Social History

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rshi20

Diamonds and War. State, Capital, and Labor in British-Ruled Palestine

Sherene Seikaly a

a The American University in Cairo

Available online: 22 Feb 2012

To cite this article: Sherene Seikaly (2012): Diamonds and War. State, Capital, and Labor in British-Ruled Palestine, Social History, 37:1, 107-108

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2011.651610

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
radicalism in its wider intellectual and socio-political environments. The book is well written and can be recommended to a scholarly as well as a broader audience.

Christoph Schumann
University of Erlangen-Nürnberg
© 2012, Christoph Schumann
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2012.651866

David De Vries, Diamonds and War. State, Capital, and Labor in British-Ruled Palestine (2010), 382 (Berghahn Books, Oxford and New York, £56.00/$95.00).

David De Vries provides a detailed study that explores the relationship between the state and Jewish private capitalists in British-ruled Palestine. Departing from conventional historical accounts that dismiss the political and economic importance of capitalists in favour of the labour Zionist narration of the period, De Vries reveals the interdependence of yishuv (the statutory Jewish community in Palestine) diamond manufacturers and the British imperial and colonial enterprise. The story unfolds in the period of the Second World War when the industry took off in Palestine due to the shutdown of the diamond hub of Antwerp in Nazi-occupied Belgium. British imperial interest met with that of Jewish diamond industrialists, and in particular the ‘dictatorial’ figure of Oved Ben-Ami, who headed the Palestine Diamond Manufacturers Association (PDMA).

From 1939 to 1946 a prosperous industry consolidated in the cities of Tel Aviv and Netanya and functioned as a PDMA-run monopoly. The dominant labour union of the Histadrut competed with five other unions for the allegiances of diamond cutters. Diamond labourers organized some of the most effective and sweeping general strikes in British-ruled Palestine. Throughout this short period, the diamond industrialists avoided the ‘triangular thread’ of Zionist institutional and labour structures. Its main ally and reference was the British colonial state. As the war came to an end European support for the Antwerp hub’s recovery, alongside the escalating political cost of remaining in Palestine, together drove British divestment from the diamond industry. De Vries here provides one of his most insightful contributions: the British colonial state was not a passive bystander; it took an active part in a process that was critical to Zionist capitalism, Israeli state-building and the state–private capital relationship.

De Vries ends his story with a call to attend to the continuity of the erosion of labour’s power in the face of a consolidated alliance between capitalists and the state. Yet the case of the diamond industry reveals the multiple ways in which the Histadrut took part in the consolidation of a liberal–capitalist order. De Vries reveals how the Histadrut’s post-war role in restraining diamond workers brought it closer to both the PDMA and the para-state Zionist institutions. He could have said much more about how the Histadrut itself participated in the erosion of labour’s power. In addition, De Vries goes a long way towards deconstructing the understandings of capitalists as ‘compradors’ as opposed to critical actors in state-building. However, De Vries falters and, at times, presents capitalism and nationalism as oppositional; criticizing this approach seems to be one of his most important aims.

De Vries builds on and contributes to the literature that uncovers the inter-war and wartime periods as critical in forming the state–capital relationship. Despite his passing point that this
case ‘resembled the role of the state in the formation of capitalism in various parts of the Middle East’, the study emerges as a primarily European and yishuv story (181). Had De Vries better situated the diamond industry in its Middle Eastern context he would have revealed the continuities and ruptures his case offers. He would have also been able to address the colonial-settler framework that defined Zionist ideas and practices in Palestine. This is an important and thorough study that will speak to students and scholars of economic thought, labour history, colonialism, capitalism and British-ruled Palestine.

Sherene Seikaly
The American University in Cairo
© 2012, Sherene Seikaly
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2011.651610

Caitlin E. Murdock, Changing Places: Society, Culture and Territory in the Saxon-Bohemian Borderlands, 1870–1946 (2010), x + 275 (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, $75.00).

Caitlin Murdock’s book examines the fluid, constructed nature of regional, national and state identities and borders in a complex frontier society experiencing profound changes due to industrialization, war, state-building and economic crises. She demonstrates that even in periods with strict state surveillance and vocal nationalist activism, powerful local traditions and practices can promote the permeability of borders, thereby allowing the movement of peoples, goods and ideas across them and creating distinct transnational regions that challenge national and state classifications. She makes a valuable contribution to the history of state–society relations, arguing that ‘State power, territorial identity, and population mobility . . . were not simply dictated by central governments but were the product of constant negotiation between regional actors and their states’ (13).

Murdock draws her evidence from the central European borderlands zone encompassing the southern reaches of Saxony, a one-time independent state incorporated into the German Reich in 1871, and the northern stretch of Bohemia, a province of the Habsburg monarchy until 1918 when it was integrated into the new state of Czechoslovakia. This area in Bohemia constituted part of what became called the Sudetenland after 1918. Even with maps, the reach of Murdock’s Saxon-Bohemian borderlands is not always clear, especially when she draws examples from the southern Bohemian town of České Budějovice/Budweis or the northern Saxon city of Leipzig. Points in the book provide glimpses of everyday life in the Saxon-Bohemian borderlands, although a focused, detailed presentation of landscape and traditions there could better illuminate the cultural ingredients of the fluctuating identities in this diverse transnational region. Further description of tourist activities mentioned could reveal more about the symbolic worlds in which these frontier people lived.

Murdock discusses the diversity characterizing the Bohemian side of the borderlands. German speakers predominated, but there were also Czech speakers and bilingual residents who in their everyday lives spoke both Czech and German, depending on their activities and encounters. Many residents, regardless of their language use, were indifferent to national identity even after the First World War. Further, while some northern Bohemians felt loyalties