

What's the Truth about... the Uganda Plan?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: The early Zionists were offered, and nearly accepted, Uganda as the Jewish homeland. This demonstrates that Zionist leader Theodor (Binyamin Ze'ev) Herzl and his supporters were indifferent to the historic Jewish homeland and did not appreciate the unique relationship between the Jews and the Land of Israel.

Fact: None of the land offered by the British was in Uganda; it was all in present-day Kenya. Those willing to consider the plan wanted to create a Jewish refuge and save Jews from the pogroms and anti-Semitism of Eastern Europe.

Background:¹ At the beginning of the 1900s, Palestine was under Turkish rule, and negotiations between the Turks and the Zionists concerning the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine failed to progress. Desperate to find a sanctuary for Eastern European Jews suffering from poverty, discrimination and deadly pogroms, Zionist leaders, particularly Herzl's assistant Leopold Greenberg, began meeting with Joseph Chamberlain and other British leaders in search of a solution within the British Empire.

Starting in 1895, the British East Africa Protectorate (called Kenya since the 1920s) was administered by the British Foreign Office, but development of the region was stagnant due to a lack of European settlers. In December

1902, Chamberlain, then the British colonial secretary, visited the protectorate. He conceived of the notion of offering it to the Jews and proposed his idea to Herzl in April, and then again in May, 1903. By August of that year, just before the Sixth Zionist Congress, the British-Zionist talks seemed to have borne fruit.

On Sunday, August 23, 1903, Herzl stunned the nearly 600 delegates of the Sixth Zionist Congress with his proposal to settle Jews in East Africa. The proposal led to heated, often acrimonious, debate among both the Zionists and the East African settlers.² It also spawned numerous articles, editorials and letters in the Anglo and Jewish press.

Confusion surrounding this issue persists, and the identity of the region offered to the Zionists by Chamberlain remains mired in misinformation. Uganda and the British East Africa Protectorate were both in East Africa and under the control of the British Foreign Office, but they were distinct and independent of each other. Despite the fact that the latter is wholly in today's Kenya, most textbooks of Zionist history speak of the "Uganda Plan."³

The confusion may have arisen because the offer was linked to the Uganda railway, the principle means of travel from the coast inland. Although the railroad was located in Kenya between the sea and Lake Victoria, it

terminated in what was then known as the Uganda Protectorate (see map in this article). Even some contemporaneous sources erred with regard to the location, though Herzl called it the "Nairobi Plan," referring to the capital of Kenya, in a June 1903 diary entry (Weisbord, 63).⁴ Greenberg met with Chamberlain on May 20, 1903, and asked him: "Do you mean Uganda [for the Jews]?" Chamberlain stated emphatically that the land he had in mind was *not* in Uganda (Weisbord, 65).

It was clear that the Zionists preferred Palestine as a refuge for the Jews. Chamberlain realized this, as he stated in his notes:

If Dr. Herzl were at all inclined to transfer his efforts to East Africa there would be no difficulty in finding land suitable for Jewish settlers, but I assume that this country is too far removed from Palestine to have any attractions for him (Weisbord, 30).

The historic longing for the Promised Land certainly motivated the Zionists, but they were also driven by the pressing need to save Jewish lives. Leo Pinsker (1821-1891; see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 13:545-8) articulated this territorialist position:

The goal of our present endeavors must not be the "Holy Land" but a land of our own. We need nothing but a large piece of land for our poor brothers; a piece of land which shall remain our property from which no foreign master can expel us (Weisbord, 41).

Rabbi Dr. Zivotofsky is on the faculty of the Brain Science Program at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

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While the need for a haven was acknowledged, the officially stated goal of Zionism, as unanimously adopted in Basel, Switzerland, at the First Zionist Congress in 1897, was “to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law” (Weisbord, 49).

In May 1901, Herzl began meeting with the sultan to help further the Zionist goal of securing Turkish Palestine. In July 1902, the sultan finally offered to give the Jews land in Mesopotamia, Syria and Anatolia in exchange for 2.6 million pounds, but he did not offer Palestine. Until then, Herzl had adamantly refused to consider other options; late in 1897, he had rejected a plan to settle Jews in Cyprus, as proposed by Davis Trietsch.⁵ Even later, while considering the East Africa option, Palestine was always on Herzl’s mind. Having failed with the sultan, he met with Russian leaders in July 1903 and received what turned out to be a duplicitous pledge that they would use their influence with Turkey and try to secure Palestine for the Jews.

In fact, the first non-Palestine option seriously considered was El Arish, Egypt. Lying adjacent to Palestine, the area was therefore not viewed as a repudiation of the ultimate goal, but rather as a temporary stepping stone to an ultimate move to Palestine. In the 1890s, Paul Friedman, a converted Jew, was deeply moved by the suffering of Russian Jews and wanted to establish a Jewish colony. (In December 1891 he had forty-six people who were ready to go with him to Egypt, but within a year the plan had disintegrated.⁶) Within the Zionist movement, however, the plan enjoyed many reincarnations.

Herzl’s immediate response to Chamberlain’s offer of present-day Kenya, as recorded in his diary, was the following:

Our base must be in or near Palestine. Later on we could also settle in Uganda, for we have masses of people ready to emigrate (Weisbord, 61).

The East Africa proposal led to one of the fiercest controversies in Zionist history and nearly destroyed the still

young and fragile Zionist movement. Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952), who was to become the first president of the State of Israel, recalled that that was the only time in his life there was a coolness between him and his pro-Kenya father and brother.⁷ Max Nordau (1849-1923), a defender of the East Africa plan, insisted that the goal was, and always would be, Zion, but that there were Jews who needed a haven now and could not wait.⁸ The event that ultimately moved the plan along was the horrific Kishinev Pogrom on April 6-7, 1903. Though it was not the only, nor even the largest, pogrom, it occurred in a city that by 1897 was 46 percent Jewish.

In Herzl's concluding speech to the Sixth Zionist Congress on *erev Shabbat*, August 28, 1903, he dramatically displayed his commitment to Palestine by raising his right hand and solemnly declaring in Hebrew, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning" (Psalms 137:5-6) (Weisbord, 148). Despite this pledge, Avraham Menachem Mendel Ussishkin (1863-1941) and other Russian Zionists continued to oppose the plan, as did the British Sephardic Chief Rabbi and Vice President of the First Zionist Congress Rabbi Moses Gaster (1856-1939).⁹

Surprisingly, one of the blocks of support for the Uganda Plan was the Religious Zionist Mizrahi movement, under the leadership of the esteemed Talmudic sage Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines (1839-1915). For the Religious Zionists, unlike the secular Zionists, there was no fear of forgetting Jerusalem. Even if the Jews found a temporary refuge in East Africa, the Religious Zionists would continue to pray for the return to Zion, and thus would never forget the ultimate goal of returning to the Land of Israel.¹⁰ Rabbi Reines is said to have voted with Herzl for the Uganda Plan in an effort to prevent the Zionist movement from splintering.

However, not all Religious Zionists supported the plan. Rabbi

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Yitzhak Nissenbaum (1868-1942), known as the “traveling Zionist preacher,” served as the link between Herzl and the Chovevei Zion movement, and attended the First Zionist Congress. In order to fight the Uganda Plan, he temporarily moved to Palestine, later returning to Poland, where he refused to leave during the Nazi occupation and was murdered in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942.

So too Rabbi Meir Berlin (Bar Ilan; 1880-1949), son of the famed Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin), who attended his first Zionist congress as a delegate in 1905, voted against the Uganda Plan. Nonetheless, he attended many future congresses. In 1926 he made *aliyah*, and, at the Twentieth Zionist Congress in 1937, Rabbi Berlin was one of the few to vote against the Partition Plan. “We should be ready to accept harsh conditions and even war if that is what is needed to inherit the complete and Biblical Eretz Yisrael. ... It is our belief that Eretz Yisrael in its totality belongs to us,” he stated.

Despite being approved for consideration by the Zionists, the Uganda Plan was almost killed in December 1903 due to difficult negotiations between Zionist leaders and the British Foreign Office regarding, among other things, the exact size and location of the East Africa allocation. The region finally settled upon was an area known as the Uasin Gishu plateau. It also became clear that England was offering the Jews only limited autonomy, on par with that of an English county.

Even the very Jews who most needed to be saved were passionately opposed to Kenya or any place other than the Land of Israel. As Herzl said, “These people have a rope round their necks and still they refuse” (Wheatcroft, 110; Weisbord, 147).

Not only were Jews being persecuted and murdered, but their options for refuge were dwindling. England, for example, was considering legislation to ban aliens. In the midst of the Zionist movement’s internal wrangling over the

East Africa plan, its intense negotiations with England and the renewed contact with Turkey over Palestine, the movement was dealt a stunning blow—on July 3, 1904, Herzl died at the young age of forty-four.

David Wolffsohn (1856-1914) succeeded Herzl as president of the World Zionist Organization. An expedition had been planned to visit Mombasa, Kenya, to investigate the feasibility of the East Africa plan, but had been held up by politics, and, most significantly, by a lack of funds. In the summer of 1904, a non-Jewish Englishwoman, Mrs. E.A. Gordon, secretly donated the cost of the mission. In December 1904, a full sixteen months after the Sixth Zionist Congress, Wolffsohn reluctantly dispatched the expedition. The delay irritated the British and harmed the reputation of the Zionist organization.¹¹

The commission, headed by Major A. St. Hill Gibbons (1859-1916), a well-known African explorer and author, also included Professor Alfred Kaiser, a Swiss explorer and scientist, and Nachum Wilbusch (Wilbuschewitz) (1879-1971), a Russian civil engineer and the only Jew of the three.¹² In early 1905, the group spent about two months exploring the interior of the African region. Kaiser emerged pessimistic, Wilbusch was disparaging of the whole idea and Major Gibbons was only mildly more hopeful, with his report offering a tepid recommendation for an African Jewish colony. On May 22, 1905, the Greater Actions Committee, a sub-committee of the Zionist Congress, met in Vienna to review the report and unanimously voted to recommend to the Zionist Congress that the scheme not proceed.

The Uganda Plan was officially rejected at the Seventh Zionist Congress (1905) in Basel, and the decision was conveyed to the British government by Greenberg on August 8, 1905.

By implication, the rejection was the delegates’ assertion, finally, that the Jewish homeland would be nowhere but the Land of Israel. However, twenty-

eight of the delegates had refused to accept the overwhelming decision of the Congress. These “territorialists” believed that the most important issue at hand was saving Jewish lives. Led by Israel Zangwill (1864-1926) and Nahum Syrkin, and supported by Lucien Wolf and the Rothschild brothers, Leopold and Baron Nathan Mayer, they left the Zionist movement. Zangwill declared that “there are wild beasts in East Africa, but in Jerusalem there are wilder creatures. There are religious fanatics [hostile Muslims]” (Weisbord, 227).¹³

In 1905, Zangwill formed a new organization, the Jewish Territorial Organization, known as ITO and headquartered in London, whose goal was to find *any* autonomous land for the Jews. While proclaiming broad-based support, the ITO never made much headway either with its attempts at concessions from the British government or in garnering Jewish backing. It was a thorn in the Zionist movement’s side and caused it political harm. ITO’s activities essentially ceased with the appearance of the Balfour Declaration in November 1917, which officially stated the British government’s support for a Jewish state. Zangwill rejoined the mainstream Zionists, and the ITO officially disbanded around 1925, four years after Zangwill’s death. It has been convincingly argued that it was Herzl’s negotiations for East Africa that laid the groundwork for the Balfour Declaration (Weisbord, 255-6).¹⁴

Herzl’s serious consideration of Kenya as a place of refuge for the Jews stemmed not from his lack of appreciation for the Land of Israel, but rather from his overwhelming desire to save Jewish lives. Herzl did not live to see the modern State of Israel, but he did describe his dream in great detail in his utopian novel, *Altneuland*.¹⁵ In the very last paragraph of the book, Herzl has his main characters explain the source of the success of their utopian Jewish country, which included the construction of the *Beit Hamikdash*.

At last Fredrich asked a question, and each answered in his own way: “We

see before us a new and a happier form of human society here—by what was it created?” ... Steineck, the architect: “the united nation.” Kingscourt: “the new technology.” “Knowledge,” said Dr. Marcus ... but the venerable Rabbi Shemuel rose and solemnly proclaimed “God.”

Herzl ends his masterpiece on that note, with a rabbi attributing to God the coming to fruition of all that Herzl perceived as good! An insightful glimpse into the nature of what was lying in the pure soul of the visionary of modern-day Israel. **IA**

Notes

1. For the complete story of the Uganda Plan, see Robert G. Weisbord, *African Zion: The Attempt to Establish a Jewish Colony in the East Africa Protectorate, 1903-1905* (Philadelphia, 1968). Much of the information found in this article is taken from this work. An additional source is Jehuda Reinharz, *Chaim Weizmann: The Making of a Statesman* (New York, 1993), vol. 1, 165-210.

2. It was not only many Zionists who opposed the plan. The immediate response of Lord Delamere, a leader of the East African whites, was that he did not know details of the plan, but that “generally he objected strongly.” On August 28, 1903, he sent a telegram to *The Times* (London) stating: “Feeling here very strong against introduction alien Jews.” At a meeting of settlers it was stated that “Jews rendered themselves obnoxious

to the people of every country to which they went” and “they were people alien in their habits, thoughts and actions” (Weisbord, 81-83). It seems that every epithet and term of opprobrium, every cliché and unflattering stereotype of the Jew that was common in contemporary anti-Semitic movements, was found in *The African Standard*, a settler paper used as the forum for the settler attack on the “Zionist invasion” (Weisbord, 89, 252). The misconception that the plan was for Uganda even led to snide jokes about “Jewganda.” For their part, the settlers took pains to note that they were not anti-Semitic. And, to be fair, they probably would have strenuously resisted the introduction of any large non-English group. For a variety of reasons, almost all segments of British society, both in Africa and in Britain, Jew and non-Jew, were against the plan. The plan, however, did succeed in putting the protectorate on the map, and it turned out to be a watershed for the history of East Africa.

3. See Weisbord, 262-3, n. 8 for a long, yet only partial, list. Credit should be given to recent works that cite it correctly. Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *The Controversy of Zion* (Indianapolis, 1996), 110, n. 3 observes that “the territory concerned was in fact in modern Kenya,” and Rabbi Berel Wein, *Triumph of Survival: The Story of the Jews in the Modern Era 1650-1990* (Brooklyn, 1990), 245, n. 49 states that “the area under consideration approximates the borders of the current-day state of Kenya.”

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4. It was also referred to as “Brown’s Plan”; Brown was the Zionist code name for Chamberlain (Weisbord, 67). The code name for East Africa was “Samson.”

5. After the summer 1898 pogroms in Galicia, problems in Romania and being in deadlock with the sultan, Herzl *did* re-consider Cyprus in 1899 and again in 1901.

Trietsch (1870-1935) was a Dresden-born writer who had participated in the First Zionist Congress. He was convinced that the problem of Jewish immigration could be solved by Jewish colonization of Cyprus. For sources on this scheme, see Weisbord, 51-53 and 271, n. 33.

6. See Weisbord 55-56 and 272, n. 49-50. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Paul Friedman.”

7. Weizmann, supportive for the first forty-eight hours, quickly became adamantly opposed to the Uganda Plan. His position is articulated in the famous story of his January 1906 meeting in Manchester with former British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, arranged by Charles Dreyfus, chairman of the Manchester Zionist Society and an ardent “Ugandist.” After Balfour explained the practical benefit of the Uganda Plan, Weizmann, while agreeing that it was a well-intentioned offer, explained why the Jewish people

would accept nothing but the land to which they were historically and emotionally tied. Weizmann asked Balfour if he would change London for Paris. The latter replied, “No, but London is the capital of my country.” Weizmann responded, “Jerusalem was the capital of our country when London was a marsh.” Balfour later said, “It is curious—the Jews I meet are quite different.” To which Weizmann replied, “Mr. Balfour, you meet the wrong kind of Jews.” See M.W. Weisgal and J. Carmichael, eds., *Chaim Weizmann: A Biography by Several Hands* (New York, 1963), 93.

8. On Weizmann’s and Nordau’s feelings about the Kenya proposal, see Weisbord 292-3, n. 2 (Weizmann) and 294, n. 8 (Nordau).

9. Despite his opposition to Herzl’s plan, he named his son Theodor Herzl Gaster (1906-1992) after the recently deceased Zionist leader.

10. Ironically, some of the most vociferous modern mockers of Herzl’s contemplation of the Uganda Plan have nowadays taken comfortable refuge in such places as Monsey and Flatbush, New York and Melbourne, Australia—and at a time when there *is* a Jewish homeland in the Land of Israel.

11. Not everyone procrastinated. Upon hearing about the plan, a handful of adventurous South African Zionists moved to East Africa. Most took up farming and many continued to live there even after the project was officially abandoned.

12. Wilbusch’s diary and other papers are available at the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem.

13. As a solution to the Arab question, Zangwill called for the transfer of Arabs from Palestine to neighboring Arab states.

14. It is interesting to note that a Kenya plan was again briefly proposed in 1938 as a solution to the problem of Jewish European refugees. It is an irony of history that it was Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, Joseph Chamberlain’s son, who severely curtailed that plan, and that Russian Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky, who had voted against the plan in 1903, wondered in the 1930s whether it was a mistake to have passed up the “chance for salvation” offered by the British government (Weisbord, 258-9).

15. According to his diary (30 August 1899), the “secular” Herzl modeled the name of his work after the famous Prague Synagogue, the Altneuschul.

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