched book, Sandra M. Sufian, an assistant professor of medical humanities and history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, argues that Zionist medical and engineering methods during the British Mandate era in Palestine were uniquely shaped by the Zionist project of national transformation. Through efforts to eradicate malaria in Palestine, Zionist authorities tried to mold the landscape into a national entity based on modern science and medicine. In their view, the ancient land would be rescued from disease and disrepair and made suitable for Zionist settlement. So too would Jews be rescued from the unhealthy ghettos of Europe and brought to Palestine, where they would be remade with healthy bodies.

According to Sufian, the Zionist leadership, like the Mandate government, tried to manage the health of the Palestinian Arabs as though they were part of the natural environment. Diseases from the natives might be transmitted to the colonial authorities or the Zionist settlers and so should be managed through official public health policies. The Zionists imported European and U.S.

medical technologies and foreign capital to restore the land to what was in their eyes its original state, with little concern for those who had long made their living from it. The Zionist settlers had no sense of the national rights of the Palestinian Arabs, who they believed had no real attachment to the land. Like European settlers elsewhere, the Zionists considered the indigenous population primitive and backward. The land was a swampy wasteland inhabited by an unproductive people. In this, the Zionists were merely drawing upon racial views of non-European, indigenous populations then prevalent among colonialists. As Sufian points out, Zionists, like other Europeans, saw malaria not as an environmental problem, but one caused by the neglectful, indifferent, and lazy lifestyles of the natives, whose watering holes and leaky irrigation ditches were ideal places for mosquitoes to breed. The Zionists' goal was to drain the swamps and pools of water to eradicate the disease, thereby expanding the land available for settlement and agricultural production. As the author notes, in many parts of world European settlers made this connection between disease eradica-

tion, immigration, and settlement. When the Zionists drained the swamps they also reduced the pasture land long used by Bedouins and other Arab agriculturalists for grazing their livestock. Despite stiff resistance, land formerly held collectively by Palestinian Arabs became private land owned by Zionist settlers.

Sufian's central argument is that the unique aspect of the malaria eradication project was its goal, which conflated the regeneration of the land with the regeneration of the Jewish people. The Zionist leadership also sought control of malaria eradication programs as a means of enhancing their claim to the land, as this would support the assertion that Zionist settlers were replacing native fatalism and neglect with productivity and energy. The British Health Department of Palestine, not surprisingly, cited its Anti-Malaria Ordinance as the main agent of malaria prevention.

As Sufian makes clear, Palestine had been integrated into global markets since the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, both British and Zionist policies were premised on a conception of Palestine as an isolated, stagnant place awaiting modernization and rejuvenation at the hands of Europeans. Sufian also illuminates other contentious aspects of the malaria eradication process. For example, she documents Arab participation in and contributions to such efforts, contradicting the Jewish Agency's claims that the great majority of the eradication schemes were carried out solely at that organization's expense. Much of this is illustrated through the work of Dr. Tawfiq Canaan, a Palestinian Arab and prominent physician before and during the Mandate era, who lectured about malaria in German and English to scientific audiences. In a report to the Mandatory authorities, he stated that Palestinian Arabs had done their share of the eradication work. They had carried out swamp drainage projects and worked as laborers in government malaria control measures. Arab landowners distributed quinine to their

workers and supervised drainage projects. When Zionist authorities claimed that their efforts had resulted in the improvement of the health of Palestinian Arabs, Canaan argued that the health of Arabs had begun to improve before the expansion of Zionist settlement, that the main improvement was in Arab communities farthest from the settlements, and that Zionist settlements had no effect at all on the increased birthrate of the Arabs.

Sufian also discusses efforts at Zionist and Arab cooperation, which usually meant Zionist initiative and Arab participation, as well as the unrealized plans of British experts to establish joint medical or scientific institutions that could form a basis for Arab/Jewish cooperation.

The author also points out that the Israeli government has recently attempted to reconstruct some of the swamps and lakes because of unforeseen ecological damage. Israeli experts are reintroducing displaced plants and animals (like water buffalo) into the swamps, but no thought has been given to returning the displaced Palestinian Arabs. Now these areas are dedicated to boating, wind-surfing, fishing, hot-air balloon rides, donkey rides, and picnicking, and feature a safari park and a hotel. Such tourist development has prompted opposition within Israel, but it is driven by concern for wildlife habitat, not by a desire to facilitate the return of the wetland's indigenous inhabitants.

Finally, Sufian notes that some Israeli academics have argued that the swamps drained during the early years of Zionist settlement were actually much smaller than previously claimed. In response, the Israeli media accused these academics of being pro-Palestinian traitors who want to undermine Israeli rights to a disputed land. In addressing such issues Sufian has written a fascinating book that clearly demonstrates the complex and important connections between disease, health, politics, and national mythology.

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