



## Article

# The Toynbee Affair at 100: The Birth of 'World History' and the Long Shadow of the Interwar Liberal *Imaginaire*

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**Abstract:** Functioning as “precedent” and “templates” for future transfers, the Greco-Turkish population exchange and the Lausanne Treaty) are undoubtedly events of world-historical significance. But they are also crucial in the genesis of the subfield of historical research we now call “World History”: they provided the backdrop against which Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889–1975) began sketching his magnum opus, *A Study of History* and developed the foundations of this subfield of history writing. This article revisits the so-called “Toynbee Affair” and places it in its intellectual and political contexts. First, it revisits the British classicist scholarship that provided the backdrop and initial inspiration for Toynbee as it shifted its gaze from ancient Rome to Greece, which was put forward as a better model for foreign and imperial policy. Next, it examines Toynbee’s wartime activities and shows that his attitudes towards the new states of Central Europe were based on principles that often stood in tension with his activities and views connected to the Middle East. During these years, Toynbee was an active participant in a discourse concerning the need to manage “mixed populations,” which moved to the forefront of a new form of internationalism, while also exposed to the writings of authors such as Oswald Spengler and Frederick J. Teggart, who pushed him to advance a new type of historiography. Third, the article looks at the uneven reception of Toynbee’s ideas after 1945, including his views on the US, the “Muslim civilization,” and his controversial views on Jews and the politics of the Middle East. The article concludes by arguing that his views, which rested on a deep suspicion of liminal hybridity or cultural mestizos, failed to transcend the basic logic of separation developed in Lausanne. Entirely on the contrary: Toynbee’s story offers us a case in which we can recognize the making of the interwar “cultural *imaginaire*” and “reinvention of differences,” which continues shaping our view of “the West’s” supposed borders to this day.



**Citation:** Dubnov, Arie M.. 2023. The Toynbee Affair at 100: The Birth of ‘World History’ and the Long Shadow of the Interwar Liberal *Imaginaire*. *Histories* 3: 308–330. <https://doi.org/10.3390/histories3040021>

Academic Editor: Greg Melleuish

Received: 12 June 2023

Revised: 25 August 2023

Accepted: 28 August 2023

Published: 4 October 2023



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**Keywords:** Toynbee, Arnold J.; Greco-Turkish War (1921–1922); Lausanne Treaty (1923); Murray, Rosalind; Teggart, Fredrick J.; Spengler, Oswald; Classicism; Thalassocracy; International Relations

## 1. Introduction: Hauntology

“The contact of civilizations has always been, and will always continue to be, a ruling factor in human progress and failure.”

Arnold J. Toynbee (1922)

“Westerners tend to think of nation states as the principal actors in global affairs. They have been that, however, for only a few centuries. The broader reaches of human history have been the history of civilizations.”

Samuel Huntington (1993)

The Greco-Turkish conflict, culminating in the massive population exchange that was ratified internationally a century ago at the Treaty of Lausanne (July 1923), occupies a unique place in world history. The chronological diameters of the conflict, which some date as beginning in the 1912–1913 Balkans War if not even all the way back with the Greek war of independence (1821–1829), spills over and disturbs textbooks’ neat periodizations that take the ‘Great War’ to be a clearly charted and delineated event locked between the

declarations of war in summer 1914 and the November 1918 armistice. The gruesome realities of the story and its consequences—a massive removal of Orthodox Christians from Asia Minor coupled with the forced “Hellenization” of the territories of the Greek state achieved through involuntary removal (“return”) of thousands of Muslims expelled to Turkey—reveal a darker side of the so-called “Wilsonian Moment”, which was glorified as the beginning of a brave age of self-determination and interwar internationalism built on the debris of the multiethnic empires of the long nineteenth century (Psomiades 2011; Baba and Winter 2022; Ekmekçioğlu 2023, pp. 118–40).<sup>1</sup> This seemingly “regional” event had global political ramifications that became clearer in light of subsequent histories. Writing in the late 1990s, against the backdrop of the atrocities that accompanied the wars that broke out in former Yugoslavia, Mark Mazower was perhaps the first to observe that the vicious war in Bosnia, with its ethnic cleansing, recharges the story of the 1923 Greco-Turkish agreement with “new relevance” (Mazower 1997, p. 48). During the early 2000s, scholars such as Renée Hirschon, Onur Yildirim, Matthew Frank, and others revisited the Turco-Greek compulsory population exchange as an unprecedented example of regimented population exchange, which gained its “lawfulness” thanks to the League of Nations’ endorsement (Frank 2007; Yildirim 2006; Hirschon 2003). These studies helped turn attention to the ways in which the compulsory population exchange provided a template for subsequent population transfers, thus highlighting how it was far more than a “local” or “regional” infection. Doing so, they not only revealed what Peter Gatrell described as the lowercase “wars” after the “Great War”—gruesome episodes of violence that were bottled up and elapsed from memory, so they should not threaten to destabilize the sanguine picture of the 1919 Peace Treaty as bringing all bloodshed to an end—but also helped divert the discussion from the somewhat archaic disputes about “Realism” versus “Idealism” in post-1919 international relations, which reified the theoretical dichotomy while failing to acknowledge how the new ethnically based conceptions of national sovereignty went hand in hand with the basic premises of the international system, in an entangled, mutually constitutive relationship (Gatrell 2010, pp. 558–75).

Poignantly, there is a considerable degree of “hauntology”—if one is to use such a Derridian neologism—in Lausanne’s infamous Treaty.<sup>2</sup> It was captured neatly by Bruce Clark, an author of a popular narrative history of the exchange, who stated: “It is sobering to admit that we are still haunted, at the start of the 21st century, by the legacy of a treaty that was concluded early in the 20th, when colonial empires were still intact and the right of powerful nations to dictate the destiny of small and powerless ones was broadly accepted” (Clark 2006, p. 13). Studies by Aslı Iğsız, Umut Özsu, Laura Robson and Arie Dubnov further developed these themes, revisiting the Lausanne Treaty to question old narrations of “liberal internationalism” and international law or to locate it within a longer trajectory of politics of partition, shaping remote areas such as Ireland, Palestine and the former British Raj after World War II (Özsu 2015; Iğsız 2018; Robson 2017; Dubnov 2019).

In that sense, the Greco-Turkish population exchange and the century-old Treaty of Lausanne (1923) are undoubtedly events that transcend local or regional history and gain broader significance due to the ramifications they had on later political developments and the ways they were used as “templates” for future population transfers. One can even say these are events of “world-historical” significance. However, they are also crucial to the subfield of historical research we now call “World History” for another reason: for they provided the backdrop against which too many of our basic assumptions about what constitutes “World History” were developed. The present article adds the intellectual historian’s perspective to our discussions on the centenary of the Lausanne Treaty and the legacy of interwar internationalism by looking at the central role played by Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889–1975), the English historian who could justly be described as the founding father of this subfield of historical research. It aims to place the birth of “World History” in its intellectual and political context and to see it as a mode of writing and thinking unleashed at this juncture of cataclysmic events and in response to it. Toynbee’s life intersected with the climatic events that signified the end of the Ottoman Empire: First,

during World War I, he did not experience the battlefield but served as an intelligence expert on the Ottoman front and worked closely with Lord Bryce, cross-checking and compiling the testimonies that made their way into the famous “Blue Book”, which remains to this day the largest single source of information about the wartime genocide of the Armenians. As a Foreign Office man, he then watched from proximity the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and was appointed to join the team that was supposed to represent Britain in a regional Middle East Committee and at the International Commission on Mandates in Turkey, better known to us as the King-Crane Commission. In this capacity, he was involved in deliberating on the “contact zones” between Turkish-speaking Asia Minor and the Arab-speaking Middle East, marking the boundaries separating the two post-Ottoman zones. Though he moved into academia shortly afterward, in January 1921, Toynbee took a two-semester leave from his professorship as Koraes Chair in Greek Literature and History at King’s College London to travel to the Greco-Turkish front and produce a series of warzone reports for the *Manchester Guardian*.

The story of Toynbee’s trip of January to September 1921 was told several times by him and by others as involving a life-changing epiphany. Being a devoted and energized classicist, Toynbee went into the conflict zone delighted to be allowed to visit the ancient Hellenic sites he was studying, just as he did a decade before, on the eve of the Balkan Wars, when he traveled on foot through the old territories of Greece (November 1911 to August 1912). However, from his 1921 trip, he did not return enthusiastic but deeply pessimistic and disenchanted. Accompanied by his wife, the novelist Rosalind Murray (1890–1967), during the nine months the couple toured Asia Minor, Greece sent an armed force to Smyrna (today’s Izmir) to regain territory (March 1921) and began its advance toward Ankara (June). During their visit, the Toynbees saw the devastation that the invading Hellenic Army left on the Yalova Peninsula, heard reports from Maurice Gehri, an International Committee of the Red Cross delegate sent to assist Muslim refugees from the area, continued by boat, sailing through the Gulf of Marmara from Constantinople towards Izmit, and witnessed several cases in which Muslim villages were set ablaze by Greek soldiers and where Muslim residents in the Smyrna area were targets of pillaging and ethnic violence. The tides turned with the three-week-long Battle of the Sakarya (23 August–13 September), as Turkish forces, commanded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who, exploiting weaknesses in the overstretched Greek lines, forced the Greeks into retreat, which was also the time when the Toynbees returned to Britain (15 September). What started as a self-assigned newspaper reporting expedition, Toynbee wrote in later years, turned out to be “a mental voyage” and “an inquiry into the mystery of human nature” (Toynbee 1967, p. 240).<sup>3</sup>

The textual product of this journey was *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey*, published in 1922, while the war was still raging, a short time before the opening of the Conference of Lausanne (Toynbee 1922). Primed by moral outrage, the book came as a surprise to many. After being applauded a few years earlier for condemning the Ottoman war crimes against the Armenians in the Blue Book and authoring pamphlets carrying brash titles such as “The Murderous Tyranny of the Turks”, the Toynbee of *The Western Question* was accused of forging a one-sided apologetic narrative favoring the Turkish point of view. Even Lloyd George expressed his dismay at the young academic who not only refused to express philhellenic sentiments but had turned “pro-Turk” and “forsaken the Gladstonian position” (cited in Gil 2011, pp. 172–200 on 183). So scandalous were his reports about atrocities committed by the Greek army in Asia Minor that he soon lost his academic position and would make a living instead as director of studies at the newly founded Royal Institute for International Affairs at Chatham House. During the long years he worked for the Chatham House (1925–1955), Toynbee became a despairing commentator on international affairs and increasingly suspicious of modern Western Enlightenment-inspired belief in human progress and moral improvement. No less significant, the bitter Greco-Turkish experience, as he later reported, also inspired his 12-volume magnum opus, *A Study of History* (Toynbee 1962). This launching pad deserves our attention. As I will show in the following pages, at the heart of Toynbee’s innovative historiographical move

stood the reading of the Greco-Turkish as a civilizational clash, a paradigmatic example of the contacts and frictions between civilizations.

In what follows, I would like to revisit the Toynbee love–hate affair with Greece and Turkey, which I consider to be the cornerstone of his World Historical approach. Departing from previous studies that took Toynbee’s new emphasis on civilizations and the fault line between them as a revolutionary historiographical approach, I suggest restoring it to its intellectual and political contexts and see it as a product of a long-established British classicist tradition, which read the chronicles of the ancient world as lessons providing instructions for the present, and, at the very same time, as an attempt to respond to the quandaries of the post-1918 world order that prompted interwar liberal internationalist thought. Toynbee’s schema included a stronger emphasis on faith and religious ideas, which he regarded as the constituent elements of civilizations, and an equally strong condemnation of ethnonationalist ideas, regarded by Toynbee as the rotten fruits of Western modernity. It represented a bold departure from romantic philhellenism and pre-1914 views on the so-called “Eastern Question”, but did not break away from the logic of the *pax imperialis* and interwar visions of a British-led supra-national world order. Though he was hailed by his admirers as a progressive critic of “the West” and criticized by his foes for constructing a theory built on moral self-flagellation and a messianic complex, Toynbee’s historicist schema represents a reification of the Occidentalism/Orientalism binary. Crucially, his taxonomy assigns members of minority religious groups an incongruous position as aliens who could never fully join the civilization in which they live. Toynbee’s abhorrence of nation-states should not prevent us from acknowledging this vicious paradox. His deep suspicion of liminal hybridity or cultural mestizos, blurring the neat division lines between cultures, left minority groups to be tagged as “questions” or “problems”. Rather than scrutinizing it, such a move complemented the sinister logic of the Lausanne Treaty that still haunts us.

## 2. From Greek to British Thalassocracy

To understand why the Greco-Turkish conflict constituted a watershed moment in Toynbee’s mind, we must first consider the quintessentially Oxonian knowledge ecosystem in which his ideas were nourished. Oxford University in general, and Balliol College in particular, conceived itself as an institution committed to manufacturing the Empire’s future leadership. The system that produced Toynbee and his peers dates back to the 1850s. Benjamin Jowett, Balliol’s iconic Master, played a key role by establishing a competitive system encouraging the best and the brightest graduates to be recruited to the various colonial administration bodies, particularly the ICS—the Indian Civil Service—the elite of the colonial bureaus.<sup>4</sup> Toynbee’s namesake, his uncle, the late Victorian economic historian and social reformer Arnold Toynbee (1852–1883), was a tutor at Balliol College, also in charge of the candidates for the Indian Civil Service. The connection between education and imperial governmentship was never hidden but boasted. “I should like to govern the world through my pupils”, Jowett famously wrote to Florence Nightingale. And so he did: between 1874 and 1914, more than 27% of Balliol graduates went to work in the ICS; by 1905, three successive Viceroys of India had graduated from the College. Herbert Henry Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister (1908–1916) and leader of the wartime coalition government, was also a Balliol man—according to his memoirs, his years at the College during the early 1870s were both the happiest and the most formative of his life—very much like Sir Edward Grey (1862–1933), the Foreign Secretary (both resigned in December 1916). Sir Herbert Samuel, appointed Palestine’s first High Commissioner in 1920, was also a quintessential Balliol man. It was Lord Samuel who boasted: “where there are D.Phils. in a developing country, one is Head of State and the other is in exile. Both probably went to Balliol” (quoted in Hughes 2011, p. 19).<sup>5</sup> Implanting a progressive sense of civic duty through “liberal education”, in other words, had been encoded into a licensing system for a national elite.

Even more critical in the context of our present discussion was Oxford's largely classical examination syllabus. *Literae Humaniores*—the study of ancient Rome and Greece, alongside Latin, ancient Greek, and philosophy—was staunchly defended as “the only effective mind-sharpener” and calls to diversify and modernize the curriculum were dismissed as radical and nonsensical (Brock and Curthoys 2000, part 1, 13–15, 25–26, 354–56; part 2, 8–12, 413–15 and passim). “If accused of being restricted in variety of knowledge, the perfection and mastery in what is taught must be conceded to Oxford and Cambridge”, the English historian and novelist James Anthony Froude declared in 1906, a year before Toynbee was admitted to the University. Undervaluing classics “would be to exclude ourselves from an acquaintance with all past time, except in monkish fiction and the feudal barbarism of the Goths of the north” (Froude 1906, p. 31). Toynbee's academic training concentrated on the classics. He took the four-year *Literae Humaniores* track, winning numerous prizes that brought him to the attention of the university's leading classicists, including Alfred Eckhard Zimmern (1879–1957), Fellow and tutor at New College at the time, and the Australian-born Gilbert Murray (1866–1957), Regius Professor of Greek, known for the popular series of translations of the major Greek tragedies he authored and, later on, for being one of the most vocal campaigners for the League of Nations. Zimmern became a close friend, while Murray became Toynbee's father-in-law once, in 1913, the young academic married his daughter Rosalind. Classics thus became a family business and a trademark. It was no coincidence that in Rosalind Murray's autofiction novel, *The Happy Tree* (1926), the clever though buttoned-up and somewhat arrogant academic Walter Sebright—modeled after her husband—flirts with the main protagonist during a walking tour along the Roman Wall in Northumberland, flaunting his skills in deciphering ancient inscriptions, courts her in a later scene by reading out loud selected passages from Edward Gibbon, and insists on educating the young lady in Greek (Murray 2014, pp. 108–12, 168–70, 183, 203).<sup>6</sup> Rosalind accompanied her husband on some of his business trips, including to Versailles in 1919 and, as mentioned above, the Greco-Turkish front in 1921.

Though the literary descriptions of the couple's early years in Rosalind Murray's novel should be taken with a grain of salt—if only due to what turned out to be a troubled marriage—there is no doubt that from an early stage, the study of the ancient world provided Toynbee the lens through which he thought about statecraft, the future of the British Empire, and the nascent field of international relations. He was not unique in that respect. As Eva Marlene Hausteiner reminds us, throughout the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, it was common to find university-trained policy advisors and makers whose primary method of “imperialist agenda-setting” was to employ historical analogies, usually by comparing the British and the Roman Empires (Hausteiner 2016). Lord Curzon's 1907 Romanes Lecture was perhaps the boldest attempt at this rhetorical technique, urging his Oxford audience to learn from the ancient Romans who fortified their empire's frontiers by encouraging the creation of protectorate states rather than establishing far-flung, expensive, and sluggish administrations (Curzon 1908).<sup>7</sup> However, such analogies were not failproof. Indeed, habitual comparisons to Rome were often employed to highlight Britain's problems, if not its inevitable breakdown. In an atmosphere in which anxieties of imperial decline were rampant, Roman-empire-inspired models brought to the surface deep concerns about imperial overstretch and opened questions many would have preferred avoiding regarding the feasibility of imperial rule in modern times and its incompatibility with Britain's declared commitment to ideals of liberty. In other words, what was desperately sought out was not a rehearsal, but a reversal of the lesson drawn from Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

It was against this backdrop that Toynbee and his mentors shifted their gaze from Rome to Athens. Or, more accurately, to the entire Hellenic world circa the 5th Century BC, which included an astonishing association of numerous Greek city-states, and a shared culture, expressed in creative works of art, theater, and philosophy. The Delian–Athenian League, which was founded on a series of autonomous, self-governing city-states, protruded in these narratives. Zimmern (and Toynbee after him) viewed this League as a much

better model, and as a brilliant political mechanism: a thalassocracy (θαλασσοκρατία, derived from the ancient Greek word *thalassa*, “sea”), a maritime empire comprising a network of almost entirely independent city-states, competing with each other but united by a common culture, strong economic ties and shared enemies.<sup>8</sup> Zimmern famously applied the term “Commonwealth” to describe the Ancient Greek system he admired so passionately. Soon thereafter, he began using the same term to describe the British Empire and its dominions.<sup>9</sup> If Rome, in the words of the sociologist Michael Mann, was a “territorial empire” that spread its power over a vast imperial space, the Greek-speaking civilization provided an example of an “empire of domination” that neither possessed a single center nor controlled an entire territory directly (Mann 2012, vol. 1, pp. 130–78).<sup>10</sup> British Dominions, dependent territories, and settler colonies could now be reimagined as self-governing political entities, analogous to the ancient Greek poleis, united by common virtues, mores, language, and political outlook and constituting a more open, less hierarchical, web-like trans-local political entity. Furthermore, no less important, echoing a familiar Victorian sentiment, Britain was depicted in this script as the nation best suited to lead civilization the same way Athens was imagined as the *primus inter pares*, leading the ancient Greek world.

Here was, at last, an inspiring antidote to Gibbon: preparing the stage for a twentieth-century model of indirect imperial rule, this Greco-centric model allowed self-government and imperial hegemony to coexist. The new historical-parable-turned-model for colonial policymakers served the desperate need to find a way out of the all too fashionable Edwardian pessimism and helped make the world safe for Empire again. Not coincidentally, after the war, Zimmern would become the first scholar to occupy an academic chair of international relations (first at the University of Wales—Aberystwyth, 1919–1921, and after 1930 at Oxford). Toynbee’s unconventional career, landing him at Chatham House, displayed a parallel, albeit less smooth, transition from classics into the nascent academic discipline of international relations. Lecturing in May 1920 to candidates for the Honours in *Litterae Humaniores* at Oxford, Toynbee did not abstain from employing the Greco-British analogy, betraying a prototypical belief in Britain’s separateness vis-à-vis the European Continent, stating insolently:

The study of Ancient Greek is generally admitted to have more educative value for an Englishman than the study of modern French or German, because Greek and English embody the fundamental principles of human language in entirely independent forms of expression, while French and English, in addition to the elements common to all language, share the special background of the Bible and the Classics, which have given them an extensive common stock of phraseology and imagery. This applies equally to the study of civilization. One learns more by studying Ancient Greek religion and comparing it with Christianity than by studying Christianity in ignorance of other religious phenomena; and one learns more about institutions by studying the Greek city-state and comparing it with the modern national state than by merely studying the evolution of the national state in modern Europe (Toynbee 1921, p. 13).

Written prior to his trip to the Greco-Turkish front, Toynbee’s 1920 lecture still equated civilization with “a work of art” and argued that studying it “is not different in kind from the study of a literature” (Toynbee 1921, p. 5). Contrary to later statements that were heavily shaped by Cold War bipolarism and excluded all regions that grew under the shadow of the Eastern Church from Europe proper, the young Toynbee of that time strongly believed that “the resemblances between East and West European history are more significant than the differences”, and that studying modern Greece is part of the study of “the West” (quoted in Clogg 2016, p. 44).<sup>11</sup> These preliminary working definitions were much in line with how classicists like Murray would address the subject. Toynbee’s papers evidence that Murray remained a close interlocutor and an informal counsellor in years to come. A year after his marriage to Rosalind Murray, Toynbee was commissioned to author his history of Hellenism (a project postponed due to the outbreak of the war and completed only in 1959) for the Home University Library, edited by Murray.<sup>12</sup> It was also Murray who informed Toynbee in the summer of 1918 about the newly founded Koraes Chair at the

University of London and encouraged him to apply for the position, and once it became clear that Toynbee would not agree to serve as a pundit promoting Eleftherios Venizelos's nationalist policies, as the Greek businessmen who donated the money for the chair would have hoped, Murray came to the rescue again.<sup>13</sup>

By the time the Koraes Chair scandal erupted, the connection between classicism, Empire and the nascent internationalist institutions was quite evident. Both Murray and Zimmern played a key role in founding the British League of Nations Society and were famous for their advocacy of world peace and supranational order. In 1922, Murray joined the illustrious group of intellectuals including Henri Bergson, Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, and others who founded the Committee on Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations. Later, Murray would become three-time President of the United Nations Association.<sup>14</sup> He epitomized many of the inherent contradictions of interwar internationalism, promoting a world peace that was motivated by a profound suspicion towards nationalism, yet without concealing the fact his desired world order left Britain and its Commonwealth in positions of leadership. Though E. H. Carr later dismissed him for promoting a form of naïve and utopian "Idealism", Murray's ideas laid down the intellectual pedestal upon which the main institutions of interwar internationalism were erected. Crucially, this internationalism was not regarded as incompatible with Empire but rather represent its evolution into a new phase. Glenda Sluga, who highlighted the fact that nationalism and internationalism were, in fact, entwined concepts, described Murray as no less than a "British imperialist who disliked the antinational implications of world citizenship and had an unmistakable class-, race-, and gender-bound view of internationalism's reach" (Sluga 2013, p. 62). Even more sympathetic portraits, such as the one offered by Peter Wilson, could not help but confess to the fact that Murray "displayed all the hallmarks of the Victorian imperial mindset" (Wilson 2011, p. 902).

With Zimmern, who was younger and more approachable, Toynbee had developed a tighter conversation. Toynbee had been drawn to Zimmern since attending his introductory lectures on Hellenic history during the summer term of 1909. "Alfred Zimmern taught me, eight years before the publication of Benedetto Croce's *Teoria e Storia della Storiografia* in A.D. 1917, that 'all true history is contemporary history'", Toynbee would later write (Toynbee 1962, vol. 10, p. 232).<sup>15</sup> Indeed so: Zimmern, who soon became Toynbee's close friend, was also a key member of the Round Table group that was thinking about the future of the Empire as a federalist enterprise, dubbed by him "the Third Empire", and modeled after the Athenian League. Notably, after leaving Oxford, Zimmern became the first person ever to hold a professorship in International Relations. In addition to Toynbee, the circle of young intellectual middlemen who orbited him included men like Lewis B. Namier and Reginald Coupland, who ended up playing critical roles in developing diverse schemes for the future of Palestine, ranging from "dominionization" (which would cancel the Mandate and add Palestine into the British Commonwealth of Nations) to partition (modeled after Ireland and the Lausanne Treaty) (Dubnov 2020, pp. 56–84; 2021, pp. 315–38).

Toynbee conceived of ancient Greek history as a drama, but he went beyond his tutors in highlighting the importance of distinguishing classic Greece from the Hellenistic civilization, or the "Hellenes", which was "a corporate name for the association of local peoples", who shared a similar culture and developed a "distinctive way of life" with their own Panhellenic "international", based on a network of city-states and a religion he called "Humanism" (Toynbee 1959, pp. 4–6, 9, and passim). One could speak of a "Hellenic 'world-state'" emerging from the Aegean basin and the military and commercial advantages gained through maritime mastery, pushing Hellenic settlers to export its culture into northern Africa and the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Instead of "Commonwealth of Nations", Zimmern's term for the British Empire with its dominions, Toynbee preferred to speak of "synoecism" a Greek word literally meaning "housing together", used by him to describe a process of political consolidation in which the self-governing city-states develop strong ties and interdependency (Toynbee 1959, pp. 33–34). The plurality and the interconnectedness

of the city-states was the beating heart of that civilization in his mind and the defining feature distinguishing Hellenic history from the Roman:

“[T]here never was any such thing as ‘the city-state’ in real life. In the singular, it was an imaginary abstraction. In reality there were always city-states in the plural until the Inst chapter of Hellenic history, when Rome made herself the city-state of the western half of an enlarged Hellenic World by wiping some of her sisters off the map and reducing the rest of them to the status of unicipalities” (Toynbee 1959, p. 51).

It is beyond the scope of the present article to describe Toynbee’s wartime activities at the War Propaganda Bureau and, at a later stage, at the Foreign Office’s Political Intelligence Department.<sup>16</sup> What is noteworthy, however, is the way this experience forced Toynbee to turn himself into an “area expert”, whose duty was not only to analyze vital wartime intelligence but also to survey political dynamics in the new war fronts, and how he kept returning to the lessons of Classical antiquity to rebuff the fashionable theory of the nation-state. This political vocabulary was evident in his first book, *Nationality and the War* (1915), which bears a strong mark of Zimmern-inspired conceptions of nationalism-within-Empire and statehood without sovereignty Toynbee (1915a). In polar opposition to J. A. Hobson and V. I. Lenin, who highlighted the links between capitalist competition and territorial expansion to explain excessive aggressiveness in international relations, Toynbee followed the catechism of contemporaneous liberal imperialists instead by insisting that nationalism, a “continental” disease, was the principal augments of envy and strife and the primary cause of bloodshed. Prefiguring some of the tension that would reach a boiling point in 1921–23, Toynbee was already resisting Greek irredentism at this stage, pouring cold water on the Megáli Idéa by arguing that Smyrna could not be included in the borders of Greece, since it would ruin the region’s economy. With all his admiration for antiquity, he made it clear that the borders of the modern Eastern Mediterranean could not be drawn from the maps of the ancient world but be adapted to the new constellations.

### 3. “Small Nations” or “Experiments” in Managing “Mixed Population”?

The presence of persecuted communities whose religion distinguished them from their surrounding was undoubtedly one of these new factors Toynbee had to come to terms with. Before the 1921 trip, as part of his wartime activities, Toynbee was exposed to the issue when appointed assistant to Lord Bryce, the Regius Professor of Civil Law at Oxford, with whom he compiled the Blue Book, bringing the Armenian tragedy to the attention of Western audiences. Its enormous impact notwithstanding, at this stage we do not find indications of Toynbee departing from earlier discursive strategies nor the use of the word civilizations in the plural. As Peter Gatrell commented, the Blue Book highlighted the fact the victims were “adherents to a common Christian ‘civilization’” (in the singular) and did not recommend separation between ethnic or religious groups to “solve” the crisis (Gatrell 2013, p. 61). On the contrary, it often highlighted the numerous cases of peaceful coexistence before the war, “[w]here Moslem [sic.] and Christian lived together in the same town or village, led the same life, pursued the same vocation, there seems often to have been a strong human bond between them” (Bryce et al. 1916, p. 651).<sup>17</sup>

To a large extent, the Blue Book reiterated a nineteenth-century Gladstonian understanding of the “Eastern Question”, presenting the Armenians as distant extra-European Christian kin requiring protection. As Donald Bloxham and Oded Steinberg suggested, what provided a vital subtext for this wartime book was Bryce’s Armenian mission from the 1870s and the attention he gave to the massacres of 1894–1896, which caused the wartime catastrophe to be seen as a natural continuation of these earlier heinous acts of barbarism (Bloxham 2005; Steinberg 2015). The book suggested that the atrocities inflicted on the Armenians were an outcome of great powers’ struggles, especially between Britain and Russia, but did not suggest reading it as a symptom of a “clash of civilization”. It echoed the central dilemma of nineteenth-century liberal interventionism: should moral considerations and desire to aid the Christian communities in a state of crisis overpower

realpolitik considerations regarding the undesirability of military action against illiberal Empires. Notably, the Ottoman authorities were accused of a “murder of a nation”, not liquidation of a “minority”. This strengthens Michelle Tusan’s assertion that Bryce and Toynbee’s language was “taken from a bygone Victorian era, compellingly intertwined humanitarian and geopolitical interests in a powerful, moralizing vision that linked the defeat of Germany with the liberation of ‘small nationalities’” (Tusan 2012, p. 129). During those years, Toynbee still took the heterogeneous ethnic and religious composition of Asia Minor at face value and did not consider the intermingled nature of populations as an obstacle to overcome or a problem to solve. The breakaway from the nineteenth-century rhetoric of “Questions”, in other words, was not the result of the Great War nor the brutal, systematic slaughter of the Armenians.

Also evident in these wartime writings was Toynbee’s fear of the “Far East”. He predicted that competition between China and the British Commonwealth of Nations would become the “fundamental factor” of the post-WWI world, and hoped that this new threat would encourage the “English-speaking nations”, alongside the South American republics, Russia and Japan, to join forces and create “a league of nations to preserve the Pacific from Chinese domination”. Even his highly sympathetic biographer—his heir, William McNeill, was forced to admit that “some of Toynbee’s predictions turned out to be wildly wrong”. This innuendo regarding the Far East did not come out of nowhere. For Toynbee, like most British liberal imperialists at the time, the collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires was a reason for alarm more than a cause for celebration. The “Far East” was no longer distant, nor was the Orient. In a 1918 memorandum, he described Turkey and Russia as “the landbridge [sic] between Europe and the East”, functioning as massive buffers separating East from West. Stitched together, the two massive empires were considered part of one entity that “embrace[s] Europeans and Orientals in one political body without any clear-cut division between them”.<sup>18</sup> Great Britain, for the first time, now stood at the gates of the Orient, and the prospect of ruling it was accompanied by fear: just as Alexander the Great’s generals, whose conquests helped spread the Greek language, literature, and culture, were the first to be “Orientalized”, so could the British attainment of new lands lead to excessive influence of Eastern manners. For him the Great War did not solve the notorious “Eastern Question” as much as it opened a new Pandora’s Box, making the East near and eminent.

Observing developments in Central Europe, the replacement of Austro-Hungary with a patchwork of new petite, separate national states was no cause for celebration either. The lessons of antiquity came in handy once again: “The parochial sovereignty of each city-state, vis-a-vis every other, might and did breed perpetual petty wars”, he declared in a lecture on “The Graeco-Roman Civilization” in early 1920.<sup>19</sup> The civilization, he warned, was predestined to collapse because its entire economic system, “based on local production for international exchange [...] could only work successfully if, on the economic plane, the city-states gave up their parochialism and became interdependent”. Similar ideas appear in his lecture “The Tragedy of Greece”, delivered at Oxford in May 1920: “The city-states, in their rivalry for dominion or their resentment against the domineering of one state over another, forgot their loyalty to the common weal of Greece and fought each other for empire or liberty” (Toynbee 1921, p. 60).<sup>20</sup>

What makes the recitation of these historical narratives significant? *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s powerful *j’accuse* against Eurocentric historiography, underscored the fact that European narratives of the past often served as vehicles to postpone, if not stave off altogether, demands for democratic self-rule emerging from non-European colonies and territories. “Historicism—and even the modern, European idea of history—one might say, came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody’s way of saying ‘not yet’ to somebody else” (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 8). The nexus of (historical) knowledge and (international) power during the immediate postwar moment provides a powerful demonstration of this postcolonial critique. Liberal mandarins utilized historical narratives when constructing an international forum that sought not to challenge old hier-

archies too much. A “civilizational scale” was needed to justify an odd asymmetric reality in which Eastern and Central European nationalists were permitted to form new states while sovereignty was denied to African and Middle Eastern ex-German and ex-Ottoman territories.

Recent studies revisiting the methods used by European powers to shred the constitutional order envisaged by Arab nationalists in the wake of the war further demonstrate that point: the fact that local Syrian elites were quick to absorb a Wilsonian language of “self-determination” and to compare their demands to those of the small nations that mushroomed on the debris of the Austro-Hungarian Empire posed a threat to French and British expansion into the Middle East, and was substituted with a different system that accommodated a French-backed Christian-Maronite Lebanon and a Jewish homeland supported by the British in Palestine. Besides corresponding better the imperial interests, such faith-based separations between communities, argues historian Elizabeth Thompson, intensified what W. E. B. Du Bois famously described as a racial “color line” that denied rights to “subject” and “inferior” groups and was now extended across the globe under the guise of the League of Nations (Thompson 2020). Anthropologist Lori Allen concurs: the encounter of Arab elites with European representatives of the nascent “international community” was an emotional encounter that raised high hopes but exposed an impossible mix of recognition and paternalism, which ended up in deep frustration as it became clear that “civilizational” classification became institutionalized and used to deny full political rights to groups who were conceived as needing further colonial tutelage (Allen 2020). The mandate system itself—initially conceived by Jan Smuts to encompass Central European regions as well—was a product of negotiation and compromise between great powers. It was purposely designed, as Susan Pedersen has demonstrated, using ambiguous language that never definitively intended independent statehood as a final objective (Smuts 1919; Pedersen 2015).<sup>21</sup>

Looking at how Toynbee initially thought to address the twin challenges posed by the collapse of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, we see that he did not challenge so much as bolster this mode of thinking. His wartime collaboration with Robert W. Seton-Watson, Tomáš Masaryk (exiled in London), Lewis B. Namier, and the group of writers affiliated with the journal *The New Europe* was predicated on the notion that “Continental” nationalism was the major source of instability threatening to fragment Europe. And yet, it was permitted to persist and culminate in the formation of small Central European states that would continue relying on Britain for protection and support. The emphasis put on the word “small” in the phrase “small states” was notable: it echoed Victorian oratories that introduced a distinction between “small” and “great” nations when envisaging a global order, and it allowed Masaryk and Seton-Watson to present to the British audience a vision of postwar Europe in which new states continued to rely on the liberty-loving British commonwealth (Varouxakis 2007, pp. 136–58; Ayers 2018, chp. 2). King’s College, where the Koraes Chair was established and given to Toynbee in 1918, stood at the epicenter of this wartime “small nations” discourse, hosting Masaryk, who was appointed chair of the new department of Slavonic and East European Studies in 1915. Not coincidentally, Masaryk’s inaugural lecture of October 1915 was dedicated to “The Problem of Small Nations” and emphasized: allowing “mixed” or “polyglot states”, housing under one roof of multiple nationalities, was fully compatible with the principle of nationality as well as the idea of Empire. Indeed, “history proves”, Masaryk insisted, that small states are, in fact, “ephemeral” and short-lived and thus depended on the protection of “great states” like Britain. *Mittleuropa*, based on a patchwork of nations, was nothing but a stepping stone towards a “world-federation” (Masaryk 1966).

Toynbee concurred. In a series of six essays, published between May and September 1915 under the title *New Europe*, he further developed Masaryk’s ideas and pushed them further, advocating for a federated Europe. Due to nationality, Toynbee argued, the political map of contemporary Europe was shattered and resembled that of medieval Europe—“a fantastic mosaic, in which innumerable tiny states have been dovetailed together with

capricious complexity". Nationalism, he admitted, is a force to be reckoned with, but when left alone, it leads to a disaster and internecine strife. "The phase of organization that precedes 'national self-government' makes strong government its ideal, and arbitrary government its practice; and a state of this calibre is quite unable to cope with an economic development initiated from without on a modern scale". He comforted himself and his readers by arguing that this fracture could be temporary since, eventually, economic evolution would push these units towards consolidation into larger multinational entities. Pathological nationalism, in other words, was counterbalanced by a modern laissez-faire economy that recognizes no "Natural Frontiers". History came to the rescue once again, as Toynbee recommended what principles should guide Europe's postwar reconstruction. Yet this time, it was not the ancient Athenian League that was heralded but the magnificent story of the "Anglo-Saxon" pioneers in North America:

"A clue to the future is often visible in the past, and the international problem of the European Powers may find a solution in the federal experience of the United States. When Great Britain recognized the independence of her American colonies, she left thirteen sovereign states on the Atlantic seaboard, related to one another by no bond but their common derivation from the country whose allegiance they had repudiated in the war and the military co-operation to which they had severally lent themselves for this limited end. They had no tradition to draw them together, no uniformity of economic environment or social evolution, while between each and all of them there were the most formidable conflicts of territorial interest. [...] If the North American commonwealths had followed the colonial tradition of Europe, or anticipated the spirit of the Spanish-American republics, they would each have pushed forward their own settlers, their own military roads, their own fortresses, into the disputed regions, and fought such bitter and such indecisive wars for their possession, that the opening up of the West, instead of creating a new English-speaking world, would have exhausted the vitality of the Anglo-Saxon race on the American Continent, and perhaps even have shaken its hold on the districts it already occupied at the moment of asserting its independence from the British Crown. But the liberated states did not take advantage of their freedom to plunge into this disastrous course. They submitted their individual sovereignty to a federal organ, and invested this authority with real responsibility and real power, by a mutual agreement to resign in its favour all individual claims upon territories in the West" (Toynbee 1915b, pp. 29, 35, 65, 70–71).<sup>22</sup>

In the Middle East, however, statehood of the European model was denied. The main effort was to consolidate indirect rule and identify local groups who would not raise the anticolonial banner against Britain. In later years, Toynbee would write extensively about the correspondences between King Hussein and Sir Henry McMahon, Britain's High Commissioner in Egypt during the war, which stood at the center of the debates about conflicting British wartime pledges. Poignantly, in real time, Toynbee had no qualms imagining Jewish nationalists as one of the groups working in collaboration with Britain. As we can discern from the memorandum Toynbee co-authored together with Lewis B. Namier in December 1917, he saw no contradiction between the Balfour Declaration (November 1917), calling for the creation of a Jewish National Home in Palestine under the auspices of empire, and the rights and interests of the local Palestinian population. The memo, written to assist the British Foreign Office in replying to critics of its Middle Eastern policy, stressed that the Declaration did not constitute a preferential treatment of one minority at the expense of others and declared that the aim of the Zionists was not to form an independent sovereign state but a "cultural and national self-government on a personal and not a territorial basis", similar to how "churches do in organised states".<sup>23</sup>

The historical record is too fuzzy to determine whether Toynbee, who was a member of the team that was supposed to represent Britain in the International Commission of Inquiry to Syria, expressed any inclination to divert from the official policy line at the time, culminating in Britain and France's decision to withdraw from the commission. The fragmentary archival evidence that survived suggests that Toynbee was appointed in 1919

as McMahon's secretary and "expert advisor" representing Britain in the Commission. He worked closely with David George Hogarth, an Oxford archaeologist and naval officer who was associated with T.E. Lawrence and Gertrud Bell (Howard 1963, pp. 12–20, 42–43, 47n 3, 85, 318).<sup>24</sup> Toynbee was evidently charmed by Charles Crane's quizzical personality but did not have the opportunity to spend much time with him, since he suffered from what seems to have been a mild nervous breakdown during the procedures leading to Britain's withdrawal.<sup>25</sup> The King–Crane Commission's Report, produced later that summer by the American delegates without Britain's support, endorsed the demand to create an American-supervised "Greater Syria" on the territories that comprise today's Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine. Toynbee refrained from making any public statements on the subject besides commenting opaquely in 1925 that the Report "tallied with certain antecedent facts which were not open to dispute". The source of his hesitancy is clear. Endorsing such a plan would have demanded severe restrictions on Zionist immigration and land purchase and a practical nullification of the Balfour Declaration, upsetting the British official line. Besides, there is no reason to assume that at that early stage, he would have preferred a plan designed to thwart European imperialism and allow the Americans to get their foot in the door. A way into the mid-1930s, when he was no longer a government employee, Toynbee continued defending British mandatory rule in Palestine for building up "a non-national fully-self-governing State in which there will be national homes for Jews and for Arabs side by side". It was, he added, an "audacious experiment" given the fact "mixed populations which had been deposited by long processes of history have been exploding next door in Anatolia and Rumelia [the Balkans]", but if that experiment succeeds, "it might also be made to succeed in India and in East Africa and in Manchuria" (Toynbee 1931, p. 49).<sup>26</sup> This language of audacity and political experimentation in engineering a "mixed" space seems surprising in light of Toynbee's later statements and when compared to his view of Greece and Turkey as belonging to distinct, incompatible "civilizations" that should be neatly separated. This is a semblant contradiction. The presence of religious minorities was welcome when they positioned themselves as frontiersmen of the European empires, like new city-states further expanding the limits of ancient Hellenic civilization. The rhetoric also concealed deep anxiety about imperial decline that would be catalyzed once a secessionist nationalist virus infects its subjects. It was often mentioned that Toynbee was heavily influenced by Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*), a best-seller by contemporaneous standards, offering a preliminary comparative sociology of civilizations and equally consumed with an alarmist sense of Western decline. It was Spengler who proposed first that History with a capital H moved through periods governed by "universal states" followed by decline and loss of social cohesiveness. Toynbee's discovery of Spengler took place before the publication of the English translation (1926–28), and at the exact brief moment between the end of World War I and the Greco-Turkish crisis. Notably, it was his Jewish–Polish colleague Lewis Namier who brought Spengler's book to his attention shortly after its publication, in the summer of 1920. In this case, the timing matters: it was Spengler's postwar book—and not the mere exposure to horrendous acts of mass violence against the civilian population—which provided Toynbee with a conceptual toolbox pushing him to interpret the Greco-Turkish as a "civilizational clash". Toynbee was not relying blindly on Spengler's anxiety-driven book but supplementing his analysis with the lessons he drew from his classicist mentors, and both were consistent with the British internationalists' deep-seated desire to keep national sovereignty in check.

Next to Spengler, we know that Toynbee also read and was inspired by Frederick John Teggart's treatises, *Prolegomena to History* (1916), *Processes of History* (1918), and *Theory of History* (1925). An Irish-born émigré to California, Teggart sought to heal historical writing from its most pervasive childhood disease: the tendency of historians to identify themselves with a particular nation and use their narrative as trumpet calls of heroic nationalism. History could not be considered rigorous and scientific as long as "the historian takes sides, that he is affected by love and hate, that he 'allows' himself to be influenced by personal and

patriotic considerations—that he is Emory’s mouthpiece for his countrymen” (Teggart 1916, p. 55). Teggart’s “scientific” history, as opposed to the old brand of writing he categorized as “historiography”, had to be emancipated from nationalism and apply the methods of natural sciences and sociology instead to examine vast “past social data” while using a comparativist, transnational perspective, that would ultimately provide generalizable laws. Yet, proper history was also the science of differences:

“The observation of the cultural differences which distinguish human groups leads at once to a recognition of the major problem of the science of man, namely: ‘how are these differences to be accounted for?’; ‘how have the differences which we observe in the cultural activities of men come to be as we find them in the present time?’” (Teggart 1925, p. 171).

“Teggart’s dicta”, quoted by Toynbee in the long acknowledgment section added as an appendix to his *Study of History*, was described by him as an eye-opener that helped him overcome the obstacles his classicist training imposed on him (Toynbee 1962, vol. 10, p. 232). Equally significant, it was from Teggart, who looked at the Great Wall of China as a barrier against migrant invaders that defined China as a distinct political unit, that Toynbee deduced one of his central concepts: that while history is shaped by mass migrations (which he insisted on calling *Völkerwanderung*), each “universal state” erects its own “cultural *limen*”, comparable to a barrage or a dam (Toynbee 1962, vol. 8, pp. 1–12).<sup>27</sup>

It is clear, then, that by the time Toynbee came to observe the Greco-Turkish conflict, this intellectual software was already installed in his system. He interpreted the conflict as proof that Turks and Greeks alike were infected by a nationalist virus originating in Western modes of thinking, resulting in irredeemable wickedness. The root cause of the calamity in the region, he concluded, was precisely that “[f]or the last two and a half centuries, the Near East [. . .] lost its *distinctive civilization*, [and] has flung itself into the Western movement with hardly any reserves or inhibitions”, and that in opening themselves to a foreign civilization, the “Turks have now become infected with the Western idea of political nationality [. . .] a destructive force, especially when transplanted into the foreign environment of the Near and Middle East” (Toynbee 1922, p. 321).<sup>28</sup> Creating a *limes* separating these distinct “civilizations” was the only cure imaginable.

#### 4. From Interwar to the Cold War Culture

Toynbee’s international reputation soared after the Second World War against the backdrop of Cold War proliferation and the dirty wars of decolonization. His portrait appeared on the cover of TIME magazine in March 1947—a proof of worldly recognition very few historians could have claimed to achieve and, perhaps, a symbolic crowning of an intellectual force to be reckoned with. Writing at a time when one could no longer ignore the rapid shrinking of the British Empire, Toynbee was forced to admit that the interwar experimentation he embraced so passionately had failed, yet his sermons still consisted of warnings that the only way “for us” (i.e., Westerners) to avoid the “doom” of “our civilization” would be to “establish a constitutional co-operative system of world government [. . .] [a] secular super-structure [which goes] back onto religious foundations” (Toynbee 1947, p. 15).<sup>29</sup> Such comments were supplemented by Toynbee’s frequent references to the passing of the civilizational torch between the Greek and the Roman civilizations as analogous to the special relationship developed between the declining British Empire and the rising American power.<sup>30</sup>

These ideas, however, became a source of endless debates. The stronger emphasis placed by him on religious values brought him to the attention of American ecumenical Protestants, who sought to promote their own vision of a world organization with an Anglo-American leadership at its heart, but they found it difficult to digest his assertions that modern racial prejudice is rooted in Western religions (Zubovich 2022, vol. 91, pp. 159–61).<sup>31</sup> These controversial views provided fodder for Toynbee’s exchanges with the German-born political philosopher Eric Voegelin, whose multi-volume study *Order and History* (1956–1987) offered an analogous meta-historical narrative of Western civilization

accompanied by a yearning for the recovery of spirituality (Voegelin 2000, pp. 100–12; Voegelin and Toynbee 1963).<sup>32</sup> Yet there was an interesting case of inverse correlation here: next to the majority of academic historians who stirred away from Toynbee's work for taking the form of "*preparatio evangelica*" (i.e., a work of Christian apologetics), which "provokes more than it convinces", his influence on future diplomats and Anglo-American internationalists lessened the more his multi-volume study on the rise and fall of civilization was received enthusiastically and read as a moralistic critique of a nefarious West and a philosophical treatise concerning the deeper meaning of history.<sup>33</sup> For instance, when a Harvard undergraduate named Henry A. Kissinger chose to include a lengthy inquiry of Toynbee's ideas in his overtly ambitious honors thesis, he did not hesitate to state that, akin to Hegel, Toynbee is also "considering history as the realization of a divine plan", that he was a lousy empiricist, all too eager that his findings would provide validation of his normative concepts, and that his theory concerning the breakdown of civilizations "is a necessary product of his metaphysical doctrine". Exhuming the Christian foundations of Toynbee's system, the young Kissinger concluded that at the end of the day, "Toynbee's metaphysical assumptions derive from a theology in the medieval tradition of Dante" and that he sneaks in through the back door what is essentially a Calvinist approach in which "Sin denotes the Causality of which failure constitutes the phenomenal manifestation" while "Success represents the reward for moral action" (Kissinger 1950, pp. 134–35, 195, 236, 238–39). Hans Morgenthau, one of the most influential international relations theorists of the time, was equally skeptical: even if we were to accept the claim that Western civilization's only salvation could emerge from the restoration of faith or the creation of new "syncretic religion", such spiritual revivals cannot be ordained from above nor are an act of conscious will. Ultimately, they were also not the business of international affairs (Morgenthau 1956, pp. 191–99).

Much more curious was the reception of his ideas outside the so-called "West". Astonishingly, the former arch-imperialist, a staunch believer in a hierarchy of civilizations with Western Christianity being at the top, was able to rebrand himself not simply as a clamorous critic of Western modernity but an advocate for neo-traditionalism, urging "the other civilizations" to stop imitating the corrupt West and cling to their distinct cultural traditions. Historian Cemil Aydin, who observed the enthusiastic embrace Toynbee's ideas received from audiences in the Global South, could not ignore the multilayered ironies involved. There was little that was particularly new in Toynbee's ideas to Third World intellectuals since "civilizationism had long been a dominant theme in anticolonial discourse, whether pan-Islamic, pan-African, pan-Asian, or nationalistic". Yet they still find him useful:

Toynbee's historical framework, in which Islamic civilization appears to be one of the few durable civilizations able to resist the materialism and destructiveness of the West, appealed to multiple ideological currents in postcolonial Muslim societies for diverse reasons. But one thing Muslim intellectuals agreed on regardless of their respective levels of piety and varied political inclinations was that there was indeed a sharp distinction between the Islamic and Western worlds (Aydin 2017, p. 195).

The discomfiting consequences of these ideas, Aydin adds, were evident: Toynbeeism lent a seal of approval for aggressive anti-modernist religious pietism and Occidentalism. Equating the universal, borderless Muslim ummah (community of Islam) with the Western notion of "civilization", he transformed a history of *religion* into a history of a *region*, contouring each "civilization" with strict geographical perimeters that define and sculpt its structure. Judaism, on the other hand, was infamously described by him as a "fossilized relic" of an extinct Syriac society preserved first through an ethos of religious zealotry that corrupted the pre-Christian Hellenic world and later, by a group that created an exclusionary mode of corporate existence, resistant to fusion and assimilation that was close to solving 'the Jewish problem' in the Western World on the eve of World War I (Toynbee 1962, vol. 8, pp. 274, 279–80, 287–88).

No less remarkable was Toynbee's ability to acquit the British Empire from any accusation of brutal colonialism and belittle his own involvement in the great power politics that shaped the borders of the modern Middle East. Contributing a chapter on "The English Policy of Conquest" to an anthology compiled by Alain Locke, the first African-American Rhodes Scholar, who played a formative role in the Harlem Renaissance, he insisted that warfare had disappeared from the British Isles after the twelfth century, that the United Kingdom enjoyed stability thanks to "the complete subjugation of the Scottish Highlanders and the 'Wild Irish'" to its authority, that the English-speaking settlers to distant lands continued looking for "performing a public service rather than as leading a life of lawlessness and crime", and that the "Protestant frontiersmen" who reached the frontiers of the United States "assimilated to their Indian foes and victims—in dress, in habits, and above all in ferocity" (Toynbee 1949, pp. 151–52).<sup>34</sup> In surveying the Middle East, his narratives obscured Britain's active role in adding pernicious elements into the region. A masterful disguise of his own active involvement in planning British foreign policy, he was quick to highlight "the lessons" of 1922: "The object lesson of Turco-Greek and Turco-Armenian relations during a Century culminating in the two catastrophes of A.D. 1915 and A.D. 1922 confuted in advance the Mandatory Power's official pious belief that the mandatory régime would somehow miraculously save Great Britain's honour by engendering one day a self-governing bi-national Arab-Jewish Palestinian state". According to this narrative, Britain's Colonial and Foreign Offices had nothing but good intentions in mind. Naive? Perhaps. But acting with a clear conscience. Only in retrospect one could recognize that this was a "predestined catastrophe" (Toynbee 1962, vol. 8, pp. 305, 306).

Paradoxically, while it was supposed to push audiences beyond parochial and exclusionary ethnonationalism, Toynbeeism was easily reconciled with chauvinist statist conceptions, accentuating national purity and looking suspiciously at "alien" communities. Toynbee's comments about Jews sternly believing "they are a 'chosen people'" and forever remaining "intensely conscious of being not as other men are" were considered highly offensive, especially in light of the Holocaust, especially once coupled with descriptions of Judaism as an odd ancient relic that should have disappeared by now (Toynbee 1962, vol. 1, pp. 246–47). Such distasteful remarks were mistakenly tagged "antisemitic"—an erroneous description insofar as we understand antisemitism as a modern ideology of hatred predicated on a belief in the "biological" or "racial" difference of Jews as "Semites". It would be more accurate to interpret this coded language as concealing old Christian prejudices, echoing an age-long theological aversion toward Judaism and Jews, resisting its message of salvation. What made this seemingly scholarly interfaith dialogue so exceptionally toxic was the heated political climate in which the statements were made, as Britain's tactical alliance with Zionism was replaced with bitter hostility. Actively engaged in the inflammatory discourse surrounding the Israeli–Arab conflict after the 1940s as well, Toynbee did not hesitate to lend his authority and fuel the fire with anti-Jewish prejudices, underscoring the alienness of Jews to the region and their merciless violence towards the indigenous population and repeatedly comparing Zionism with National Socialism. The resentment turned into open hostility after the 1967 War. On 8 October 1973—two days after the eruption of the Yom Kippur War—he sent Major General Mustafa Tlass, the Syrian defense minister, a letter expressing his "heart-felt [*sic*] wishes for an Arab victory".<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, the Syrian state was commissioned to complete the "civilizational mission" of erasing the Jewish state, an alien, dangerous, and hopefully temporary Western colonial outpost in the Middle East.

## 5. Conclusions: Clashes of Civilizations

It is not for no reason that Arnold J. Toynbee's life and thought has attracted such vast scholarly attention over the years. What we have here is yet another fascinating case of historian-as-witness. Like Polybius, who was a leading figure of the Achaean League captured by the Romans before he authored his celebrated *Historiaí*, or Josephus, the Jewish-rebel-turned-historian, imprisoned by Vespasian and watching the events he reported on,

or even Marc Bloch, whose personal experiences in trench warfare during World War I convinced him to take psychology more seriously in the writing of history, Toynbee's grand meta-historical oeuvre is not a product of an unbiased, detached chronicler. As I have argued above, putting his work in context requires us to revisit the dramatic events of World War I and its immediate aftermath. His initial "Hellenic" vision of civilization and global stability, bearing traces of a loaded nineteenth-century Gladstonian view of "the Eastern Question", had to be reformed and adapted to a post-1918 reality in which an Ottoman Empire was no longer occupying a landmass separating Britain from "the East". This rhetoric of "questions", a readymade linguistic template so characteristic of nineteenth-century political discourse, as Holly Case showed, did not vanish in 1914 (Case 2018). On the contrary, Toynbee's writings provide a lens through which we can see nineteenth-century discourses of the "Eastern Question" morphed into a "Western Question", and, one might add, brought to the surface the "Minorities Question" and left it unanswered. In the words of historian Rebecca Gill, "in Toynbee's minority faith groups would always occupy an anomalous position. They may be polyglots and share customs and traditions with their neighbors, but they would never be members of the same civilization, and will continue to be considered as questions or problems" (Gill 2011, p. 185). Part of what made Toynbee's explanatory schema so appealing was the new spatial, tectonic imagination that accompanied it: one could identify the fault lines separating civilizations on maps. Contact zones between ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities turned into lines separating unassimilable cultures, thus viewed as exceptionally lethal. However, his deterministic explanations of ethnonational violence and political devastation as inevitable outcomes of a wicked penetration of European ideas did not challenge the sinister logic of separation, but rather relied on the assumption that catastrophe springs when civilizations are not left in their purity.

The Toynbee Affair also demonstrates the inseparability of "history writing" and "policymaking" during the Edwardian and interwar periods. The present essay is not the first to argue that, in numerous cases, British historians had been involved in attempts to devise international means to restrain violence since the early nineteenth century precisely because such efforts intrigued the historical imagination and relied on it (Craig 2008). I would invite us to go even further and acknowledge the power/knowledge interdependency. For besides being a curious case of a classicist-turned-journalist/witness-turned-historian, Toynbee's story also exemplifies arguments advanced by Robert Vitalis, Priya Satia, and others regarding the close connections between history writing, power in international politics, and anxieties of Western decline (Vitalis 2015; Satia 2020). Chronicles of past events were not fables or allegories. Instead, the fall under the category of what William Bouwsma famously defined as "a useable past" informing statesmanship (Bouwsma 1990). The fact that Toynbee's history prided itself on a bold attempt to transcend nationalism in favor of larger units of analysis does not make his views extrinsic to international relations. On the contrary, it gave long-established traditions and cultures a constitutive role and explanatory force in better understanding Toynbee's contemporaneous *histoire événementielle* and a moral guide for foreign affairs. The Toynbee Affair sheds a less complimentary light on the genesis of international relations as an autonomous field of study and, most crucially, requires us to scrutinize the underlying assumptions and prejudices built into it.

The proximity of "history writing" to "policymaking" is also evident on the institutional level. The writing and publication of the dozen volumes of the world-historical survey he published between 1934 and 1961 were performed with the blessing of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, where Toynbee was employed from 1925 to 1955. Toynbee's mentors were directly involved in establishing the RIIA in 1920, and he was writing his history in parallel to his day job, editing the RIIA's annual surveys, and overseeing much of the research conducted under the Institute's auspices. Established a decade after the Andrew Carnegie's Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC, the RIIA was the world's second international relations policy think tank. Focusing on the Chatham House's American counterpart, Robert Vitalis warned scholars of American international

relations of reproducing fables of origins about their discipline. Such mythical histories of origin obliterate the fact the field's genesis is interwoven with the vexed question of race relations in the U.S. Academically and institutionally, the field emerged neither from Thucydides nor from President Wilson, but from a reality of racial segregation and increasing anxiety that accompanied American expansion into and annexation of overwhelmingly non-white territories: how could the white republic not lose its soul by governing the new territories, and what kind of institutions should be developed to enable non-whites to "progress" without disturbing racial hierarchies? Separately, yet in a similar vein, Priya Satia underlined the intimate relationship between English history writing, statecraft, and liberal imperialism, which, more than an ideology, was a type of moral sentiment "premised on the notion that benighted peoples around the world, lacking conscience and virtue required a paternalistic imperial government that might at once compensate for the original British sin of conquest" (Satia 2020, p. 71).

Similar questions must be asked about Toynbee and the role World History played in British internationalism. The appeal of Toynbee's schema has grown, for obvious reasons, in direct correlation to the increasing frustration from the nation-state as an idea and the practices of postcolonial nation-states in particular. Given the suffocating effect methodological nationalism has had on historiography, there are good reasons for historians to disrespect borders. In our increasingly "globalized" world, information, capital, diseases, and challenges of climate change recognize no limes. And yet, we should not be blind to the fact that World History was born out of imperial reality, written from within the Empire, carried over the basic premises of colonial history into interwar internationalism, functioned as a form of imperial apologia, and sought to respond to anxieties of imperial retreat and decline. Toynbee could not ignore decolonization and the overshadowing of the British Empire by a rising American power, but his primary method of constructing policy advice based on historical analogies to ancient Greece remained intact well into the Cold War years as he was urging the United States to lead a modern union of city-states against the Soviet empire, just as the ancient Greeks had done, assigning it the role of Britain's successor as leader of "the West" (Toynbee 1953b). He also kept alluding to Gibbon, emphasizing that the great historian's fundamental error lay in supposing that ancient civilizations collapsed due to external pressure rather than internal mechanisms of deterioration and decline, and that the Greco-Roman civilization, as he famously put it, "died not by murder, but by suicide" (Toynbee 1953c, p. 227). These frightened, almost panic-struck warnings of the "internal" threats to "the West", did not discard the Orientalist/Occidental binary as much as they reified it further, making the presence of religious minorities a dangerous anomaly, for they would forever remain assimilation-resisting aliens and never full members of the same civilization. They will continue to be considered "problems" or "questions."

Following Toynbee's trajectory and recontextualizing his ideas, it is not surprising to find a close link connecting the interwar liberal Hellenophile imagination with Toynbee's deeply Christian and ultimately "Samuel Huntingtonian" view of civilizations and the cultural fault lines that separate them from each other. Though the binarism "civilization/barbarism" was discarded by him and dismissed alongside much of the "old" colonial vocabulary, he developed a stringent explanatory framework of cultural ethnoreligious differences as constituting unbridgeable distinct, "authentic", and irreducible cultural identities. Like the idea of partition, which was born in the interwar years in the context of imperial desires to "contain" differences but made its reappearance in the 1990s and 2000s, so did Toynbeeism made its comeback with Samuel P. Huntington's influential 1993 essay (expanded into a book) reviving the idea of a clash of civilizations as the guiding principle of future foreign policy (Huntington 1993, 1996).<sup>36</sup>

Toynbee's megalomaniac world-historical explanatory scheme is predicated on what we may call, following the French sociologist Jean-François Bayart, the essence of contemporary "cultural *imaginaire*" and "reinvention of differences" (Bayart 2005). Like Toynbee's civilizations, it idolizes the idea of cultural identity that is constantly performed, seldom negotiated and considered homogeneous, not fluid. Like contemporary culturalists, Toyn-

bee's argument also "eludes [sic] to the roles played by innovation and borrowing, by assuming that a central, hermetically sealed core of intangible representation persists over the centuries". "To many world historians today, Arnold J. Toynbee is regarded like an embarrassing uncle at a house party", wrote historian Michael Lang (Lang 2011, p. 747). The problem is not simply that there is something quirky and offensive about Toynbee's style of presentation, which could be politely ignored as that awkward uncle, but mostly the fact he shaped explanatory mechanisms and directed a production of knowledge in the direction that takes the fundamental fuzziness, hybridity and intermingling of human groups as a problem that needs to be overcome. The disastrous implications of this mode of thinking take us back to the time and place where it was born, a century ago, in the violence of the Greco-Turkish war and, more significantly, in the massive, compulsory "exchange" of minorities, prohibiting the return of refugees to their homes and forcing emigration of those who had no desire to leave by marking them "alien" nationals—all conducted with the blessing and encouragement of the liberal international community. The ability of the Lausanne Treaty's architects to present the forced uprooting as a model for a "peaceful" resolution of conflicts provides a powerful illustration of the power of euphemistic language in international affairs. Surprisingly, no one with solid classicist training in the room could paraphrase Plutarch's Phyrrius and warn that with another such peace, we are undone.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The phrase 'Wilsonian Moment' was popularized by Manela (2007). The secondary literature on the Greco-Turkish War is much too vast to be surveyed here sufficiently. A helpful review of the historiographical debates can be found in Llewellyn-Smith (2023).
- <sup>2</sup> The term 'hauntology' was introduced by Derrida in a series of lectures delivered in 1993. Written against the backdrop of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the lectures also functioned as a response to Francis Fukuyama's influential treatise that argued that the progression of human history as a struggle between ideologies reached its end. See Derrida (2006) and Fukuyama (1992). As far as the interwar period is concerned, Glenda Sluga's work is arguably the most influential example of a history of twentieth-century internationalism that ties it with the history of nationalism and recovers its entanglement. See Sluga (2013).
- <sup>3</sup> Toynbee's ostentatious wording notwithstanding, he did not write detailed accounts of these travels in real-time, and much of our information regarding the couple's experiences in Greece and Turkey comes from Rosalind's letters. These were used for a careful reconstruction of their visit in Prott (2016, pp. 180–211).
- <sup>4</sup> The best introduction to the subject remains Symonds (1991). The College's history is examined thoroughly in Jones (1997), and much invaluable information can also be found in Soffer (1994). Also of value is Furse's autobiography (Furse 1962), which reveals the extent of the ties between the University and the Colonial Office during the twentieth century.
- <sup>5</sup> On Samuel, see Wasserstein (1992); Huneidi (2001). On the Balliol-ICS connection see Brown (2009); Chapman (2004); and Buettner (2004). The political career of some notable alumni of Balliol is examined partly in Williams (1991).
- <sup>6</sup> The novel was originally published by Chatto & Windus in 1926. I would like to thank Jonathan Conlin for bringing to my attention the republication of this novel.
- <sup>7</sup> For further discussion of Curzon's ideas, see Bell (2016, chp. 5).
- <sup>8</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term 'thalassology' entered circulation in the 1840s, often in reference to ancient Phoenicia. The Italian-Jewish classicist Arnaldo Momigliano, who was forced to leave Italy for Britain after the passing of the *Leggi Razziali*, registered his surprise in 1944 that the history of the idea of thalassocracy in Greek thought has never been written but was quick to add that it could be deduced from Herodotus to the Greek sources on which Cicero drew his conclusions. See Momigliano (1944). The term resurfaced in the last two decades with the rise of new Mediterranean studies. For discussion see Peters (2003); Horden and Purcell (2006).
- <sup>9</sup> A point further developed in Castellin (2015) and Baji (2021).
- <sup>10</sup> For analysis and discussion of Mann's grand narrative see Steinmetz (2013, pp. 1–50).
- <sup>11</sup> Compare and contrast with Toynbee's later appreciation of Russian history in Toynbee (1953e, pp. 164–83).

- <sup>12</sup> [Toynbee \(1959\)](#), preface). The sharp contrast between the circumstances in which the book was initially conceived and the radically different views that Toynbee expressed by the time it was finally published did not escape the scrutiny of one harsh reviewer of the 1959 book, who stated: “The present Professor Toynbee does not love Greece and Greek civilization. It is well known by now that he has turned his back on the West and looks to the East for the future. He no longer shares the views of Philhellenists such as Gilbert Murray. It must have been different when he drafted his book for the first time”. See [Ehrenberg \(1959\)](#), p. 492.
- <sup>13</sup> For a detailed account of the scandal, see [Clogg \(2016\)](#) and [Beaton \(1991\)](#). The inaugural lecture was published as [Toynbee \(1919\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> For his recollection of his father-in-law see [Toynbee \(1960\)](#), 212–20. See also [West \(1984\)](#) and [McNeill \(1989\)](#). Harvard historian Akira Iriye also emphasized Murray’s central role as a pioneer of what he calls “cultural internationalism”; [Iriye \(1997\)](#). This is further discussed in [Laqua \(2011\)](#) and [Pernet \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> See also the long chapter dedicated to Zimmern in [Toynbee \(1967\)](#), pp. 49–61. The respect was mutual: Zimmern considered Toynbee a brilliant classicist and in later revised editions of his best-seller textbook on the Greek Commonwealth he acknowledged Toynbee’s aid.
- <sup>16</sup> I chronicled many of these in [Dubnov \(2021\)](#). Toynbee and Namier, who knew each other from Balliol, were recruited together by C. F. Masterman to the War Propaganda Bureau soon after its establishment.
- <sup>17</sup> [Bryce et al. \(1916\)](#), p. 651). For the history of the publication and the controversy surrounding it see [Miller \(2005\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> Toynbee, India Office memorandum, 1918, as quoted in [Satia \(2008\)](#), p. 210.
- <sup>19</sup> Reprinted in [Toynbee \(1953a\)](#), pp. 42–61 on 58).
- <sup>20</sup> [Toynbee \(1921\)](#), p. 60). Toynbee’s lecture was prepared for students attending a summer course organized by Gilbert Murray.
- <sup>21</sup> The argument is further advanced in [McCullers \(2019\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> [Toynbee \(1915b\)](#), pp. 29, 35, 65, 70–71). The collection was accompanied by an introduction by the Earl of Cromer. Poignantly, Toynbee makes no reference to the American Civil War in this analysis.
- <sup>23</sup> [Toynbee and Namier] “Zionist movement” (5 December 1917), as quoted in [Dubnov \(2021\)](#), p. 333).
- <sup>24</sup> Historian Harry N. Howard argued that Toynbee was the author of most of the official British recommendations that were prepared in February 1919, before the delegation visited the Middle East, and that they included an explicit analogy between the situation in Palestine and Thrace and Smyrna which were similar “sensitive areas” of “mixed population” that “has no common will.” See also the exchange made in preparation for this book between Howard and Donald M. Brodie, member of the American delegation to the Paris Peace negotiations, Paris, and Secretary of the American Commission on Mandates from 26 October and 10 November 1940 concerning the different appointments to the Commission in the King-Crane Commission Digital Archival Collection, Oberlin College Archives: <http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/digital/collection/kingcrane/id/1491/rec/4>, accessed on 20 August 2023 and <http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/digital/collection/kingcrane/id/1482/rec/3>, accessed on 20 August 2023 (original files are at Donald Brodie Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California). I thank Ken Grossi of the Oberlin College Archives for his assistance in unearthing these letters.
- <sup>25</sup> For his impressions of Crane, see [Toynbee \(1967\)](#), pp. 208–20). A reference to “poor Toynbee [who] had a baddish breakdown and could not go” is made in a letter sent from Eric Forbes Adam (a member of the British delegation who would later serve as the First Secretary in the British Delegation to the Lausanne Conference) to Prof. Albert Howe Lybyer, the American historian of the Middle who served as a technical advisor to the King–Crane commission. In a later testimony, Toynbee argued that he worked with McMahan for several weeks in preparations for the intended expedition to the Middle East and fell sick a week or two before Britain and France withdrew from the commission. See Eric Forbes Adam to Albert H. Lybyer, 28 May 1919, in King–Crane Commission Digital Archival Collection, Oberlin College Archives: <http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/digital/collection/kingcrane/id/2416/rec/2>, accessed on 20 August 2023 (original files in the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign Archives) and ([Toynbee 1970](#), p. 190).
- <sup>26</sup> For further discussion see [Renton \(2010\)](#), pp. 15–39) and [Dubnov \(2019\)](#). Interestingly, there is no archival evidence to suggest that Toynbee took notice of proposals made at the time to internationalize the port city of Salonica (today’s Thessaloniki, Greece) because the majority of its residents were neither Christian nor Muslim but Jews. Such suggestions were rejected upfront in Lausanne, but it is noteworthy and somewhat ironic that Toynbee could not allow a city-based identity to serve as a basis for political planning, despite the fact his intellectual voyage began with the ancient city-states of the Aegean. On Jewish Salonica see [Naar \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>27</sup> Compare with [Teggart \(1918\)](#), pp. 95–98).
- <sup>28</sup> Emphasis add my me [AD].
- <sup>29</sup> The essay was reprinted as [Toynbee \(1953d\)](#), pp. 29–41 on 39).
- <sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Toynbee’s essay on “The Graeco-Roman Civilization,” in which he makes the analogy explicit, stating that “the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ variety of our Western civilization has just managed to survive—Maimed and stunted, and barbarized—In the overseas, English-speaking countries”, and that one should go beyond the differences in vernacular languages of Europe since the difference between Dante’s Italian, Shakespeare’s English and Goethe’s German “is of minor importance” and that “Latin literature stands to Greek [...] as English literature stands to Italian and French”. See [Toynbee \(1953e\)](#), pp. 42–61 on 47, 49).

- <sup>31</sup> Toynbee dedicated a lengthy chapter to the subject in the introductory volume of *A Study of History*. See [Toynbee \(1962, vol. 1, pp. 207–338\)](#). There is a good reason to believe that Toynbee developed at least part of these ideas before World War II and the Holocaust, as inferred from a paper entitled “Religion and Race” dated July 1935, which may have been prepared for a meeting of the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work. Marked “confidential”, it is unclear if the mimeographed typescript text that survived in the archive was ever sent to print. For discussion see [Thompson \(2015, pp. 120–44\)](#).
- <sup>32</sup> For discussion of Voegelin and Toynbee, see [Henningson \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>33</sup> [Marmorstein \(1961, p. 347\)](#). The most devastating critique of Toynbee’s work, accusing him of falling back on dispensational theology, came from the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper. Toynbee referred to it briefly in his conversations with his son Philip but avoided addressing its contents. Instead, he dismissed it, arguing: “Really Trevor-Roper put too high of voltage through me, so it didn’t hurt at all. If he’s being more moderate, perhaps he might have electrocuted me.” See [Trevor-Roper \(1957\)](#) and [Toynbee and Toynbee \(1963, p. 73\)](#).
- <sup>34</sup> According to Robert Vitalis, who examined Locke’s activity and the book’s genesis, assembling the anthology began as early as 1939: [Vitalis \(2015, pp. 104–5\)](#).
- <sup>35</sup> Arnold Toynbee to Major-General Mustafa Tlass, 8 October 1973, Bodleian Library, Special Collections Section, Arnold Toynbee papers, Box 112, Middle East, R–Z, as quoted in [Nachmani \(2014, p. 383\)](#).
- <sup>36</sup> On the genesis and travels of partition see [Dubnov and Robson \(2019\)](#). Commenting on the comeback of the concept of civilization, [Kumar \(2014\)](#) offered a highly useful historiographical survey, identifying the conceptual kinship between Toynbee and Huntington.

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