

Weizmann, Chaim

(1874--1952), Scientist and Zionist statesman who served as the first president of the State of Israel.

Born in Russia, Weizmann studied chemistry in both Germany and Switzerland. He moved to England in 1904 to work at the University of Manchester. During his early years in Great Britain, Weizmann became very active in the World Zionist Organization and the English Zionist Federation. He played a key role in British war production in World War I, having developed a way to produce acetone. During World War I, Weizmann came to the conclusion that it was not the crumbling Ottoman Empire that should be depended on to further the Zionist goal of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine, but rather the British Empire, which soon took control of Palestine as a British colonial "mandate." In November 1917 Weizmann played a major role in securing the Balfour Declaration, the British government's promise to support the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1920 Weizmann was elected president of the World Zionist Organization, and in 1929 he helped establish an expanded Jewish Agency.

After Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Weizmann took over the Jewish Agency's Department for the Settlement of German Refugees. He used his diplomatic contacts with various world leaders to try to ease the persecution of Jews in Germany and other Nazi-dominated areas and to try to get as many Jews as he could out of Germany and into Palestine. After World War II broke out, Weizmann called for the creation of a Jewish fighting unit within the British army; this was finally achieved in 1944. Weizmann also tried to organize various rescue efforts, but the British government consistently refused to help him in his struggle. They declined to suspend the White Paper of 1939, which severely restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine, and denied a proposal to pay the Germans large amounts of money in exchange for Jewish lives. Weizmann also asked the British government to bomb the extermination camps, to no avail (see also Auschwitz, Bombing of).

After the war, Weizmann continued working for the Zionist cause. In February 1949 he was elected the first president of the newly established State of Israel.