THE PALESTINE COMMUNIST PARTY FROM 1919-1939: A STUDY OF THE
SUBALTERN CENTERS OF POWER IN MANDATE PALESTINE

M.A. THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Master’s of Arts Degree in the Near Eastern
Languages and Cultures Department at the Ohio State University

By James Steppenbacker

Graduate Program in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

The Ohio State University
2009

M.A. Thesis Committee:

Dr. Joseph Zeidan, Adviser
Dr. Sabra Webber
Copyright

by

James Steppenbacker

2009
ABSTRACT

It has been well established that communism and socialism played important roles in the historical development of the political cultures of both Palestine and Israel. The Palestine Communist Party was, at one time, the official representative for the Middle East region for the Communist International. What is less known is how a party that had much of its ideology in common with the Jewish and Zionist communities could, by the late 1930’s, become so estranged from it and by the end of that decade would cease to function as a coherent body for many years. How could a party that for much of its early existence was predominantly Jewish find itself ostracized and shunned by the larger Zionist community in Palestine? Much of the story lies with the policy of Arabization that the party pursued following the Wailing Wall riots of 1929 but there is still much that is less known such as why did the party pursue such a policy as Arabization? Did the party members understand the implications of the policy of Arabization and the natural outcome of such a policy? How did the party intend to pursue this policy in Palestine despite a lack of an organized working class and basic knowledge of communist ideology among the native population? Perhaps most importantly, how would the party relate to and deal with the three main centers of power in Palestine during the British Mandate including the British Mandate authorities, the Zionist Organization, and the local Arab elites?
By building upon the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, I hope to demonstrate that the work of the Palestine Communist Party with the Arab peasantry of Palestine during its early years of existence places this group into the Subaltern realm of politics. It is through the experience of rebellion against the British that these subaltern actors gain their voice and a place in which to express that voice. The Party was among the only organized groups that actively sought out the Arab peasant in outreach and by 1929, the Arab peasant was the preoccupation of the Party, perhaps to its detriment. Once mobilized to the impending dangers to their way of life, the peasants in Palestine called upon traditional form of organization and built upon old patterns of relations and kinships to facilitate that organization. But the use of traditional methods of organization should not mislead us to believe that what was witnessed was the reinvention of something old but rather demonstrate the “constant process of invention” of a modern culture that was carried out in light of British occupation and Zionist immigration (O’Hanlon and Washbrook, 209). In the final analyses of the PCP, their efforts to shape and lead the agrarian revolt in the East ended in failure but the fruit of their labor continues on in both the Israeli and Palestinian societies.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to thank my advisor Dr. Joseph Zeidan for his guidance and support without which this thesis would not have been possible, and also for his patience in helping with transliterations and stylistic issues.

I am truly grateful for the help of Dr. Sabra Webber for her guidance in issues of theory and new material.
VITA

May 24, 1976………………………………Born – Lebanon, New Hampshire

2006…………………………………………B.A. History, Cleveland State University

Fall 2007-Spring 2009………………….Graduate Teaching Assistant-The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field-Near Eastern Languages and Culture
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT .................................................................................................................. ii

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENT ................................................................................................... iv

VITA ................................................................................................................................ v

SYSTEM OF TRANSLITERATION ................................................................................ vii

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................... 1

SUBALTERN STUDIES AND THE PCP ................................................................. 4

THE PALESTINE COMMUNIST PARTY, 1919-1939 ........................................... 8

THE WAILING WALL RIOTS OF 1929 ................................................................. 15

THE PCP FOLLOWING THE EVENTS OF 1929 ................................................. 20

THE EXAMPLE OF HAIFA ...................................................................................... 26

THE YEARS OF ARABIZATION, 1929-1936 ....................................................... 31

THE YEARS OF CONFLICT, 1936-1939 .............................................................. 34

PHASE TWO, INTENSIFIED VIOLENCE FROM JULY 1937-AUTUMN 1938 39

PHASE THREE, THE RENEWAL OF EFFORTS ..................................................... 40

THE POETRY OF RESISTANCE .............................................................................. 41

CONCLUSIONS ......................................................................................................... 44

WORKS CITED ......................................................................................................... 47
SYSTEM OF TRANSLITERATION

All transliteration contained in this document are done using the standardized DMG system developed by the German Oriental Society and used in the Hans Wehr Dictionary
INTRODUCTION

The predominant mode of analyses applied to studies of the modern history of the Middle East normally focuses on elite groups and privileged classes. This approach to Middle Eastern Studies, and particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict, has stressed the importance of certain classes or personalities in guiding and influencing revolutionary movements and periodic outbreaks of violence. The problem with this approach is that it subsumes the role and importance of the subaltern. An example of this type of approach can be seen in Yehoshua Porath’s study of the history of Palestinian Nationalism.¹ In this work, Porath stresses the role of the Jerusalem elite, personalities such as al-Hajj ʿAmin al-Husayni, Raghib al-Nashashibi and organizations such as the Muslim Christian Association and the Arab Executive Committee. Although these groups and individuals did play important roles in the events that led to the Great Arab Revolt of 1936-1939, there was no place for discussion of the peasantry other than in broad general terms. The ease with which alternate centers of power have been overlooked is especially problematic in any analysis of the Great Arab Revolt due to the wide-spread participation

¹ See Yehoshua Porath, The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1919-1929.
of the Palestinian Arab population and the overwhelming peasant make-up of the participants.²

Despite the fact that attention to elites predominates in studies of the Palestine-Israeli conflict, the lack of research and focus on subaltern groups as centers of power has begun to be addressed. In his analyses of the Great Arab Revolt, Ted Swedenburg adapts the approach first used by Ranajit Guha to re-examine the role of the Indian peasants in the anti-colonial struggle against the British and applies it in a study of the Arab peasants consciousness and memory of that event. Guha and the members of the Subaltern Studies Group had adapted the ideas of Antonio Gramsci³, particularly the idea of the subaltern or marginal groups, due to dissatisfaction with the then current level of research in the field of Indian anti-colonial history. As was the case with Palestine, studies of Indian history had tended to stress the role and importance of a particular privileged class at the expense of the peasantry that made up the bulk of the movement during the British Mandate period.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the role that was played by the Palestine Communist Party in the anti-colonial struggle against Britain. I will also attempt to add to the understanding of how the PCP, as a subaltern group, interacted with the “elite” groups already present in Palestine. In order to accomplish this goal, I will use in this study some of the theories previously applied by the Subaltern Studies Groups in the study of the Indian anti-colonial movement with the goal of shedding light on the role played by the Palestinian communists among the Arab peasantry during this important

² See Sonia El Nimr, The Arab Revolt of 1936-1939 in Palestine: A Study Based on Oral Sources. In this work El Nimr is able to demonstrate through oral interviews with actual participants to the Revolt that there was widespread support from all spectrums of the society and that the overwhelming make-up of the participants was Muslim peasant.
³ See David Forgacs, A Gramsci Reader, pp. 351
period. In addition, I will avoid the type of analyses that totalizes the histories of
the entire Palestinian national movement recognizing that that situation was complex and the
participants did not share the exact same set of goals and expectations.4 The Palestine
Communist Party, or PCP, was one of the groups most active with the peasantry. There
were practical reasons for the PCP to adopt this attitude toward the Arab peasants of
Palestine. Perhaps the biggest reason was the lack of an organized and active proletariat
class during the period in question, 1919-1939. I have also chosen to focus on this
particular period of time ending in 1939 because it was during these early years the Party
came together in an attempt to bring Communism to the Middle East but following the
ethnic violence of the Revolt the ability for the PCP to stay as a single coherent body
passed. Although this posed some problems in the early years of the Party, the PCP under
direction from the Communist International transformed itself from a political party
working toward class revolt to a party that viewed agrarian revolt as the key to victory in
Palestine and the larger Middle East. Despite this realization on the part of the PCP, their
efforts with the Palestinian peasantry proved to be an unsuccessful one.

4 The conscious effort to avoid an approach that totalizes the Palestinian movement is built upon French
poststructuralist theory, particularly Michel Foucault's emphasis on the heterogeneous nature of power. See
SUBALTERN STUDIES AND THE PCP

The work of the Subaltern Studies Group (or SSG), as stated above, arose in the late 1970’s in Britain out of dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in the historiography of the Indian anti-colonial movement. The prevalence of elitism in that field prompted members of the group to begin to search for other more socially balanced means of interpreting the available data. There was a desire on the part of these scholars to understand the subaltern domain of politics that existed in parallel with that of the elite domain (Guha, 40). By subaltern, I do not mean or try to imply a group that is oppressed but rather any group that has either limited or no access to structures of power in a society. Subaltern politics had existed prior to British colonialism, had resisted being rendered irrelevant by it, and made up the majority of the anti-colonial movement in India. The SSG was driven by a desire to understand the motivations of these groups when they decided to act in a rebellious manner, to unpack how the subaltern interacted with both the colonial authority and the local elite, and to demonstrate how the subaltern achieved the “horizontal” mobilization that was a hallmark of these groups.

Building on the analysis of Gramsci of the Russian Revolution of 1917, Guha saw the peasantry as a “living force” that acted in a more or less heterogeneous manner (Guha, 24;29). An analysis that takes into account the peasantry as a community is
needed in the field of Palestine studies due to the predominance of elite-centered narratives. The peasants and not the elite groups made up the bulk of the movement in both the Wailing Wall riots of 1929 and in the Great Arab Revolt that occurred from 1936-1939 (El Nimr, 187). Most studies of the above mentioned conflicts tend to stress the role of either the Zionist community or the nationalist Arab elite and view the peasant-based revolt in terms of shock and surprise. But as Guha argues in India the peasantry in Palestine, although typically conservative, acted out in defense of the institutions it saw as important. The decision to act had to have been a rational and informed one since by that time the peasantry knew the repercussions of civil disobedience. The very idea of public demonstration entailed a series of decisions and conscious choices. Burke’s definition of the public demonstration, that it is the “utilization of the public sphere for unofficial and anti-official purposes” which itself builds on Foucault’s idea of power permeating throughout society, demonstrated that the Arab peasants and the PCP attempted to assert its own challenge to the natural order that existed in that society at that time. The heterogeneous make-up of the peasant group is another important aspect since it is precisely this point that on one hand has been used to critique the Arab peasantry’s ability to organize during the Great Arab Revolt while on the other hand demonstrates the presence of alternative, subaltern sources of power⁵. The heterogeneous make-up of the movement was both natural and advantageous since it allowed for and aided the quick dissemination of information.

⁵ Tom Bowden emphasized the heterogeneous make-up of the revolt as a weakness and sign of political immaturity (Bowden, 149). He rightly cited the importance of the village and family in the life of the peasant but the actual magnitude of the importance seems to be missed. Halim Barakat has shown that the family is the nucleus of the Arab world and that this would be the natural way of organizing when the local elite are viewed in binary opposition.
Scholars have long attempted to assert the religion of Islam as a context for social action in the Arab world. Without a doubt, Muslims made up the bulk of the movement during the Great Arab Revolt but the issues cannot be simplified as merely religious fervor or duty. Researchers such as Porath placed an over-emphasis on the role of the religious leadership and institutions in the Great Arab Revolt and others have tried to place the Palestinian movement during the British Mandate into the context of the Muslim world.\(^6\) As for the presence of religion in the uprising Budeiri offers a compelling and reasonable explanation,

“Looking at the Arab community from the outside, the Party leadership could not perceive that the religious fanaticism of the Arab Masses was simply an expression of their opposition to the foreigners who were usurping their lands, within the familiar reference points of their own value system.” (Budeiri, 33 italics mine)

The importance of the PCP for the present study is that it was one of the only groups who saw the peasantry as a viable force in Palestine and that sought in some fashion to reach out to this group and to meet the needs of it. That reality was a partial reflection of the socio-economic gap that had been growing between the Arab elites and the peasantry which had the effect of estranging these two groups (Seikaly, 155). Of course, it would be incorrect to assume that the Party was the only group who attempted in a concerted fashion to reach out to the Arab peasantry. There were people such as ‘Azz al-Din al-Qassam, who had come to Palestine from Syria in order to organize and lead the

\(^6\) See Donna Devine, Islamic Culture and Political Practice in British Mandated Palestine, 1918-1948, pp. 71-73. In this work, Devine holds central to her argument the role played by the British but leaves little room for discussion for the effect that Zionism played in the region during the Mandate period.
resistance to the British and Zionist presence in the region\textsuperscript{7}. He arrived in Haifa in 1921 and was among the only challenges to the Arab elite in terms of organizational power.

There are also important considerations that must be made as to the uniqueness of the situation in Palestine due to the presence of Zionism. Quite apart from their normative ruling style during the British imperial period, the British did not use the local elites in an indirect ruling style as they did in India; instead they tended to use the Zionist to fill this role. The reasons offered as to why include that their de-facto existence in the land made them a force that had to be dealt with in some way. The mechanisms of the Zionist groups, both locally and internationally especially in the West, made it an effective group adding to its appeal to the British. But the conflicting goals of the Arab nationalist leadership, in Jerusalem versus the countryside for instance, put this group in a position where their goals were counter to the British imperial ones. The refusal of the Arab national leadership to participate with the Zionists in regional councils and officially sanctioned legislative bodies, due to not recognizing Jewish parity in regional leadership, placed the Arab community outside the arenas that would have allowed for the development of any dual administration (Townsend, 919).

\textsuperscript{7} ‘Azz al-Din al-Qassam was a preacher who had come to Palestine from Syria. He had been trained in the Salafi Islamic tradition under Muhammad Abduh, a well known Egyptian Islamic teacher. After finishing his studies at al-Azhar University, he returned home to Syria and became a preacher at the Jebla Mosque. While there, he raised a group of mujahidin to fight the Italian colonial presence in Tunisia. Over time, al-Qassam grew closer to the poorer working classes and this is what drew him to Palestine. The plight of the Arab peasants in Palestine who had been affected by the presence of a foreign army and population and taken advantage of by the Arab elite in the region closely resembled the situation he witnessed in Syria following the French occupation. Much like the peasantry itself, al-Qassam saw the conflict in religious terms with a religious solution needed that of Jihad. (see Struggle and Survival in the Middle East, Burke ed., chapter 11 Abdullah Schleifer)
THE PALESTINE COMMUNIST PARTY, 1919-1939

The official starting point for the Party can be traced back to 1919, when a small group of Jewish communists led by Yitzhak Meirson, M. Khalidi, and Gershon Dau, some of whom had arrived in the Second Aaliyah, or wave of migration (lit. ascent), broke away from the Poalei Tzion (Workers of Zion) movement and founded the Mifleget Poalim Sozialist, or MPS. The Poalei Tzion movement had been founded in Palestine in 1905 with one of its main tenets being the “Conquest of Labor” (Budeiri, 5). The idea of a Jewish “Conquest of Labor” is a vital one and will be revisited later in the paper. The MPS had attached itself to the proletariat Zionist movement thereby linking its success with the success of the larger socialist revolution it hoped to spark in the region. Perhaps most important for the present study, the MPS had stressed the importance of linking the movement with the “native working class” and of working jointly with the Arab community in Palestine (Budeiri, 6).

This last point, that the MPS saw the need to work with the Arab community in order to bring about the socialist revolution, is a key to understanding the relations of the

---

8 The Poalei Tzion movement, should at this time, be viewed in the context of the dispute that had arisen in the Communist International movement, or Comintern, as to the future of the movement in light of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. There was a general debate at this time as to how close the international movement should remain to Moscow with the Palestine Section of Poalei Tzion choosing to distance itself from Moscow and its influence. The main issue at hand was a split between those in the movement who were sympathetic to communism and those who were not.
MPS with the other Socialist-Zionist movements in the coming years. The larger Socialist-Zionist movement had, as previously stated, as one of the centerpieces of its doctrine the idea of a “Conquest of Labor”. The concept of “Conquest of Labor”, hereafter without quotations, entailed two aspects. Firstly, there was a personal aspect where a person could overcome their bourgeoisie background through engaging in manual labor, which reflected a current in Zionist thought at that time. Secondly, there was the larger issue that Jews could become masters of labor and use this to help found and build the new Jewish community in Palestine (Lockman, 48). The uniqueness of the Palestine at that time was that there was, as stated previously, no organized labor which would allow for the importation of a foreign labor force without causing friction among a native labor force. The Zionist leadership, for instance Ber Berochov who had been the major ideologue for the Poalei Tzion movement at that time, saw this friction between national labor groups as a main driver of anti-Semitism (Rubenstein, 32-33). The main obstacle to the realization and implementation of this idea was the presence of an overwhelming Arab population, one that was predominantly employed in agriculture and had historically been sought after for employment by land owners, both Arab and Jewish due to their practical expertise and their low labor cost.

With the coming of the Second Aaliyah, the situation in Palestine became tenser with the increased competition for jobs and the strong attachment of this group to the Conquest of Labor ideas. The immediate problem facing the burgeoning Jewish community in Palestine, or Yishuv, was how it would absorb and retain the members of this group since many of the members of the previous Aaliyah had returned home to

---

9 There had been an idea present in Labor Zionism that posited the problems of the International Jewish community on its preponderance in bourgeoisie fields, and that the correction for this was to engage in more labor oriented fields (Beinen, 4)
Europe or emigrated elsewhere due to the harsh conditions they encountered. It was from the context of this particular issue that the idea of Hebrew or Jewish Labor emerged. Despite the fact that Poalei Tzion had a more Marxist outlook, the group recognized the incompatibility of the ideas of a Conquest of Labor in light of a predominantly non-Jewish agriculturally employed indigenous population. The decision was made that the Nationalist needs of the Jewish community outweighed the socialist ideals, and that the movement needed to focus on the Jewish community at least until the establishment of a more class-conscious community (Lockman, 51). To quote Zachary Lockman, “The exclusion of Arab Workers from employment in the Jewish sector of Palestine’s economy would come to be seen by the Labor-Zionist movement as absolutely crucial to the formation of a Jewish working class in Palestine, at least for the short and medium terms” (Lockman, 52). Again, as stated earlier, the concepts were not ethnic in terms of being anti-Arab at least at that time, but rather more a reaction from the perceived boycott against Jewish workers in Europe and Russia which the Zionist movement touted.

By 1919, the growing Yishuv, having embraced the ideas of Hebrew Labor saw the need to merge all of its labor organizations into one over-arching group. This was the Ahdut Ha’avodah, or Unity of Labor, and in the coming years this group was the main antagonist of the MPS. The actual life of the MPS was short-lived, barely two years in fact, but the ideas of a socialist revolution that occurred in cooperation with the Arab population were thoroughly implanted in a small minority of its members. For most of its existence the members of the MPS found themselves at odds with the larger Jewish community due to its position on Jewish immigration. The MPS saw the immigration of Jews into Palestine as detrimental to the Arab population due to the competition it would
eventually create for jobs, land, and the country itself (Rubenstein, 58). This linking of Jewish immigration and Arab hardship caused many in the *Yishuv* concern since this belief placed the new immigrants at the center of the issue. It was this minority group of former MPS members that would become closer with the Communist International and eventually formed the nucleus of the Palestine Communist Party (Beinin, 6).

In 1921 during a May Day demonstration, members of the MPS clashed with the more moderate members of the *Ahdut Ha’avoda*. The clashes brought about a swift reaction from the British Authorities but also prompted a response from the Arab community. The swift and harsh response on the part of the British was a reflection of the imperial goals of Britain which in this case was to discredit the communist movement. The British deported 15 members of the MPS following the clash, including Dau and Khalidi, resulting in the loss of an important part of the leadership cadre. The MPS had, by that time, been labeled an illegal organization and the clashed provided a further reason to increase repression of the group. Combined with the official response from the British, there was a violent, hostile reaction to both the MPS and the *Ahdut Ha’avadah* from the Arab community. The attacks on Zionist settlements spread to other regions of Palestine in one of the first wide-spread manifestations of Palestinian Arab resentment of Zionism’s presence in the region. The result of the combination of these factors on the MPS was to bring about its end as the organization was forced underground and eventually ceased to function.

The break-up of the MPS resulted in the growth of a number of smaller Jewish socialist groups, one of which was the PCP. By the summer of 1923, the PCP merged

---

10 The British had had advanced warning of the demonstrations and allowed the event to occur as a pretext to imposing a harsh sentence on the communists. The evidence from the event demonstrated a close British and Zionist collaboration against the MPS (Tzur, 108)
with another of the smaller socialist group and following its merger began the work of aligning itself with the Comintern. The bulk of the early work of the PCP had been in attempting to transform itself from an almost exclusively Jewish political party to a more regional one that reflected the Arab predominance in the region. The Comintern had been interested in the region for some time but was resistant to alignment with a Zionist-oriented socialist party due to the incompatibilities the Comintern saw with Zionism and Communism, particularly the ethnic aspect of Zionism. The PCP set about the work of membership in the Comintern and sent one of its representatives, Wolf Auerbach to Russia to meet with the ECCI (Executive Committee of the Communist International) (Budeiri, 7). Auerbach is perhaps one of the most important figures to the PCP due to his position when the party became the official representative for the Communist in Palestine. The PCP was officially admitted into the Comintern by spring of 1924 and the ECCI set about the transformation of the Party from a Jewish one to a regional one.

The anti-imperial stance of the PCP was a key factor in its decision to support the Arab national movements in the region, and particularly in Palestine. The national movements at this period in Communist ideology prior to the double-cross of the Chinese communists by Chiang Kai-Shek, were seen as being vitally important for the struggle against the British imperial presence. The Party was also against the Proletariat Zionism movement due to its ethnic nature. The PCP also rejected working with the nationalist Arab leaders, such as the Supreme Muslim Council, due to the latter’s being seen as helping to further British imperial aims in the region. The nationalist Arab leaders were also criticized for attempting to turn the struggle in Palestine from an anti-imperial one to

---

11 The Proletariat Zionism movement held to the doctrines of Hebrew Labor which the PCP had rejected. Zionism had not only been rejected due to the ethnic nature of the doctrine but also because it had been seen as being used by the British in its imperial scheme for Palestine. (Budeiri)
an anti-Jewish one. Obviously the PCP did not want to see the movement take on a ethnic dimension, especially since it advocated remaining in Palestine as a protected minority in an Arab dominated country and branded as “liquidationist” those Jews who advocated leaving Palestine (Budeiri, 22). Under the direction of the ECCI, the PCP began working toward making contacts with the Arab Istiqlal movements. These groups were active primarily in Syria and called for the independence and unity of the Arab peoples (Muslih, 143).

An event that occurred in 1924 showed the position the Party saw itself in fighting the Zionist take-over of the land. In the area of Afula, a Jewish organization had bought land that was uninhabited, at that time, for the purpose of Jewish settlement. The Communists incited the Arabs in the area to attack the Jewish settlers which turned violent and bloody (Laqueur, 78). The Afula example, that of the Party seeing the land as rightfully belonging to the Palestinian Arabs and the Jewish immigrants as part of the overall-imperialist aims for the region, set a precedent for later members. The incident also placed it in an estranged position with the larger Zionist community. By 1927, the PCP had been successful in getting Arab representatives admitted into the Histradut although initially only with observer status. Despite this success, the coming years were difficult ones with the Party struggling to meet the demands of the ECCI in penetrating the Arab community. The PCP leadership had recognized from early on, as a result of the 1921 May Day riots, the need for Arabic language material and even

---

12 The Histradut, or General Federation of Labor, was formed when member of the second Aaliyah refused to join the Ahдут Ha’avodah for political reasons and as a result the leadership of Ahдут Ha’avodah decided to merge with the other prominent labor groups to form the federation. This group had much more power that the Ahдут Ha’avodah, particularly in economic matters (Shapiro, 16, 49)
imported some from Vienna but to little avail. The inability of the Party to communicate meaningfully with the Arab community in Palestine proved to be a major stumbling block and an issue that would eventually split the Party.

There had been a renewed focus by the Party toward Arabization, even in light of the increased arrests and deportations of Party members by the British, and growing persecution from the Zionist community. There were two major developments in 1929 that should be discussed. The first of these was a shift in policy due to the absence in Palestine of a developed and distinct proletariat class, which meant that the Party would begin to focus its efforts at the peasantry calling for the Agrarian revolt. The other main development was the result of increased militancy among both the Arab population and the Party members. This was highlighted in June of 1929 when a group of forty Party members were arrested for clashing with the police. The loss of a significant portion of the Party just prior to the 1929 revolts side-lined it as it was not able to affect the direction of the demonstrations.

13 One reason posited for the failure at the early attempts of the PCP leadership to communicate meaningfully with the Arab community was that the Moslem-Christian societies that had been created by the British fought the attempts and often discredited the material (Rubenstein, 59).
THE WAILING WALL RIOTS OF 1929

The year 1929 proved to be a decisive one for both the Arab community in Palestine and also for the PCP. It was in that year that civil unrest broke out in many Arab communities in Palestine such as Jaffa, Haifa, Hebron, and Safed. These communities all had sizeable Jewish and Muslim communities giving insight into the ethnic dimension of these outbreaks of violence. The actual events arose out of demonstrations that occurred at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem by a Jewish youth movement who protested the fact that they could not find work. This demonstration in-turn prompted counter-demonstrations by the Arab Muslim community which then became violent and spread into neighboring areas. The resultant bloody clashes brought about a swift response by the British who targeted the PCP membership for its links with Communism and subsequently arrested and deported a large portion of the members. With the loss of such a large percentage of the cadre, the PCP was forced to reexamine itself and to reassess its efforts thus far.

The official policy of the Party had been, prior to the bloody revolts of 1929, to attempt to establish and maintain contacts with the Arab national leadership. This position was reversed just prior to the revolts, which in light of the role that the national
leadership played in the uprising further complicated the position of the PCP with the Arab community in Palestine. Despite that, the pro-labor platform of the PCP had had some success in attracting members of the small but growing Arab proletariat. This is evidenced by the increase in arrests of Arab cadres by the British authorities and also by the number of Arabs sent to Moscow for education (Budeiri, 25). The policies advocated by the PCP in respect to the Arabs also helped to increase its standing and prestige among the Arab community. These included an eight-hour work day, improved working conditions, and importantly equal pay with Jewish workers. These points all combined to help lay the groundwork for the Arabization of the Party that would occur later.

The result of the unrest of 1929 was far-reaching in both the Arab and Jewish communities. The violence and suddenness of the uprising caught people from both communities by surprise. The British were shocked at the level of anguish present in the Arab community. There was also a degree of surprise from the nationalist Arab leadership who had found themselves reacting to rather than directing the movement (Porath, 271). The anti-Jewish nature of some of the attacks caused fear and memories of the Russian pogroms in the Jewish community while the undeniable ethnic nature of the attacks prompted it, and particularly the Zionist community, to begin to examine seriously the Arab question. The position of the Party was to view the riots as imperialist in nature; emphasizing that the ethnic nature of the violence only furthered helped to divert attention of the Arab community artificially from the British colonial presence to the Jewish community. The PCP also criticized the Jewish community leadership for placing Jews in the “front-lines” of the conflict which put them in harms way and

14 The Supreme Muslim Council (SMC) played a key role in the revolts of 1929. At the head of the SMC was al-Hajj ‘Amin al-Husayni who has been criticized for using the unrest as a way of creating Anti-Jewish sentiment in the Muslim community (See Porath, 269).
exacerbated the anti-Jewish nature of the riots (Budeiri, 31). The ECCI criticized the PCP for being sidelined during the revolt and not being in a position to direct the course of events. The ECCI directed the Party to begin to position itself better in the Arab community so as to have more influence over the events and the peasantry who were becoming increasingly important to the Party. The Party was to embark on a more intensified period of Arabization. Much of the critique was directed toward the Central Committee of the Party since it guided much of the policies and had been predominantly Jewish in make-up.

The renewed focus on Arabization should be seen in light of the Sixth Comintern Congress which occurred in the summer of 1928. The Sixth Congress, had, among other things adopted a new official stance in regard to the colonial question. That decision arose out of the results of the Chinese Communists partnership with Chiang Kai-Shek which ended bitterly for the Communists (Beinin, 8). The official position of the Comintern was to attempt to work with the nationalist leadership in bringing about the proposed revolution but in light of the disastrous results of Chinese Communist collaboration this position was seen as no longer viable. That event was important due to the influence it had on the ECCI in interpreting the events in Palestine following the 1929 unrest. The practical effect of this analysis of the Palestine situation was that the ECCI and eventually the PCP viewed the Palestinian leadership in collaborator roles. The Zionist community was also seen as being used by the British to further and maintain their imperial presence in the region and so the Party was directed to make a break with that part of the Jewish community. Not only was the Zionist community viewed as being generally collaborative, but the ECCI went on to criticize it as actively impeding attempts
at Arab and Jewish proletariat alliance (Degras, 77). In fact, the ECCI saw the British, the nationalist Arab leadership, and the Zionist movement as working together to further British imperial goals as stated in a resolution from 1929 that ‘The fighting that broke out in August “was undoubtedly organized by British agents, provoked by the Zionist-Fascist bourgeoisie, and arranged by the Arab-Mohammedan reaction” (Degras, 77).

In practical terms this meant that the policy of Arabization would become a priority and that the PCP now viewed itself in antagonistic terms with the local elite groups in the region. By using the term “elite” I am attempting to further demonstrate the elite-subaltern divide in regard to the PCP and the prominent groups that exercised economic and political hegemony over the rest (Guha, 35).

This idea of subaltern and elite confrontation builds on the ideas of Gramsci who saw the tension resulting from the interaction of these groups as a central problem for societies, particularly in places where the peasantry was the predominant group. The ECCI from that point on was concerned with transforming the Party from a Jewish one to a more territorial one that better reflected the ethnic make-up of the region. That decision to make Arabization a priority entailed a series of changes in the Party and its policies. The first of these was instruct the Jewish cadre to act more in a support role, that of “aids not leaders” (Budieri, 35). Along with that change there was the decision to integrate Arabs into every facet of the Party organization. Importantly for the Arab peasants the Party adopted the new agrarian program which focused more heavily on issues that affected peasants and agrarian workers. That shift in policy reflected the realization on the part of the ECCI that the Arab workers could not sustain the movement and that the Arab peasantry was vital in this respect. One important last note was that the PCP was
not to abandon its work in the Jewish community as it was still seen as vital to the success of the movement but instead should attempt to infiltrate the major Jewish and Zionist labor organizations and reform them from within. In the end, the new reforms of the PCP and the Central Committee of the Party by the ECCI were enacted in order to place the Party in a position to influence and direct future events and unrest, which at that point were seen as inevitable.

The Central Committee (CC) initially accepted the decisions but in practical terms the policy of Arabization was slow to be acted on and at times there was active attempts to subvert and halt the process by factions within the PCP itself. Despite this, there were some successes as well with regard to the policies and actions of the PCP. The Party had achieved, at least partially, the goal of enlarged Arab membership and inclusion into the Party leadership. That fact, that the Party had achieved partial success, was reflected at the September and then the December Plenums of the Party in which six of the twenty-two delegates were Arab (Rubinstein, 217). The increase in membership was also a reflection of the increased focus in producing Arabic language material, something that up to that point only received moderate attention. The PCP had also expelled those members who had openly resisted the work of Arabization. The events of 1929 were re-examined in an attempt to avoid making the same mistakes in the expected agrarian revolt.
THE PCP FOLLOWING THE EVENTS OF 1929

As a result of the re-examination of the events the PCP had changed its focus from the Arab proletariat to the Arab peasants. The Party had adopted, as one of its central tenets, a land redistribution program that addressed the grievances of the peasants in regard to the issue of land loss. The policy of the Party to attempt to encourage Jews to disassociate themselves from the Zionist community had begun to have the affect of making it a pariah in the Jewish community in Palestine. As a result of the policy of Arabization, the Jewish members who had been raised and educated in Europe and saw the movement more in terms of a proletariat uprising began to voice opposition to the abandonment of the labor program since they still saw the proletariat left as vital to the movement. It is important to remember that Labor would go on to dominate Israeli politics for a long period of time, demonstrating that to some degree they were correct.15

In the following year, the ECCI criticized the Arab members of the Party for anti-Jewish sentiments which were interpreted by the ECCI as manifestations of national chauvinism (Budeiri, 43). As this demonstrated, the goal of the ECCI for the Party was balance in respect to Arab and Jewish membership and policies. The ECCI foresaw a party led by

---

15 By labor I refer to the Ahдут Ha’avodah organization which helped to establish a central political authority, modern economy, and many of the institutions that would go on to be vital to the success of the early Israeli state (Yonathon Shapiro, The Formative Years of the Israeli Labour Party: The Organization of Power, 1919-1930.)
Arab leadership with a guarantee for minority rights of the Jewish members to better reflect the diversity of the population and the numerical predominance of the Arabs in Palestine. In practical terms though, due to the resistance from some of the Jewish members, the ECCI had to appoint three Arab members to the EC of the Party since there was little chance for outright election. The appointment of Arab members to the Executive Committee was as important step for the development and future of the PCP. The EC had been seen as the main culprit in the missteps of 1929 and the remedy was to purge the nationalist members out in favor of loyal members, either Arab or Jew, in order to better position the Party for future events.

The Seventh Congress of the Comintern which convened in 1930 discussed, among other issues, the situation in Palestine. As stated above, one major indictment that was leveled against the Party was the failure at Arabization. The Arab uprising and subsequent ethnic violence that later ensued was seen as a “natural” phenomenon of the anti-colonial uprising (Budeiri, 44). Since the Jewish minority was seen as agents of British imperialism, the Comintern felt that the only solution for an end to the ethnic nature of the violence was for the Jewish community to make a break with the Zionist movement. The Party also adopted a strict position of opposition to continued Jewish immigration since much of the class make-up during those years of the immigrants was of a bourgeois nature. The PCP at that stage saw its main priority to be the struggle against Jewish colonization and Jewish immigration since both of these actions were seen as endangering the livelihoods of the Arab workers and peasants. At the same time, these actions needed to be balanced so as to not to give any opportunity for the Arab national
leadership or the British to create anti-Jewish sentiment in the Arab community which could jeopardize the movement.

In analyzing the outcome of the Seventh Congress’s indictments and suggestions for policy change, there are a few important points that need to be further examined. The proposed Agrarian revolt which the ECCI saw as inevitable was in reality not even a consideration on the part of the Arab peasants. The traditional loyalties of the peasants to the local leadership in the town or region that pre-dated the coming of the British and Zionist entities still were in effect. The sense of community that the peasants felt existed long before these new phenomena. The notion of community is vitally important to the examination of the Palestinian peasantry. As was first discussed by Guha but later elaborated on by Partha Chatterjee, “there is a single unifying idea that gives to peasant insurgency its fundamental social character: the notion of community.” (Chatterjee, 13).

The notion of community helps to give insight into why the peasantry chose to act how it did, when it did, and where it did. Shortly after the outbreak of the Great Arab Revolt in 1936 a phenomenon occurred in which the local communities, for a variety of practical reasons, began using locally formed “rebel” courts.

“In each village they used to choose a Committee of four or five elderly men who were known for their wisdom and good reputation. In those days no one went to the State courts or to the police, and all disputes were investigated by the Committee of the village, and the people accepted its judgment.”

The importance of community, of a familiar reference point for the Arab peasants who were used to a system of domination and subjugation, helps us to understand the failure

16 Interview conducted by Sonia El Nimr of ‘Ali Zayadneh in the Gallilee (El Nimr, 167)
that would ultimately happen in regard to the PCP work with the Arab peasants. The idea of peasant community also further demonstrates the presence of an opposition to the bourgeoisie, elite community. The bourgeoisie is typically drawn together “on the basis of common interest (or shared preferences)” (Chatterjee, 14). As Chatterjee goes on to explain, the interests of the former group are in direct contrast to a peasantry in revolt, which calls on “bonds of solidarity” that existed previously but, importantly, these bonds are not rigid but rather fluid with the peasantry able to expand and contract the community in reaction to events. This last point, of a fluid conception of community helps us to understand why at times the peasant movement was able to be rallied by Arabs from Syria for instance, under the leadership of ‘Azz al-Din al-Qassam and at times to rally behind the efforts of the PCP.

So we see from the events that followed the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, there was a radical reorientation for the PCP. The abandonment of the proletariat focus, the recognition of the national character of the movement in Palestine, the renewed efforts at Arabization, the realization of the problems of continued Jewish immigration, and the commitment to guaranteed minority rights for the Jews in the society as opposed to calls for emigration all worked to demonstrate the new trajectory for the Party. As discussed earlier, immediately following the Congress Arab members were elected to the EC of the Party although this was a short-lived success since most of those were subsequently arrested for their involvement in the Party. By the early 1930’s, as a result of the new program adopted by the PCP, the Party found itself estranged from the Yishuv
and constantly harassed by the British. By 1934 Radwan al-Hillou (Musa) was chosen as the first Arab secretary of the Party.

The new program taken up by the Party involved increased activity among the Arab peasant population of Palestine. In some cases, this was able to be accomplished in urban areas due to the fact that the severe economic conditions encountered by the Arab peasants resulting from increased competition for markets and resources combined with the loss of land led to increased migration from the rural areas of Palestine into the urban centers, particularly in the North. Despite this, most of the work in reaching the Arab peasantry still needed to be done in the villages and rural areas. Groups were set up to travel to the villages and discuss the issues that were particular to the peasants. The overwhelming majority of these early groups were comprised of Jewish communists who lacked the ability to speak in the local Arabic dialects which complicated meaningful communication. The main issues discussed included bad harvests, the dangers of famine, loss of land to the Zionist movement and seizure of land and crops by the British, and the heavy tax burden leveled on the peasants. These issues worked to reinforce in the minds of the communists that the Agrarian revolution was indeed imminent and that the party needed to form revolutionary committees in order to educate and prepare the peasants, particularly the youth since they were seen as being less influenced by religion. Although there was some success from these efforts, particularly as a result of the leaflet campaign, the successes were limited due to a lack of legitimacy that the still primarily Jewish cadre had in the countryside as in many cases the workers could not speak Arabic.

*The term *Yishuv* means literally “community” but here is used in reference to the entire Jewish community in Palestine prior to 1948. In actuality there had been an “old” and “new” *Yishuv* with the former consisting of the religious orthodoxy and the latter referring to the nationalist Jews (Yonathon Shapiro, 10).
One important area that the Party did help to draw attention as a result of these efforts was to the issue of Jewish immigration which, previously the peasants had been silent on, now they began to voice organized outrage at. But along with this change in position of the Arab peasants was a change in the priority of the Zionist community who increasingly from this period on focused in on land acquisition due to increasing numbers of Jews immigrating to Palestine and the desire to prevent a return to their home countries (Budeiri, 53). Starting in 1933 Jewish immigration greatly increased into Palestine as a result of the rise of Nazi Germany. In 1932 there were just over 9,500 Jewish immigrants into Palestine while in 1933 there were over 30,000, a number that would double by 1936 (McCarthy, 34).
THE EXAMPLE OF HAIFA

Despite some of the complications that the Party encountered in reaching the rural members of the Arab society, their efforts in urban areas proved to be more successful during this period. In urban centers like Haifa the PCP was able to bring attention to the plight of the Arab workers and the rapidly expanding working class. Haifa in particular had seen a massive investiture of capital by both the British authorities and the Zionist community. For the British there were strategic concerns since Haifa provided the best natural harbor on the Palestinian coast and was particularly suited as a depot for material both entering and exiting the region. The accumulation of Arab laborers and rapid economic growth coupled with the rise of the Jewish community in the city provided a fertile ground for the PCP activists. The Party established its first publication in Haifa in 1924 under the name “Haifa” and reflected the importance and centrality the city would come to play in the coming years to the movement.

The city of Haifa was occupied by the British on 23 September, 1918 and had been relatively unimportant prior to that point. At the outbreak of World War I, the population of Haifa was roughly 20,000 with the majority of the population being Arab Muslim (Seikaly, 21). Three important factors combined in Haifa to help bring about the change in status from an unimportant city to a crucial and vitally important center for
communications and industry. These three factors were the presence and growth of Christian educational systems, the German Templar settlement, and finally and perhaps most important for the present study the extension of the Hijaz railroad into Haifa. The last two points, the presence of the German Templar settlement and the Hijaz railway extension give important insight into the development of the Jewish community, the aggregation of Arab laborers, and the rapid expansion of the industrial base.

The German Templar movement, which was a Christian sect motivated to live and dwell in the Biblical lands, came to the region in 1869 and by 1914 had expanded to roughly 750 individuals (Seikaly, 23). The settlement they built was designed along European lines, quite different from the traditional pattern for cities in the region. The settlement was built on the edge of the city and because of that the Templar settlement only had a minor impact on Haifa itself but the style of their construction provided a model for the incoming European Jews to emulate. This last fact is important to remember, that the majority of Jews coming into Haifa during the British mandate years were from Europe, particularly Poland and Germany which had had advanced industry and labor. The influx of European Jews during this period, and especially those with experience in modern industry helped to explain the demographic transformation of the city during the Mandate (Seikaly, 47). The expansion of the Hijaz railroad had an even larger impact on the city and its inhabitants. The choice of the British to make Haifa the end point for the Hijaz railway meant that there needed to be a greatly expanded infrastructure to accommodate the loading and unloading of goods, material, and personnel.
In order to understand the situation in Haifa some insight into the geopolitical issues of the region at that time is needed. The British had, just prior to the outbreak of World War I, switched their naval fleet from coal to oil. That fact made the securing of oil a major factor in British foreign policy.\textsuperscript{18} India also played a major role in British foreign policy and the ability to secure trade and goods from the East was vital to the island nation. The importance of trade, which at that time was still predominantly done by ship, made the Suez Canal a key strategic point. These factors combined to make Palestine a key strategic region and Haifa and its deep-water port among the most important cities in the region. In this way, Haifa was different from the surrounding region of Palestine. Haifa was able to become a “haven of employment” for unskilled Arab laborers in Palestine and the surrounding region due to the intense building projects initiated by both the British and Zionist Organization (Z.O.) at a time when Arabs were facing intense competition for jobs coupled with the loss of opportunity due to the overall focus on Jewish Labor (Seikaly, 50). These same reasons made Haifa a focal point for Jewish development and employment as exemplified when the Histadrut was founded there in 1920.

By 1930, the British had created the Master Plan for Haifa in consideration of the intense industrial development and changing demographics but which also highlighted British Imperial aims. The British goal, in-line with their policy for the Mandate, was to create a city that was self-supporting and that would be as small of a burden as possible for Britain. The British made development of Haifa a priority in the region. The newly created Hijaz railroad, the subsequent construction of the Iraqi Petroleum Company oil

\textsuperscript{18} The British invaded and occupied Basra in 1914, demonstrating the importance and primacy that oil had to British foreign policy. (Bruce Westrate, \textit{The Arab Bureau: British Policy in the Middle East; 1916-20})
refinery in conjunction with the newly completed (1934) oil pipeline, and the
development of the harbor all reflected this intense focus. As for the changing
demographics, by 1933 68% of immigrants into Palestine were coming through the port
of Haifa (Seikaly, 74). The influx of German-Jewish immigrants who had been mostly
employed in industry during the 1930’s provided not only a skilled labor force but forced
the focus of the Z.O. from agriculture toward heavy industry.

The biggest challenge for the British was the fact that the ultimate decisions for
Haifa were made in Jerusalem which complicated the ability of the British Mandate
officials to know for sure the situation on the ground. The inability of the British to create
an informed plan for the development of the city gave the Zionist Organization the
opportunity to weigh heavily on the decisions and policies in respect to development for
Haifa. The distance of the British Mandate authorities from the quickly industrializing
city of Haifa allowed for a heavy local influence from those the British trusted. In fact,
the influence of the Zionist Organization proved to be decisive in the final form of the
city. One last point to examine in regard to the development of Haifa was the presence of
independent Zionist groups such as the Z.O. and the aid they were able to offer to Jewish
immigrants and building projects. The aid offered by these groups was something that
placed the Jewish community of Haifa at an advantage over the Arab population. The
ability of the Zionist Organization and the Jewish community to weigh in on the policy of
the British Mandate officials “made clear to all” that Haifa had great potential for the
development of the Jewish economic sector (Seikaly, 63). The intensified development of
Haifa by the British greatly benefited the Jewish sector of the population due to the fact
that the British placed a premium on developing new areas of the city which benefited the
new European Jewish immigrants the most. The bureaucratic process was extremely slow moving which lent itself to de-facto construction projects, a process that would be repeated throughout Palestine.

The events of 1929 brought to the forefront the frustrations of the Arab community in Haifa for both the British and the Zionists. The British had largely ignored the Arab community for various reasons but when projects were enacted for the Arab community the British expected gratitude in return. The presence of large numbers of unskilled Arabs employed in heavy industry combined with large numbers of new Jewish immigrants who were skilled in labor impressed upon the PCP the need for activity in Haifa.
THE YEARS OF ARABIZATION, 1929-1936

The activities of the Party were better organized and more effective in urban centers particularly due to the use of new banners, slogans, and hunger strikes which all proved to be very successful in helping the PCP to have some success in Haifa. It is here that the early resistance poets were especially helpful in teaching the people the slogans and terms that the communists used in their literature, particularly the use of “red” imagery (Suleiman, 126-127). The Party also began an advocacy campaign on behalf of the Arab laborers which included abolition of child labor which was common at that point, the right to organized Arab labor unions, a land distribution scheme aimed at peasants, the enactment of an eight-hour work day, some type of government aid for the unemployed, parity of wages with Jewish counterparts, and government regulation of working conditions. These demands helped to open up the Arab community to the Party but these calls by the PCP were also aimed at the other dominant forces in Haifa, the Histadrut and the Arab nationalist leadership (Budeiri, 53). The Party had already come out against the Arab nationalist leadership in Palestine due to their identifying the Arab leadership with the interests of the capitalist and bourgeoisie classes. These critiques included actual condemnation of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Supreme Muslim Council due to their being seen as using ethnic issues to turn the people away from the
struggle against British imperialism. The work of the Histradut was confined to the Jewish community despite some similarities in position. The Party viewed the Histradut as the biggest obstacle to overcome due to the militant and public measures taken by the organization to enforce the ideas of Jewish Labor which included picketing against hiring Arab workers.

So the period following the Wailing Wall riots saw a new focus on urban Arab laborers on the part of the Palestine Communist Party but the period also witnessed the rise of hostility from the Yishuv and a decrease in both Jewish membership and activity in the Jewish community. Despite this, the Party refused to cede the entire Jewish community and did attempt reforming the community from within the Zionist labor groups. The unrest in places like Haifa and Jaffa along with the transforming of the structure of the Party to accommodate Arab leadership helped to attract more militant Arabs. The gradual integration of these more militant Arabs along with educated Arab youth who were attracted by the calls for social justice gives insight into the internal make-up of the Party in the years leading up to 1936. The attempt to bring in the more radical components of the Arab population was in line with the Party’s claims of “Feudal Fragmentation” leveled against the European powers and their division of the land. By this I mean that the PCP, in light of their interpretation of the European powers goals for the region, which included using the national bourgeoisie as intermediaries toward imperial domination. That analysis by the Party placed an emphasis on attracting the members of the Istiqal and the Arab Youth Congress, which were both identified as

---

19 The claim by the PCP was that the European powers had divided up the countries in such a way as to “deprive the countries of the pre-requisites for economic independence and unification” and that the colonial powers used the clerics (Grand Mufti and the Supreme Muslim Council) and national bourgeoisie (in this case the Zionist) to keep the country from uniting in any meaningful way (Budeire, 73).
being more radical in nature.\textsuperscript{20} When strikes broke out in 1933, the \textit{Istiqlal} radical wing and the Arab Youth Congress played important roles but the PCP militants also played a prominent role demonstrating that cooperation between these groups was beginning to be successful. The strikes in 1933 were also important due to the anti-colonial nature of the attacks. The main targets for the attacks were the British and not the Jewish workers.

Following the rise of Hitler in Nazi Germany in 1933, Palestine saw intensified migration into places like Haifa due in part to the nature of the immigrants who tended to be urban-orientated and employed in industry. The period from 1933 until 1936 saw an average of 31,000 Jews a year immigrating into the land (McCarthy, 34). To give some indication of the impact of Jewish immigration had in changing the overall demographic patterns in Palestine Jews as an ethnic group made up roughly 20\% of the population but by 1939 made up 30\% of the overall population, which reflected a near doubling of their demographic group (McCarthy, 36). The intensified migration during this period helps to explain the rising tensions that would eventually erupt in the violence of 1936. During this period the PCP continued its calls for ending the Jewish migration into the land. So just prior to the outbreak of violence in 1936 the PCP had found itself in a position where it was allied to the nationalist revolutionary groups, increasingly isolated from the Jewish community, and beginning to have partial success among the nascent Arab labor movement. But the continued loss of land in the rural regions of Palestine combined with the ever-growing unemployment in the urban centers led to deterioration of living conditions and severe economic hardships for much of the Arab population.

\textsuperscript{20} The \textit{Istiqlal} movement, or \textit{Hizb al-Istiqlal al-‘Arabi} (The Arab Independence Party), was the public face of the \textit{al-Fatat} which in turn was the party of Amir Faysal’s pan-Arab movement (Muslih, 132).
THE YEARS OF CONFLICT, 1936-1939

The events that led to the start of the Great Arab Revolt are something of a contested issue. In November of 1935 ‘Azz al-Din al-Qassam was killed along with some followers in a cave in the north of Palestine at the hands of the British Mandate authorities and there was a subsequent discovery of a Jewish arms shipment in October at the Port of Jaffa (Budeiri, 91). In early spring of 1936 a series of events occurred that signaled the escalation of violence which started in February, when a group of Arabs surrounded a school being built by Jewish laborers, to April when Arabs attacked Jews in Jaffa. What is for certain is that in a very short period of time sectarian violence was witnessed in both the Jewish and Arab communities. Almost immediately calls were made for a national strike which was able to spread rapidly to other major cities and villages. The Arab elite groups, particularly those headed by ‘Amin al-Husayni, found themselves in a reactionary position and were caught unaware by the scope and speed of the revolt (Lockman, 240). The British had, as a result of the absence of any organized Arab front, felt that the Arab community was unable to organize any serious rebellion and as a result were astonished at the revolt (Townsend, 919). In May of 1936 a decision was taken in the Arab community to undertake the program of non-payment of taxes in an attempt at civil disobedience.
PHASE ONE, THE NATIONAL STRIKE

The position of the Party just prior to the outbreak of the violence was to attempt to align itself with any and all national Arab movements in order to bring about the transformation of the Party into a “mass organization” (Budeiri, 89). The attempts at opposition from within the Histadrut were also continued during this period by Jewish cadres, particularly calls for alignment with the Arab nationalist movement. In practical terms the attachment of the PCP to the Arab nationalist movement would mean close cooperation with the more traditional centers of power and the clerical elements headed by the Grand Mufti in Jerusalem. The decision of the PCP to transform itself into “an autonomous group within the framework of the Arab national movement” was a reflection to the fact that the Party realized that it could not lead the movement itself and that it instead needed to place itself in a position to influence policies and activities being undertaken by the united front. This feature of the PCP, to adapt itself and shift to different positions exemplifies the notion of community as one in which the borders and ideas of community are not fixed but instead, in response to the consciousness of the “insurgent”, adapt to the situation at hand (Chatterjee, 14).

The Party found itself in a position where it also was caught unawares by the general strike and subsequent outbreak of violence. The very fact that it and the elite
Arab leadership were both in positions of reaction instead of leadership demonstrated that neither of these groups had been truly successful in appealing to the interests of the majority of the participants in the events, the Arab peasantry. Instead, as Guha had argued for the anti-colonial struggle in India, the peasants fell back upon the already existing bonds of solidarity that were in place prior to both the arrival of the British and Zionist and did not simply react to those events. The fact that the Arab peasantry began to organize local revolutionary committees demonstrated the pre-eminence of traditional bonds of solidarity that displayed itself at the moment of crisis. The locally formed revolutionary committees also exhibit the horizontal organization that is a further hallmark of subaltern organizing. The armed groups began to appear almost immediately following the outbreak of the general strike and were the result of spontaneous grassroots organization (Swedenburg, 122). Another interesting example of the pre-eminence of traditional bonds in revolutionary movements was the use of the *faza* (alert). The use of the traditional call-to-arms of the Arab peasantry by the revolutionaries was an example of using a traditional “informal” practice and adapting it to modern needs through formalization (Swedenburg, 127).

The Palestine Communist Party had taken a hard stance towards the Arab-elite and the Zionist groups at the onset of the Revolt. Following the discovery of the arms cache in Jaffa and the killing of al-Qassam by the British, the PCP held a meeting to inform the people of its stance in regard to recent events. At this meeting, the Party denounced collaboration with the British and called for all Arab leaders to withdraw from

---

22 The rebel leadership during the revolt had a network of local informants who they used to both gather information and inform the populace of important issues. These informants often alerted the rebel commanders of impending land sales, troop movements, and collaborators (El Nimr, 165).
government service, demonstrating the pressure being applied to the Arab national leadership. Along with these calls though, the Party had attempted to call for non-violence as it viewed the situation as not ready for violent measure which the Comintern and the PCP itself felt would work against the larger anti-imperial struggle in the region. In regard to the Zionist groups, the Party’s position was more complicated since it officially viewed the Zionist movement as a whole and thus did not attempt to work with any portion of it, even the more revolutionary wing which could have helped the movement greatly (Budeiri, 93). Yet, there was still a segment of the PCP that viewed the role of the Party in Palestine in terms of helping to bring about a social revolution with Jew and Arab working together. The camp that felt strongly about this also rejected the idea that the Party should work exclusively toward national liberation and by extension work exclusively in the Arab movement. The split in the opinion of the cadres of the PCP led to the “two struggle camps” which were mostly split down ethnic lines and which members of the “camps” worked mostly in their respective communities. The split would have important implications for the Party and it would be along these lines that the PCP would eventually permanently split. The first official sign of that event was the establishment of the Jewish Section in 1937 (Budeiri, 99). Although at that time, the split was explained as organizational, in practical terms it meant that the Party had begun to realize that despite the previous years of cooperation, using the Jewish cadres was a futile and untenable position for the Jewish members of the Party and it would permanently split apart in 1943 (Budeiri, 114). The Jewish cadres had shown in practice they could not come to alienate themselves from the larger Yishuv by supporting the Arab revolt.
Since the Party had been surprised by the outbreak of events, it had also thought that the events would be short-lived and so when violence began to become widespread and more ethnic in nature the Party attempted to downplay those events. In the *Yishuv*, the Party attempted to convince the Jewish community of the importance of limiting immigration to forestall anti-Jewish sentiment and of working with the Arabs while at the same time the Party attempted to place the blame for anti-Jewish violence on the Jewish community itself and also seeing the violence as a natural phenomenon and outgrowth of the circumstances on the ground. The Party did however attempt to place the blame for the events turning ethnic in nature on the Arab leadership claiming that the nationalist leadership was subverting the goal of anti-imperial struggle for their personal aims and acting in a reactionary way. The Party had been very successful during the years of revolt in increasing its prestige with the Arab community through the reform of its policies and also the distance it placed between itself and the *Yishuv*.

The Party had also begun to take part in a small number of armed activities and in 1936 some of its members helped to place a bomb at a Histradut-run workers club in Haifa. That event placed the Party in a position where it now was under pressure from the British authorities and increasingly estranged from the *Yishuv*. It also attached two of its members, Nimr ‘Uda and Fuqad Nassar to the military command of the resistance further demonstrating the close role it intended to play in the Revolt (Beinin, 10).
PHASE TWO, INTENSIFIED VIOLENCE FROM JULY 1937-AUTUMN 1938

The British, in response to the insurgent activity in Palestine, sent the Royal Peel Commission into the land in order to find a solution to the violence. The Zionist leaders had, by the time of the arrival of the Royal Peel Commission in Palestine in late 1936, begun to endorse an unofficial policy of Arab transfer (Masalha, 54). That fact is important to note because the Zionist leadership tried tirelessly to influence the finding of the Peel Commission to reflect the Zionist desire for transfer, most likely to Transjordan. The Royal Peel Commission issued its finding in July of 1937 and suggested partition of Palestine and transfer of almost a quarter-million Arabs from their lands to make way for Jewish settlement (Masalha, 60). The Commission awarded the best land to the Zionist state despite the Arabs being given more actual land. The importance of the Royal Peel Commission’s findings to the present study was that the suggestions of the Peel Commission were rejected by the Arabs almost unanimously and the issuance of these recommendations by the British resulted in widespread peasant violence as the worst fears of the Arab peasantry had now been publicly acknowledged, the loss of land.
PHASE THREE, THE RENEWAL OF EFFORTS

By 1938, the British were fully on the offensive against the uprising in Palestine. Large numbers of the Party’s cadre were being arrested and deported to Moscow and those who were not were being forced underground. There had been a brief break in the violence with the British Royal Peel Commission’s work in 1937 but following the rejection of the partition scheme, things had begun to become active again. Violence would again become widespread in 1939 until the issuing of the British White Paper in which the British reversed their earlier position on Jewish immigration into Palestine and would now begin to take steps to limit it. The White Paper signaled to the Party that the period of Zionist-British collaboration was at an end (Budeiri, 105). The final period of the Great Arab Revolt witnessed intensified British persecution along with internal chaos and disorder as a result of the mass arrests, killings, and deportations that had occurred during the period (El Nimr, 230). A consequence of the Revolt was that the Party would eventually break with the Comintern due to a realization of the differences in policies and views between the two groups.
THE POETRY OF RESISTANCE

Ghassan Khanafani, poet and former member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, on recounting the events of the Great Arab Revolt, remarked on the importance of the popular resistance poetry in both informing the peasantry of Palestine and also in mobilizing them for action. He wrote “poetry and popular poetry accompanied the mass movement of the masses from the early 1930’s, expressing the developments that proceeded the outbreak of the revolt” (Kanafani, 17). In fact, it was through popular Arab poetry that the first warning against Zionist immigration into Palestine came about. Arab poetry, had been predominantly religious in nature up until about the end of the nineteenth century but with the rise of nationalisms and the unrest and turmoil being witnessed in the Ottoman Empire Arab poetry and poets began to take a more overtly political tone and position (‘Atawat, 109). For instance with the announcement of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 by the British the Lebanese poet Wadi al-Bustani (1886-1954) warned against the implications of the document and the impact it would have on the Arabs in the region. There were also the poets Ibrahim Tuqan (1905-1941), ‘Abd al-Karim al-Karmi (1907-1980), and ‘Abd al-Rahim Mahmud (1913-48) who were important in the period for giving voice to the frustrated masses but also for carrying on the tradition of Arab resistance poetry. Their poetry attempted to warn the
Arab masses to the dangers they faced from British colonialism and Zionism (‘Atawat, 127). ‘Abd al-Karim al-Karmi, also known as Abu Salma, had practiced law in Haifa until 1948 when he was forced to flee first to Acre then eventually to Syria (Jayyusi, 94). He is important not only for his poetry during this period but also for his work in helping to spread leftist (يسارية) ideology into Palestine (Suleiman, 126). Abu Salma had been in a position to witness the work of the PCP in Haifa and also to witness the plight of the Arab laborers and peasants who had been fighting a losing battle for equality with Jewish workers. The link to Haifa is important since Haifa had been “the scene of intense labour activity during the period” (Seikaly, 133). Although not exclusively a poet, his use of the classical form of Arab resistance, poetry, in bringing attention to the plight of the peasantry and country and of linking this poetry to the Arab labor movement was important for giving a level of cultural authenticity to the work of the Party. The poet as a provocative force in Arab culture is a concept that finds its roots in pre-Islamic times. In fact, it has been argued that poets in the Arab world tend to be more active in the social, political, and national movements than most other national actors (Frangieh, 222). Below is an excerpt from a short work by Abu Salma in which he talks of the mass mobilization of the people and of the dangers of immigration:

لنا دول، ليتها لم تكن مطايا وأذناب مستعمرين
و جائعة، لم تزل دمية يخفى إليها الرحمين اللعين
تسير على جانبينا الشعوب ونحن أمام صباح المبين
We have countries, however we wish they were not due to the shame we feel as a result of being used and taken advantage of as though we were the colonists’ tails.

And as for the people, they are still played with as though they were puppets that they accursed Devil couldn’t have conjured better.

We are like a flowing river with people residing on either side of us, and yet we do see the light of hope ahead.

From “Palestine” by ‘Abd al-Karim al-Karmi
CONCLUSIONS

The Palestine Communist Party struggled for much of its existence to overcome the ethnic problems that were unique to it. On final judgment, the PCP was never truly successful in its goal of Arabization. There were, without a doubt, small successes but the overall failure of the Party to integrate more Arabs into key positions kept the Party weak and somewhat illegitimate in the eyes of the Arab peasants and allowed for the Arab nationalist leadership to assume the role of national lead. The attempts of the PCP to reach the peasantry were also met with mixed results. Although some of the problems in regard to outreach among the peasant majority of Palestine rest with the Party itself, there were also internal issues that needed to be considered. The ability of the peasant consciousness to take and use concepts from different areas of their environment reflected the heterogeneous nature of the peasant consciousness which aided the efforts of the PCP in some ways (Arnold, 29). The peasantry, particularly those who had migrated to urban centers in search of employment and as a result of their closeness to the Zionist project and employment in newer heavy industries, were more open to the ideas of the PCP. But the Party was less successful in reaching the rural peasantry at the early stages of the Revolt due to the predominance of long-standing traditional bonds and local historical alliances, which in times of crisis was what the peasants fell back upon.
But the Great Arab Revolt of 1936-1939 was truly important due to it being the key event that would bring the PCP and leftist ideology into a positive position with the Arab peasantry. The period immediately following the Revolt saw large numbers of new members, particularly among the educated Arab youth. Although the Party split along ethnic lines, the new parties were in a position to better serve their respective communities.

The Jewish communists who came to Palestine in the early twentieth century found themselves in a unique situation. There was an almost complete lack of an organized proletariat or even a class-conscious population. They were coming, for the most part, from industrialized societies where they were made to feel alien to a society in which agriculture was the basis of economic life and where they felt they could create a new society in which they themselves would be master despite lacking the agricultural skill early on. The Arab peasant, on the other hand, was witness to a situation where every aspect of life was being transformed by outside forces. New modes of livelihood had to be sought, new centers of power were being established, and old-ways of life were being erased and this caused the Arab peasant try to cope with the new situation as best they could. By seeking traditional bonds of kinship and societal organization, the Arab peasants in Palestine were able to have a hand in forming and shaping the new reality they found themselves in.

The Palestine Communist Party, despite its failure at Arabization, is an important part of the story of Palestinian nationalism. Although Jewish in make-up for most of its early existence, the PCP recognized the numerical predominance of the Arab peasant in the land and of the potential power that it could wield. The PCP was among the only
groups to reach out to the peasant and the adherence to this policy helped to bring about its demise following the Great Arab Revolt. The present study has attempted to place the peasant and the members of the PCP into something more than an “object” without a voice or conscious thought. (Pratterjee, 39) The Party members were active members of the societies they found themselves in and the more-dominant groups in Palestine were forced to consider and interact with them due to the power that they were able to wield. The insight and experience gained from the Great Arab Revolt would serve the Palestinian national cause for years to come.
WORKS CITED:


Periodicals:


