Monty Noam Penkower, *Decision on Palestine Deferred: America, Britain and Wartime Diplomacy 1939-1945* (London: Frank Cass, 2002). xvi + 384 pp.

England's best course in Palestine, remarked Lord Moyne, the top British official in the Middle East in 1944, was to "carry on as we are and stall our Palestine policy for all we are worth." (362) He articulated this view in the midst of the raging Holocaust, when "stalling" on Palestine's future meant denying Jewish refugees a haven from their persecutors.

In *Decision on Palestine Deferred,* Monty Penkower expertly chronicles the process by which "stalling" came to define both British and American policy toward Palestine and Zionism in the 1940s. Some parts of this story have been told before in Penkower's other important books including *The Jews Were Expendable* and *From Catastrophe to Sovereignty.* But as Penkower notes in his preface, the intertwined subjects of the Holocaust and the Palestine conflict have not been fully or adequately explored in previous studies of Allied wartime diplomacy.

Moreover, no one has told the story in Penkower's masterful, comprehensive style. Every information-packed paragraph bristles with references to the constantly interacting forces shaping this vast and complex topic. This is one of Penkower's greatest strengths as a historian, and it is on full display in *Decision on Palestine Deferred.* Utilizing a vast range of archival sources, he offers the reader a fascinating, panoramic view of events, each development explained with reference to the multiplicity of factors influencing its outcome. The result is a literary tour de force, in which the reader is able to gain a full appreciation of the interlocking nature of the Arab-Jewish struggle over Palestine, the Nazi Holocaust, the conflicts within the American Jewish community, and the diplomacy waged by London and Washington during 1939-1945.

The book opens in 1939, not long after the promulgation of the British White Paper severely limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine. These restrictions would loom large in subsequent years. Despite American Jewish anger over this harsh new British policy, the Roosevelt administration declined to intervene. Although privately dismayed by the British move, FDR "refused to air his thoughts

publicly," Penkower notes. He preferred to delegate the matter to the State Department, which regarded the future of Palestine as being of no more concern to the U.S. than Tagoland, the Cameroons, or other mandated territories. (19) In fact, as Penkower observes, the State Department was not merely indifferent, but often unabashedly hostile to Zionism, going so far as to press the American Red Cross, in 1940, to reject the United Palestine Appeal's offer of twenty-five thousand dollars to aid victims of the Italian bombing of Tel Aviv and Haifa. State Department officials feared funds from a Zionist body would anger the Arabs. (60-61)

The U.S. stance in effect freed London's hand to strictly enforce the new immigration limits and to crack down on attempts by refugees to enter Palestine in defiance of the restrictions (known as *aliyah bet*), a phenomenon the Foreign Office believed was "not primarily a refugee movement" but rather "an organized political invasion" advanced by the Gestapo to undermine England's position in the Middle East. (41) Colonial Secretary John Shuckburgh, who was convinced that Jews "hate all gentiles," expressed his hope that in the wake of the Nazi invasion of Poland, "some of the sources of supply [of unauthorized Jewish immigrants] may dry up." (38) Indeed they did.

Penkower describes how the escalating tension between the Zionist movement and the British split the American Zionist leadership. An activist-minded segment, encouraged by visiting Labor Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion, favored pressing Jewish demands, while Stephen Wise, following the lead of World Zionist Organization president Chaim Weizmann, preferred a more cautious approach on the grounds that anything "that might add a featherweight to Britain's burden must be avoided." (59) Tensions between the two camps would intensify in the years to follow, eventually culminating in Ben-Gurion supplanting Weizmann and the activist Abba Hillel Silver replacing Wise at the helm of the American Zionist movement.

The Weizmann-Wise approach was grounded, in part, in their conviction that Prime Minister Winston Churchill was a sincere supporter of Zionist aspirations. The problem, as Penkower makes clear, is that Churchill's words were seldom matched by his deeds. Weizmann often found himself taking solace in the assumption

that "we are in his thoughts." (69) Whatever Churchill's private thoughts, his actions spoke for themselves. A British embassy official in Washington, writing to an American Jewish leader in late 1941, acknowledged that "the Prime Minster never has mentioned the Jews when he speaks of the yoke on Hitler's victims"; that was an accident, he theorized, caused by the fact that "he looked over the map and could think only of specific countries seized by Hitler," and "the Jews, of course, were not on that map and were overlooked." (98) Nothing better epitomizes the spirit of what Penkower calls "the bi-millenial disability of Jewish powerlessness." (97)

The intransigence of Anglo-American policy and the reluctance of many American Jewish leaders to challenge it created a vacuum that dissidents sought to fill. Penkower appropriately weaves in the Bergson group, which in late 1941 began placing full-page advertisements in major U.S. newspapers, calling for the establishment of a Jewish army to fight alongside the Allies against the Nazis (later the ads would focus on the need for allied action to rescue Europe's Jews). Bergson "shattered the prevailing American consensus regarding Jewish affairs" — that is, the consensus that Jewish concerns could be deferred until war's end — and brought militant Zionist demands "via newspaper and radio to the nation's breakfast tables." (106) Some American Zionist leaders expressed interest in trying to bring Bergson under the establishment's umbrella, but party politics intervened: Ben-Gurion insisted on severing all contact with the Bergsonites because some of its leaders had been followers of his archrival, Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, founder of Revisionist Zionism. (106)

London's rejection of the Jewish army proposal, like its restrictions on Palestine immigration and other positions unfriendly to Jewish interests, was backed up with piles of memoranda warning that a pro-Zionist policy would provoke the Arabs to embrace the Axis. The irony, as Penkower shows, is that there was widespread Arab sympathy for the Nazis anyway. "The White Paper did not, in fact, dissuade the Mufti [of Jerusalem, Haj Amin el-Husseini] and conspiratorial movements in four Arab countries from supporting the Nazi cause" (361). As the German armies marched across North Africa in 1942, Palestinian Arabs were reportedly storing up cattle "for a feast to

welcome the German victors" and marking up Jewish homes in Tel Aviv that they expected to seize. (131) The Office of Strategic Services reported to Washington that Arabs involved in the short-lived pro-Nazi coup in Iraq in 1941 had begun agitating in Syria and Lebanon. "Throughout the Muslim world," Penkower writes, "a popular German song continued to reverberate: *'Bissama Allah oua alard Hitler'* [In Heaven Allah, on earth Hitler]." (126)

The confirmation, in late 1942, that the Nazis had embarked upon the systematic mass murder of Europe's Jews did not soften many hearts among the Allied leadership. Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden remarked in 1943, with regard to the possibility of taking the Jews out of Bulgaria: "If we do that, then the Jews of the world will be wanting us to make similar offers in Poland and Germany. Hitler may well take us up on any such offer and there simply are not enough ships and means of transportation in the world to handle them." (186) The White Paper stayed in force; Palestine remained off-limits to all but a relative handful of Jewish refugees.

Oil, too, was a factor in all of this, Penkower points out. Roosevelt, already reluctant to quarrel with his ally England over the Palestine issue, grew increasingly sensitive to Arab opinion during the early 1940s as the oil issue gained prominence in U.S. strategic thinking. Wartime petroleum needs, estimates of postwar consumption, and fear of Soviet encroachment in the Middle East made Saudi Arabia an ever more influential factor in Washington's considerations. FDR personally assured the Saudi ruler, Ibn Saud, in early 1945 that no allied decision would be made regarding Palestine without consulting both the Arab and Jewish sides.

Speaking to Congress shortly afterwards, Roosevelt remarked, to the dismay of American Jews, that he had learned more about the Palestine problem by talking with Ibn Saud for five minutes than he would have learned from "the exchange of two or three dozen letters." (332) Penkower concludes: "The need for Saudi oil, and worry over Soviet intrusion into the entire region, commanded far more attention in [State Department] circles than Jewry's unique plight under the swastika." (363)

To be sure, the British and the Americans did not always see eye to eye on Palestine. Penkower describes, for example, how, much to London's dismay, a proposed Anglo-American declaration banning public discussion of the Palestine problem for the duration of the war was vetoed by the White House after vigorous lobbying by FDR's Jewish advisers. But "when deferring decision on Palestine," Penkower concludes, "there was a meeting of minds in London and Washington." (363) And so the Palestine issue was deferred, again and again, regardless of the consequences for the Jews trapped in Hitler's Europe.

Rafael Medoff is the director of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, Washington, D.C.