



# The Evidence Is in the Archives

## The Continued Colonization of Palestine along Business Lines



By Wesam Ahmad

"The farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see," is a statement made by Winston Churchill that resonates throughout this edition of *This Week in Palestine*. Although there is no love lost amongst Palestinians for Churchill's role as the British colonial secretary responsible for the implementation of the

Balfour Declaration in Mandatory Palestine, his statement provides important insights into the value of learning from the past in order to better understand the present and anticipate the future.

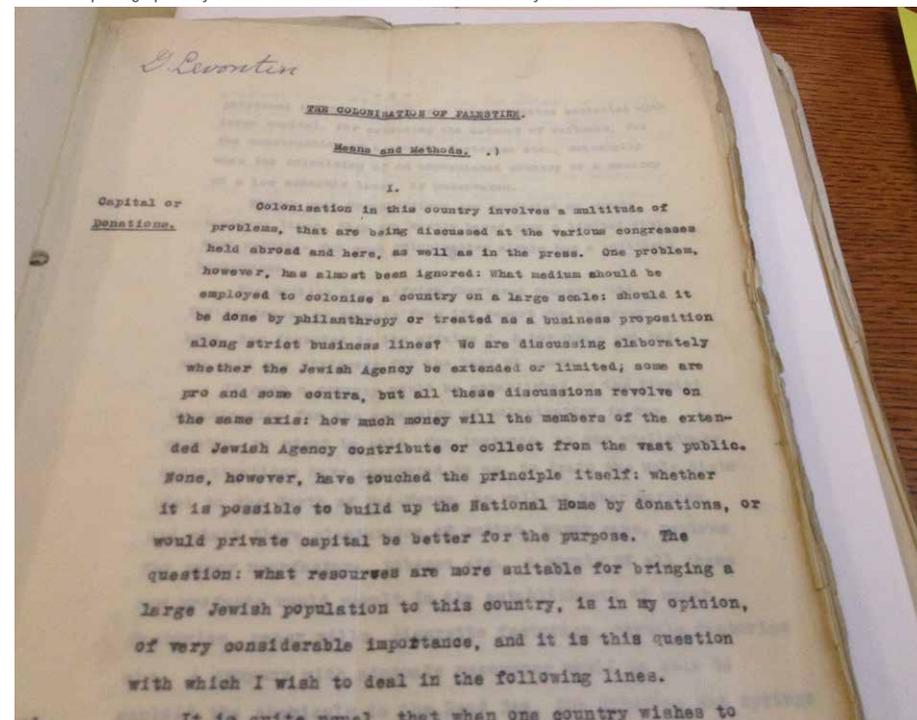
It was this frame of mind that led me to the New York Public Library archives on November 28, 2016, where I discovered in Box #15 of the Palestine Economic Corporation Collection a 44-page report from 1925, written by a D. Levontin, titled "The Colonisation of Palestine: Means and Methods." This document has helped me better understand the obstacles that we face today while also shaping my views on how to overcome them. Despite the importance of the report itself, the purpose of this brief contribution is not to analyze the document but rather to encourage, if not inspire, others to take the time to visit the archives around them. I see archives as both points on a timeline and a thread that can be pulled further backwards or forwards, while connecting to other threads going in different directions that intersect the political, economic, and cultural components of any social system at a given time. Archives provide insights into the context as to how the ideas that were developed at a particular point in time were influenced. Although the archives may be found in boxes, they did not come to exist in a vacuum.

I will, however, briefly address a few of the developments that occurred once I discovered the report referenced above. First, I had to figure out who this person —D. Levontin— was who signed the report and what influenced him to write such a report in the first place. It turns out that D. Levontin was actually Zalman David Levontin of the Anglo-Palestine Company, a subsidiary of the Jewish Colonial Trust. Although the relationship between Levontin and Theodor Herzl is also worth exploring, the more important question is why Levontin was writing such a report 20 years after Herzl's death. That answer can be found in the document itself and is visible on the first page of the report pictured in this piece.

In 1925, the World Zionist Organization, serving as the Jewish Agency, was still grappling with the appropriate means and methods for the colonization of Palestine, despite Herzl's earlier conclusions regarding the failure of philanthropic colonialism. The relevant question posed in the paper states, "What medium should be employed to colonise a country on a large scale: should it be done by philanthropy or treated as a business proposition along strict business lines?"

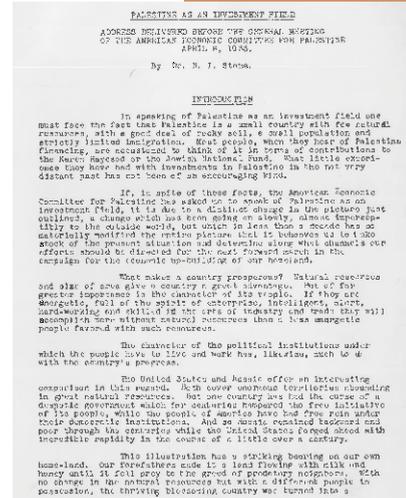
While the proposition is not as binary as it may seem, pulling the thread forward reveals a shift towards the latter, with the enlargement of the Jewish Agency to include non-Zionists and the

The first page of a 1925 report titled "The Colonisation of Palestine: Means and Methods," by Levontin, photographed by Wesam Ahmad at the New York Public Library in 2016.





The facade of the New York Public Library.



The first page of a 1933 report titled "Palestine as an Investment Field," by N. I. Stone, preserved at the New York Public Library.

Wesam Ahmad during one of his visits to the New York Public Library, while beginning his studies on "The Colonization of Palestine: Means and Methods".



treatment of Palestine as an investment field. We continue to see the repercussions today, from Psagot wines to Pegasus spyware.

A final point of emphasis in the value of archival research is how archival documents can be used to expose the manipulation of the narrative. Although I discovered this document for the first time myself in 2016, I know I was not the first: I found a reference to

the document online from 2014 with some subtle but significant modifications, the most important of which was the title. The *MIDA* online piece refers to the document as "Settlement in the Land of Israel: Means and Methods"\* and not "The Colonisation of Palestine: Means and Methods" as evidenced in the archives, despite referencing the same date and author of the document.

As the discourse around apartheid has become more a part of the mainstream narrative today, it is important to keep in mind that apartheid is a means to an end, and that end is the colonization of all of historic Palestine, with the means and methods varying over time and space. All the while, the role of economic incentives and corporate actors remain key variables and obstacles in solving for Palestine. By understanding and deconstructing these obstacles from their historical origins to the present we can better confront the economic incentive structure that perpetuates the continued colonization of Palestine along business lines. Archives are an important part of this process. Despite the risks of getting entangled within the different

threads that we may find along the way, we are rewarded with clarity in seeing the connection between the past, the present, and the future. Such insight should not be underestimated.

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\* See Akiva Bigman, "Words of the Zionist Founders: Zalman David Levontin on Economics and Settlement, *MIDA*, March 22, 2014, available at <https://mida.org.il/2014/03/22/words-of-the-zionist-founders-zalman-david-levontin-on-economics-and-settlement/>.