Perusing JPS’s fifty years of documenting Palestinian history, this essay reminds us that history is both “what happened” as well as “the narration of what happened.” Anchoring his selection in that perspective, Alex Winder identifies Charles Anderson’s “State Formation from Below and the Great Revolt in Palestine” (2017) as a JPS “hidden gem,” and Tarif Khalidi’s “Palestinian Historiography: 1900–1948” (1981) as a “greatest hit.” Relying on primary sources by participants in the rebellion and highlighting the history of the revolt, Anderson shifts the focus of traditional accounts of the revolt from the mostly ineffective role of Palestinian notables and elites to the successes of the rebels. In a similar vein, Khalidi’s article paints a picture of a rich and vibrant Palestinian intellectual life in the first half of the twentieth century that reverses the conventional view of the colonized as reactive and of the colonizer as the primary agent of history.
counterinsurgency decimated the Palestinian political leadership (via imprisonment, exile, and assassination), as well as the population at large (via mass detention; restrictions on movement; the despoliation of food and other household supplies; and the demolition of homes, neighborhoods, and infrastructure—what Anderson has elsewhere called the “destruction of everyday life”). In “State Formation from Below,” however, he argues that the revolt’s importance should also be located in the rebels’ success—however short-lived—in building a counterstate infrastructure that sustained the uprising and organized its supporters in a bid for Palestinian liberation.

This success becomes particularly visible as Anderson shifts the focus away from the (largely ineffective) elite leadership of the Arab Higher Committee, and the tensions between the Husaynis and the Nashashibis, and toward the workers, peasants, and youth activists who were the lifeblood of the revolt. These groups came together in the decentralized network of national committees that enforced the general strike in 1936 and also mobilized communities and managed resources as the strike stretched on month after month, from April until October.

Examining the second part of the revolt, Anderson turns his attention to the system of justice established by Palestinian insurgents, “in many ways the crown jewel of rebel self-organization and institutional development.” This rebel court system dealt with matters of discipline among the rebellion’s armed forces and with other exigencies, but it also served the broader Palestinian population, resolving disputes of all kinds. Despite its decentralized nature and resulting unevenness, the rebel justice system articulated a vision of justice rooted in preexisting Palestinian social practices but also striving toward a liberated future. In both respects, it allowed Palestinians engaged in the uprising “to display their concern for the lives of the common people and to show their solidarity with the downtrodden rural majority.” It is this positive vision of Palestinian society as much as that society’s opposition to British imperial power and Zionist settler colonialism that made the Great Revolt such a landmark event in Palestinian history.

Anderson’s fine-grained analysis of the revolt illuminates its particularities, but his framing also works to de-exceptionalize Palestine and the Palestinians. Palestinians looked across the borders imposed by European powers after World War I and saw protests in Egypt winning the reinstatement of the constitution from British colonial rulers, and a general strike in Syria winning negotiations with French colonial officials. Zionism imposed unique circumstances on Palestinians, but it did not sever their natural integration into a larger regional milieu. Further, contra the Orientalist construction of Arabs generally and Palestinians in particular as inherently violent, easily manipulated by corrupt and antidemocratic leadership (as represented by Haj Amin al-Huseini), and riven by internecine feuding, Anderson shows the dynamics that characterized the Great Revolt to be consistent with those found in peasant uprisings and processes of state formation elsewhere (as described by Eric Wolf and Charles Tilley, respectively). The revolt’s inability to expel Britain or its Zionist protégés from Palestine is not, in Anderson’s analysis, due to some unique failing of the Palestinians, but to “the vastly superior forces—military, police, and Zionist auxiliaries totaling over twenty-five thousand men, plus armored units, artillery batteries, and the RAF [Royal Air Force]—arrayed against the insurgents.” Palestinians were not incapable, they were simply outgunned.

One of the strengths of “State Formation from Below” is its effective use of the contemporary and post-hoc analysis of the Great Revolt by its Palestinian participants, including Bahjat Abu Gharbiyya, Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza, ‘Isa al-Sifri, Subhi Yasin, and Akram Zu‘aytir. This is not just a matter of mining underutilized sources for additional data, but of giving due attention to Palestinians’ narration of what happened, of taking seriously Palestinian history in both
meanings of the word. The appreciation of Palestinians’ historical production in “State Building from Below” is something the article shares with Tarif Khalidi’s “Palestinian Historiography: 1900–1948,” a “greatest hit” published in the Spring 1981 issue of *JPS*.10

In “Palestinian Historiography,” Khalidi seeks to “distinguish and assess the particular cultural reflexes”11 of Palestinians in the first half of the twentieth century, pushing back against the notion that this was a period of “Arab cultural barrenness”12 that followed the florescence associated with the nineteenth-century Nahda. Khalidi describes history as “something of a national pastime”13 among Palestinians during the Mandate period, and the desire to document an existence erased in colonial narratives aroused a “passionate intensity”14 in this historical writing. The sociocultural environment of Mandate Palestine—“the network of cultural relationships and the diffusion of cultural institutions”15—and the pressing political question of Zionist colonization shaped the agents, avenues, and attitude of Palestinian knowledge production, as Palestinian intellectuals flocked to “declamatory professions” in law, education, and journalism. Khalidi thus gives readers a sense of the vibrant intellectual atmosphere of Palestine during the Mandate, providing a kind of annotated bibliography of significant works that emerged during this period.

Perhaps most notable, however, is the way Khalidi’s discussion of Palestinian knowledge production in the first half of the twentieth century resonates with what we might call the “Indigenous turn” in Palestinian studies.16 Following the reemergence of settler colonialism as a framework for understanding dynamics in Palestine, from the late nineteenth century to the present, scholars have also begun to challenge the way certain uses of this framework continue to relegate the colonized to a reactive position, whose actions and identities are legible only in relation to the colonizer, which continues to be the primary agent of history.17 This has prompted a further effort to make Palestinian Indigeneity, rather than Zionist settler colonialism, the structuring analytic—a move that, as Rana Barakat argues elsewhere, offers “a potential framework that takes into account the settler-colonial studies analytic and the Native/settler binary as one of many points of departure in a larger quest toward indigenous knowledge production.”18

Khalidi’s article provides insight into the kinds of Indigenous knowledge production taking place in Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century.19 Certainly, much of the intellectual output is concerned with Zionism’s settler-colonial project, but it also exceeds the colonial frame. The texts that Khalidi addresses in “Palestinian Historiography” not only work to document Palestinian Indigeneity—as in Father A. S. Marmarji’s *Buldaniyyat Filastin al-‘arabiyya*, a “monumental topographical historical dictionary of Arab Palestine,”20 or the studies of Tawfiq Canaan, Stephan Hanna Stephan, and ‘Umar al-Salih al-Barghuthi, whose ethnographic works speak, according to Khalidi, in “the voice of the cultural historian striving to show the Semitic roots of the Palestinian peasant as an ancient and continuous occupier of the land”21—but lead us toward recovering Indigenous Palestinian epistemologies. Some of the most important and innovative work in Palestinian studies continues to revisit the works of Palestinian scholars from the first half of the twentieth century not only as records of the past, but to generate new ways of approaching and interpreting that past.22 Finally, Khalidi’s article is in itself an example of the crucial role that *JPS* has played in making Indigenous Palestinian knowledge production available to an anglophone audience.

As both these articles affirm, Palestinians have waged their battles physically in the cities, villages, and countryside of Palestine, and discursively in the textbooks, newspapers, scholarly journals, lectures, and histories that they wrote. They drew their strength from
individual and collective efforts across society: activists as well as intellectuals, elites and professionals, as well as workers and peasants. These struggles were not merely reactive, resisting the settler-colonial impulse toward the elimination of the Indigenous; instead, they were proactive, calling forth institutions to remake Palestinian society as its insurgents hoped they might ultimately be able to do, and writing histories that connected Palestinians inextricably to the land of Palestine and to the larger history of the Arab people. Anderson and Khalidi, each in his own way, present Palestinians as both subjects and objects of history, as active agents in both what happened and that which is said to have happened. This is no small thing and, within a broader constellation of institutions and individuals engaged in the endeavor, JPS has for half a century played a crucial role in “writing Palestinians into history.”

About the Author

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Endnotes

1. I draw this phrasing from Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who continues: “The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process.” Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 2.


16. As Makere Stewart-Harawira writes, there is nothing new about the idea that Indigenous people conduct research . . . Arguably what might be new, at least as far as the last thirty or so years are concerned, is the formalizing and positioning of Indigenous research as both an act of re-claiming Indigenous sovereignty and authority and as an anti-colonial process of engagement by Indigenous scholars and researchers with mainstream, western science, an engagement that is transforming western research. At the same time, Indigenous researchers claim their ways of knowing and doing research as valid, legitimate and essential ways of understanding and interpreting the world.