

# the fight for Palestine

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Eleanor Roosevelt was an American Hero. She had overcome great personal adversity by the time she read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1948. The occasion represented the pinnacle of her life's work as an esteemed humanitarian. The title, "First Lady of the World", bestowed upon her by President Harry Truman was considered well deserved in view of her efforts for social justice and the protection of minorities — for those whose lives had been shattered by the Great Depression, for African Americans and for European Jewry when it was targeted by Hitler.

While the stories of the years of her marriage to Franklin Delano Roosevelt have attracted the attention of historians and resulted in numerous scholarly and popular works, the post-White House period has been thus far neglected. It is this latter stage that my research considers. It is acknowledged that her efforts during those early years have made her worthy of the high esteem in which she is held. However, from 1946 onwards, her ardent support of the cause of the Zionists for the creation of the state of Israel reveals a blindspot in her thinking, for it meant that the rights of the native Palestinians were ignored. Such disregard conflicts with her heroic reputation and has not been previously recognised. Perhaps by considering the cultural influences of her times, an understanding of this paradox can be gleaned

At present it seems that the Americans, more than most, like to have their heroes and their myths. Accounts of benevolence accompany periods of hegemony and serve to legitimise it. While mythology is built upon grains of truths it does not usually stand up to thorough scrutiny. Eleanor Roosevelt, although voted by *Time* magazine to be of the most influential women of the twentieth century, nevertheless still had her follies and foibles, and personified the biases and prejudices that were part of the US discourse. This became apparent in her disregard for the "Oriental" people of Palestine — a phenomenon which was coined as Orientalism by Edward Said. This is a form of cultural outlook that includes aspects of racism; it attributes certain negative racial characteristics to a whole body of people and allows the beholder to feel superior. Typically to the Westerner of an Orientalist lien, those living east of Greece are irrational, sensual, demonic, untrustworthy and incapable of self-governance.

Such racist views were commonly held amongst her aristocratic peers: African-Americans generally were visible only as servants, anti-Semitism was rife and Orientalism was subliminally absorbed by the mainstream. That she rose above much of this is attributable

to her own identification with the excluded. Despite her privileges, her childhood was forlorn as she endured the abuses of her parents' flawed union: those of a cold distracted mother who measured a woman's worth by her beauty and of a drug addicted and alcoholic father. Bereft as an orphan by the age of ten, Eleanor Roosevelt tried to fill the emotional gaps in her life by pleasing others. Her diminished self-esteem hungered for approbation. She struggled later to satisfy her domineering mother-in-law by being a dutiful wife to Franklin Delano Roosevelt but was rewarded only by marital infidelity. For her this had been a shattering discovery. That she had just cause to feel excluded is a valid assumption.

As family had failed her, she threw her enormous energy into her work. Her attempts to give voice to the silenced amongst the marginalised Americans were naturally followed by efforts to alleviate Jewish suffering after the Holocaust. There was obvious appeal in that, as a widow with great prestige after 1945, she could work to assist the Jews in Europe's Displaced Persons' Camps to fulfil their dreams of a Palestine homeland. However she did receive powerful warnings from well-placed and informed members of the US State Department that the resolution of the 100,000 refugees in Europe was likely to create another and numerically far greater displacement in Palestine. That she could not see or did not care is puzzling.

## **Supporting Zionism**

The Zionists had long campaigned for an independent homeland in their Promised Land. In 1917, because it suited the British war agenda, Lord Balfour declared their aspirations as a feasible project which His Majesty's Government could support despite the fact that Sir Henry McMahon had already given the same promise of possession of Palestine to the Arabs in 1915. Although, through the millennia, the Jews had suffered the fate of the social pariah, it was as a result of the Holocaust that Eleanor Roosevelt's Christian conscience was activated to atone for this neglect and for her it became a blinding crusade. She adopted a moral stance bound up with the Balfour "promise" and tacit American support from each President, starting with Woodrow Wilson in 1917. This was despite changed circumstances in Palestine through to 1947, when the campaign for partition reached its zenith. Her support of the Zionist rationale, that Jews would only be secure from harassment in a sovereign state of their own, has certain logic. Yet her work within the UN had provided the opportunity to be fully conversant with the interests and concerns of those seeking self-determination, as was large parts of the colonial world. The conflicts in Palestine between the Jewish settlers and the native Arab Palestinians, who sought affirmation of their majority rights, had been well aired.

Eleanor Roosevelt was able to overlook the Arabs voices who protested that the Holocaust had not been of their making, therefore its problems should not be for them to resolve.

Because Palestinians had already had to accept 600,000 Jewish immigrants, they argued that it was the turn of the Westerners, who articulated such concern for the Jewish plight, to take their share. Their view was disregarded. Their representatives in the Arab National League refused to accept the majority decision of the General Assembly and long warned of the violence that would be the result of the forced partition of Palestine. When David Ben Gurion announced the creation of the State of Israel, on 15 May 1948, the civil war which had been waging between the Arab Palestinians and the Jewish settlers turned into an international conflict with the invasion of Palestine by the joint forces of Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Transjordan. The Israeli victory generated the 700,000 Palestinian refugees who were to languish in appalling conditions in camps for decades.

Eleanor Roosevelt's attitude towards the Palestinians begs questions of her renowned humanitarianism. One aspect of her industriousness was the dissemination of her views through journalism. It is in the often hastily written and therefore somewhat unguarded statements of her daily "My Day" columns which reveal certain blindspots that can only be explained through an Orientalist framework.

Her constant references to the positive attributes of the Jewish immigrants, their integrity as a people, their industriousness in making the "desert bloom" in Palestine, their tenacity in the face of adversity, demonstrated her clear favouritism. Even when their paramilitary forces blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946 ensuring multiple fatalities, or when they assassinated Count Bernadotte, the UN mediator in 1948, she was unable to condemn these actions. Instead she offered exculpatory explanations as her biases were demonstrated.

## Opposing voices

Palestinian concerns were dismissed with platitudes as she hoped, that further to a fait accompli and the establishment of Israel, they would "quieten down". She wrote that the usurpation of their homeland by the Jews "will not hurt the Arabs, in fact they will profit by it, but we do not always like what is good for us in this world".

Amongst her files there are some poignant letters written from Palestine. Following the Deir Yessin massacre on 12 April 1948, in which 250 Palestinian villagers were murdered by Jewish forces, Wadad Dabbagh appealed to Eleanor Roosevelt for help as she had heard her speeches and was confident in her advocacy of justice. Her letter was respectful and considered as she described the atrocities being perpetrated on the unwitting and the innocent. However, her concerns were dismissed as Eleanor Roosevelt told her that these things happen in wars and that the Arabs were protesting "wrongly", as she believed that they ought to have acquiesced to the UN decision. Further correspondence revealed that this had not been the humanitarian response that Ms Dabbagh had been expecting.

American citizens, too, wrote to her to express their concerns. Lydia Bacon had had some experience in the Middle East. She believed that it was wrong to partition a state as small as Vermont. She recounted instances of prior American injustices towards non-white people: the Mexicans, the American-Indians and the African-Americans. She asked that “if Americans feel so badly for the Jews, why do we not give them one of our states? How can we give away another’s country?” In her column, Eleanor Roosevelt ridiculed this thought as “funny”. She argued that the citizens of a US state could not be arbitrarily displaced, and she put it to the author that she had not given her position much thought. She was countered by another perturbed citizen, who wrote that the comparison between Eleanor Roosevelt’s support for the usurpation of territory in Palestine from the Palestinians, in favour of the Jews, was identical with the analogy proposed by Ms Bacon, which Eleanor Roosevelt had described as thoughtless.

The Truman administration considered reversing its own vote, which had supported the partition of Palestine, in view of the continued turmoil and bloodshed there and the impracticality of enforcing the division. Such threat to the prestige of the UN as a decision-making body almost caused Eleanor Roosevelt’s resignation. For her, it was paramount for the UN recommendation to be enforced if the organisation was to be an effective force for peace. In this instance, the human rights of Palestinians, who formed a majority in their country, were secondary. The schism that her resignation would effect, whatever about undermining the UN, would certainly undermine the President’s potential for re-election. Truman’s swift and assuaging response prevented that cataclysm. And thus did the vagaries of US domestic politics undermine the Palestinian rights. This was not the stuff from which heroes or humanitarians were made.

In order to ensure the successful enforcement of partition, Eleanor Roosevelt herself had previously written to the Secretary of State, George Marshall, who, on the advice of such policy advisers as George Kennan of the Policy Planning Staff and Loy Henderson of the Division of Near Eastern Affairs, opposed hasty action. These experienced policy-makers argued that the turbulence in the Middle East acted against US interests. However Eleanor Roosevelt brushed aside their concerns and urged a lifting of the US imposed arms embargo in order that the Jewish community in Palestine could be equipped to adequately fight the Arabs. She also sought US tanks and planes to subdue them. In his rebuttal, the former US World War II general reminded her of the humanitarian aspects of the delicate problems affecting the beleaguered country. The irony of an army general having to discreetly recommend peaceful measures to a humanitarian is profound and further reveals the dichotomy.

There is no doubt that Eleanor Roosevelt devoted herself to assisting the plight of society’s victims. However it appears to be only to those who were either immediately visible to her within American society, such as the African-Americans, or to those with whose culture she could identify, that her sympathies were extended. She admired the industrious efforts

of the Jews in Palestine and the zeal with which the American Zionists approached their cause. This harmonised with her own Protestant work ethic and with her perception of the advantages of American-style development abroad. She appears to have had little contact with Arabs and no understanding of their culture. The Palestinians, because they were distant and were perceived to possess all of those negative “Oriental” attributes, could be dismissed as unworthy — their plight largely of their own making. She thus accepted the racist stereotypical portrayals of the East that were current in the America of her era. That those views were not universally shared amongst her peers and amongst the public reveals Eleanor Roosevelt’s limitations and exposes aspects of her character which allowed actions/interactions that have not been previously investigated or analysed.

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