

Wearing the Empire: Suits, Masculinity and the Making of Colonial Citizenship in British-ruled Palestine

Hadas Fischer, PhD. Candidate, the Yavetz School of Historical Studies, Tel Aviv University

The male suit is a prominent object in the global history of consumer culture. An icon of modern Western masculinity and of modernity itself, it has long signified notions of industriousness, political authority and respectability. While literature on the significance of the suit to the history of the West is abundant, this paper looks at the familiar commodity from a lesser-known perspective - that of the colonial periphery. Focusing on a specific case study - British-ruled Palestine in the turbulent 1940s - the paper aims at excavating the cultural politics of the suit in the context of late colonial rule, sewing together consumption, gender and social interactions.

British rule in Palestine, lasting under the international mechanism of the Mandate system from 1922 to 1948, is mostly researched via the lens of political and military history. However, the colonial state that evolved in Palestine during the period was also significant in shaping local economic, social and cultural practices. The relationship between habits of consumption and the state, or in other words the constituting of the act of consumption as a civic engagement, is one such example. In the dramatic years of the Second World War, while the British Empire was fighting a defining and demanding battle and peoples throughout the world were struggling with austerity and scarcity, the British government in Palestine devised and operated a mass-scale endeavor to produce and sell to local men at fixed and affordable prices high-quality, English wool, tailor-made suits. This policy was based on the notion that facing the economic hardships of war – reduced supplies and drastic rise in the cost of living – every civilian is entitled to achieve certain consumerist standard. The Tailoring Scheme, as it was known, was widely popular and tens of thousands of so-called "Government suits" were made and sold under its name. Through the Tailoring Scheme, the Empire and its ideals of masculinity were commodified. In its venture into the retail business, the colonial state was taking over market exchanges, and offering colonized people a new form of colonial citizenship – embodied belonging, achieved through practices of consumption and dress – at a time in which the Empire was fighting for its survival.