

A DISCOURSE OF DELEGITIMISATION: THE BRITISH LEFT AND THE JEWS

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Introduction

In 1965, three years before an eruption of left-wing protest across Europe and the United States, the American socialist Irving Howe sounded a note of warning about the growing mood of radicalism gripping university campuses and sections of the civil rights movement¹. In an essay for *Dissent*, Howe assembled a ‘composite portrait’ of what he called the ‘New Leftist’ – a term he acknowledged to be ‘loose and not very accurate’, but the most optimal description available for what ‘sometimes looks like kamikaze radicalism, sometimes like white Malcolmism, sometimes like black Maoism.’

While Howe admired the New Leftist stress on transforming the self as well as society, and while he decried the ‘spirit-squashing’ American educational system, which spurred the more sensitive students to question, to argue and then to disrupt, he identified several discomfiting trends nonetheless. Among them were: a lack of nuanced thought; a hostility towards liberalism; a vicarious, if mostly theoretical, indulgence in violence; a visceral anti-Americanism; an unshakeable belief in the decline of the west, despite empirical evidence to the contrary; and, most perceptively, a growing sympathy for authoritarian rulers and regimes in post colonial states who ‘choke off whatever weak impulses there are toward democratic life.’

By 1968, when the New Left had firmly established itself in the vanguard of radicalism, much to the chagrin of old-style communists and social democrats, all these features were still intact. Global in scope and ambition, the New Left was supremely confident of its own victory, even if it lacked moral, ideological and organisational coherence. The near evangelical nature of this certainty encouraged a view of the world as bisected into ‘allies’ and ‘enemies’, with the identity and social position of a group determining which camp it belonged to.

There is a tendency to regard the political trends of the late 1960s with a degree of romantic affection. Yet closer examination of those elements that Irving Howe, with remarkable prescience, identified as troubling should encourage a revisionist assessment. As a period which has fallen under the gaze of novelists and filmmakers’ almost as much as political scientists and historians, the latter half of that decade is primarily remembered for its rejection of the stuffy moral codes of the previous generation and the advocacy of personal liberation. What becomes obscured here is that many political activists flirted with decidedly anti-democratic ideas and movements, such as Maoism in China and the Viet Cong in North Vietnam. Alongside this was an acceptance of the legitimacy and the necessity of revolutionary violence, a position ideologically blessed by Frantz Fanon², whose writings on decolonisation provided an interpretative framework for the New Left’s encounter with nationalism in the Third World.

The individual icons of the New Left, such as Fanon, Regis Debray and Che Guevara³, were a step removed from classical Marxism. ‘When you examine at close quarters the colonial context,’ Fanon wrote⁴, ‘it is evident that what parcels out the

world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species... This is why Marxist analysis should be stretched every time we have to deal with the colonial problem.’ Whereas social conflict was, for orthodox Marxists, determined by the relationship of competing classes to the means of production, the New Left sought to widen the net. ‘Allies’ and ‘enemies’ were social constructs; where one belonged was decided not solely on the basis of class affiliation, but in terms of group identity as well. As such, ‘imperialists’, ‘colonists’ and ‘settlers’ – not necessarily the owners of the productive and distributive forces, but always foreigners and aliens functioning as agents of an external predator – were set in stone as enemies. Using the escalation of the Vietnam war and casting the North Vietnamese struggle as a paradigm for other Third World nationalist movements, including the Palestinians, it was only a matter of time before ‘Zionists’ joined the rogues gallery. A pro-Palestinian demonstration in London in 1969 offered a flavour of the new mood when it gathered under the slogan: ‘From Palestine to Vietnam – One Enemy! One Fight!’⁵.

Thus did the Left find itself, once again, confronting its perennial ‘Jewish Question’.

The Problem of Delegitimisation

The relationship between the Left and the Jews has always been fraught. There are many instances of mutual solidarity, and the extensive contribution of individual Jews to socialist thought and practice is well known. However, the abiding impression left by even a casual probing of the two groups’ joint relations reveals that these have frequently been adversarial. What is often referred to in Britain and elsewhere as the ‘New Antisemitism’⁶ – its points of origin located in the Palestinian intifada of October 2000 and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and its defining characteristics made up of an uncompromising opposition to the legitimacy of Jewish national aspirations and a contempt for Jewish concerns – is not particularly new. The aim of this chapter is to examine the historical provenance of the Judeophobic attitudes which can be found across the continuum of the Left in Britain specifically, from the extremist fringe to the social democratic and liberal mainstream.

Although egalitarian, cosmopolitan, and internationalist principles are common to all variants of socialist doctrine, these have not immunised the Left from antisemitism. What the German socialist leader August Bebel denounced as the “socialism of fools” is as old and as resilient as the Left itself. What has changed, however, is the character of the prejudice. To reiterate, the advent of the New Left led to the downgrading of orthodox Marxist analysis. Consequently, the orthodox Marxist notion that the Jews – as an economic agent – perform a distinctive function within a system purposed for the extraction of surplus value was replaced by the anti-colonialist notion that the Jews – as a political collective – remain integral to the maintenance of imperial (more precisely, American) hegemony on a global level.

The shift from the politics of class to the politics of identity has meant that the Left’s main imperative has been to express solidarity and seek out alliances with those groups opposed to the dominance of the United States. In this worldview, America is regarded as the main foe. Any concerns about the political ideas and affiliations of such groups have been subordinated to the larger goal of anti-Americanism. A wide range of organisations have, therefore, been branded as worthy of support, from Latin American populists like the Frente Sandinista (FSLN) in Nicaragua to Arab

nationalists, of both conservative and radical hues, in Syria, Iraq, Libya and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). In recent years, this comradeship has been extended by large sections of the Left to the Islamist movements and their followers in Europe⁷. As the old Arab proverb would have it, ‘My Enemy’s Enemy is My Friend.’

The contemporary alliance between the western Left and nationalist and religious radicals in the Middle East is of special concern here. Arab and Muslim radicals have always denied that Israel, uniquely among the states in the international system, has the right to exist. That position is shared by a large proportion of western Leftists. Thus, three points warrant consideration.

First, the opposition not to Israel’s security policies alone but to its very legitimacy means that, as in Islamist and Arab nationalist discourse, the terms “Jew,” “Israel,” and “Zionist” are increasingly interchangeable in contemporary Left-wing discourse. In addition, this discourse of delegitimation has been standardised and globalised⁸. Finally, the themes and motifs associated with delegitimation are increasingly gaining recognition outside the activist margins, for example, among politicians broadly described as “progressive,” among prominent academics, and in liberal media outlets.

When the concept of delegitimation is introduced, the common refrain that there is a clear analytical boundary between antisemitism and anti-Zionism becomes harder to sustain. The Left has always bristled at the contention that opposition to Zionism equates with antisemitism, pointing out that many Jews, from the socialists of the Bund to the fundamentalists of Neturei Karta, have declared themselves to be anti-Zionists. Yet all this demonstrates is that anti-Zionist arguments, whether or not articulated by Jews, can be based upon multiple foundations with very little intellectual commonality: Satmar and Belzer rabbis, Marxists, Arab nationalists and Islamists are all opposed to Zionism, but for different reasons with very little overlap. In addition, to reproduce old ideological or theological objections to Zionism which do not account for the history of the Jewish people in the twentieth century and the associated changes which Jewish identity has undergone, is somewhat disingenuous. Although there is a dogma on the Left, as well as among Islamists, that Judaism is merely confessional, modern Jewish identity increasingly embraces cultural, religious and national elements. In other words, most Jews do not see themselves as belonging to a group that is distinct only in terms of religion. Neither do Diaspora Jews perceive a contradiction in identifying with the countries in which they live and expressing solidarity, emotional and political, with Israel; in that sense, they are very similar to other minorities, such as Greeks in the United States or Indians in Britain.

What worries Jewish communities is that standards of extraordinary severity are applied to Israel alone, thus delegitimising a major component of Jewish identity. Israel is not condemned for what it does, but for what it is. Syria and Sudan might be criticised for their woeful human rights records, but it is never suggested that either state is illegitimate in itself, even though the borders of both states were created by conflict and both have engaged in the ethnic cleansing and religious purging of minorities⁹. Neither state is regarded, in contrast to Israel, as an inherent pariah. Neither state, therefore, is the subject of relentless campaigns questioning their right to exist; nor are they the targets of economic, academic and other boycotts. Hence,

there is a profound sense among many Jews, inside and outside Israel, that they are being judged by criteria which apply to them alone. And this does not even broach the specific political canards which accompany delegitimation, such as the claim that Israel is an apartheid state, when the reality is that the only Arabs in the Middle East who enjoy human and civil rights which conform to democratic standards are those who are citizens of Israel.

Therefore, delegitimation is a concept which provides a meeting point for both Left and Right versions of antisemitism. The classic antisemitism associated with the xenophobic Right and its Leftist variant are linked by a profound enmity toward the empowered, autonomous Jew. For the extreme Right, antisemitism is based on a dark fantasy about the malign effects of Jewish power, which integrates the financial and the political spheres. In the Leftist imagination, the only good Jew is the invisible Jew, one who is assimilated totally by his surroundings.¹⁰ By contrast, Jewish national consciousness is, *a priori*, reactionary, supremacist, and politically aligned with imperialism. In order to understand why this is so, a closer examination of the ideological development of the New Left is necessary.

From Suez to Saigon: Jews and the New Left

The year 1956 was an important milestone in the intellectual evolution of what was to coalesce into the New Left in the coming years. The Soviet intervention in Hungary provided stark evidence of the culture of repression intrinsic to the Stalinist model of socialism, while the failed Anglo-French intervention in Egypt exposed the limits of imperial hubris. For many Leftists, profound disillusionment with the Soviet Union coincided with the hope that fertile ground for socialist politics would be found in the new post-imperial states. Suez and Hungary thus established the hallmarks of the New Left: a critical distancing from the Soviet Union, even though this stopped short of outright disavowal, and a broad identification with post-colonial regimes in the developing world. In the latter case, the rampant human rights abuses in these countries were either grudgingly conceded or ignored altogether.

These twin catalysts for the renewal of left-wing politics were neatly captured by one of Britain's most noted New Left theoreticians, the cultural historian Raymond Williams, who sought to explain the new politics of the Left. 'Behind it,' wrote Williams¹¹, 'there was a political shockwave – first felt, as always, among the young – from the combined effects of Hungary and Suez: a bitter reaction against imperialism and that lying invasion of Egypt, but also a bitter reaction against established Communism of the kind associated with Stalin, and persisting, though in less terrible forms, under his successors.'

Several previously divergent constituencies were swept up by the new current: revolutionary Leftists, disillusioned former members of the Communist Party, advocates of nuclear disarmament, Labour radicals and general egalitarians. Consequently, this burgeoning Leftist movement adopted several basic principles that, with hindsight, do not sit together comfortably: 'libertarian and democratic,' Williams declared¹², 'and also militantly socialist and against capitalism and imperialism.'

Suez is of concern to a study of antisemitism on the British Left because of the involvement of Israel in the conflict and because of certain parallels with the Iraq war of 2003. In 1956, Prime Minister Anthony Eden's decision to strike at the Egyptian

leader Gamal Abd'el Nasser, following the latter's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal, divided 'Englishmen against each other with unusual passion'¹³. As with Iraq, at the outset of the Suez conflict, there were two principle sides. Eden denounced Nasser and pointed to the commercial and strategic significance of the Middle East in general and the Suez Canal in particular. His opponents demanded a different relationship with the post-colonial countries, based upon the principle of the sovereign equality of states and universal acquiescence to international laws and norms as embodied by the UN Charter.

At the same time, there were noteworthy differences with the Iraq war. Critics of Tony Blair believed that he would follow in Eden's path and end his Premiership broken by what they saw as an irresponsible foreign adventure. As it turned out, it was Saddam Hussein's regime which collapsed – the exact opposite of Nasser, who withstood the assault and emerged from the conflict as a titanic figure of Arab nationalism¹⁴. On the international level, the Suez intervention was sharply opposed by the United States; this played a decisive role in the decision to end hostilities and deploy a UN force separating the Israeli and Egyptian armies. Most significant, from the perspective of this essay, was that outside the Arab world there was virtually no special emphasis on Israel's role alongside Britain and France. Nor was there any thundering anti-Zionist rhetoric from the war's opponents in the west. Suez was perhaps the last occasion where it was possible to oppose great power ambitions in the Middle East without denouncing Zionism at the same time. During the 2003 war with Iraq, the notion that the US was fighting the war for the overarching purpose of strengthening Israel's strategic position – indeed, that this was above all an 'Israeli' war – was commonplace on the Left¹⁵. But during the Suez conflict, the assertion of Arab commentators and the Soviet government that the west had been duped by Zionism did not resonate with the western Left¹⁶.

Why was this the case? To begin with, Israel had not yet been categorised, in the moral hierarchies of the Left, as an 'oppressor' state. Even though both the Suez conflict and the Algerian war for independence from France had established solidarity with the Arab cause as a *sine qua non* for the Left, it was not until after 1967 that Israel and Zionism attracted the same degree of contempt as had the *pièdes noirs*. In part, this was because of a strong sympathy for Israel, particularly in the British Labour Party, as the renewed hope of a downtrodden people. This meant that the 17 Jewish Labour MPs in 1956 were able to oppose the Suez intervention without fundamentally compromising their support for Israel, something made even easier by both Eden's reluctance to link the Suez issue to Israel's security and a residual antisemitism within the Conservative Party. The American political scientist Leon Epstein illustrates an interesting point in this regard¹⁷. As the House of Commons prepared to debate the Suez crisis, the Jewish Labour MP and opponent of the Suez intervention, Maurice Orbach, greeted Sir Thomas Moore, a Conservative MP with a record of sympathy for the British fascist Oswald Moseley and a supporter of Eden's policy, with the ironic cry, 'Another friend of the Jews! Up the Blackshirts!'

In addition, the Palestinian refugees had not been established as an independent political actor at the time of Suez. Although Palestinian fedayeen began launching raids into Israel from 1949, the PLO was not formed until 1964 and did not assert its independence from the Arab states until 1968, when it drew up a Charter notable for its strident nationalist tone and implacable enmity towards Zionism¹⁸. And finally,

when the Suez crisis erupted, the Protocol between Britain, France and Israel drawn up at Sevres in October 1956 – whereby France and Britain, following an Israeli attack on Egypt, would issue an ultimatum for an end to the fighting and then deploy French and British troops along key points of the canal – was still shrouded in secrecy. Arabist writers have pointed to the Sevres Protocol as proof of Israel's determination to humble the Arab world now that the Palestinians had been dispossessed¹⁹. What this assertion ignores, of course, is the question of Nasser's own intentions; not only did he block the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping and sponsor raids into Israeli territory, he had also assembled, with Soviet and Czech assistance, an armed force more powerful and threatening than all the other Arab armies combined²⁰.

The nascent New Left did not, then, translate its opposition to the Suez conflict into formal anti-Zionism: neither the Zionist project, nor Israel's right to exist, were questioned, even if there was some discomfort over Israel's decision to strike at Egypt. Prior to the 1967 war, the most ferocious attacks on Zionism emanated from the Soviet Union and its satellite states, as well as from the pro-Moscow Communist Parties. As David Cesarani has shown²¹, many of the propaganda themes which were eagerly adopted by the far Left after 1967 – the illegitimacy of Israel as a state, the fictitious collaboration between Zionists and Nazis – were Muscovite in origin. In 1967, while the French Communist Party newspaper *L'Humanite* was publishing articles questioning Israel's right to exist and bracketing the Arab struggle against Israel with the North Vietnamese struggle against the United States, Jean-Paul Sartre, by now firmly in his revolutionary phase, was expressing his anguish that the Jewish and Arab national causes, both of which he was sympathetic to, were locked in a deadly conflict. Sartre's agonising symbolised the position of many Leftist intellectuals who were not prepared to follow the harsh Soviet line on Israel.

An interview given to the *New Left Review*, the leading journal of British socialist intellectuals, by the Jewish Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher in the aftermath of the 1967 war provides an instructive contrast to the excesses of Soviet demonology²². It should be pointed out that Deutscher was decidedly not a Zionist; his position might be described as 'anti anti-Zionist'. In an essay published in 1954, Deutscher explained that his original opposition to Zionism 'was based on a confidence in the European labour movement, or, more broadly, in European society and civilisation, which that society and civilisation have not justified.'²³ Even so, he remained guarded in his approach to Israel, becoming far more critical after the 1967 war, as the *New Left Review* interview with him demonstrated.

Deutscher described the Israelis as the 'Prussians of the Middle East', warning them that their victory in 1967 contained the seeds of the country's undoing. Israel's leaders, he said, were guilty of mocking and exploiting the Holocaust for their own ends (although it is important to note that Deutscher did not use Holocaust imagery as a stick with which to beat the Israelis). Significantly, Deutscher argued that it was flawed to perceive any moral equivalence drawn between Zionism and Arab nationalism. As an anti-colonial movement, Arab nationalism, he said, 'has its historic justification and progressive aspect.'

That said, Deutscher was careful not to question Israel's legitimacy or right to exist, and he was concerned for its future. Israel's 'real friends', he said, would warn the

country against continuing down the road it had taken. He recognised the dangers of Arab anti-Semitism – coining the term the ‘anti-imperialism of fools’ – and the effects of this upon the Israeli psyche. Above all, he understood that the memory of the Holocaust was still fresh. For Deutscher, the challenge for Israel was to adopt a foreign policy that was not dominated by the tragic narrative of the Jewish experience in Europe.

Voices on the Marxist Left such as Deutscher’s – highly critical of Israel, yet rooted in an understanding of Jewish history and sympathetic to Jewish fears – were to become more and more isolated. In another major article on the Middle East, published by the *New Left Review* in 1969, Fawwaz Trabulsi argued for the dismantling of Israel as a Jewish state²⁴. It is equally true that Trabulsi scorned the various forms of Arab nationalism, such as Nasserism and Ba’athism, and that he denounced portrayal of the conflict in the Arab world as the product of a ‘Judeo-Zionist conspiracy’. But, unlike Deutscher, there was no sensitivity to the centrality of Jewish memory – just an assurance that Israelis need not regard the ‘proletarian vanguards of the Arab masses’ with trepidation.

The Left Against Zion

If the Palestinians were invisible during the Suez conflict, then perhaps the most significant consequence of the 1967 war was, as the Israeli anti-Zionist Akiva Orr put it in the British revolutionary newspaper *Socialist Worker*, their re-emergence ‘as a political entity’²⁵. From the late 1960s onwards, the Palestinian fedayeen organisations engraved themselves on the consciousness of the western Left. In Britain, organisations like the International Socialists (which was to become the *Socialist Worker’s Party*), the *Workers Revolutionary Party* and sundry other Trotskyist and anarchist groupuscles made anti-Zionism an integral part of the revolutionary creed. The hostility escalated to such a degree that by 1982, W.D. Rubinstein could state, in a survey of antisemitism on the Left and the Right: ‘Fringe neo-Nazi groups notwithstanding, significant antisemitism is now almost exclusively a Left-wing rather than a right-wing phenomenon.’²⁶

Indeed, the delegitimisation offensive against Israel presently pursued by sections of the anti-globalisation movement, the far Left and certain periodicals of the moderate Left – many of whose themes are shared by Islamists and parts of the far right – can reasonably be said to have begun in the aftermath of the 1967 war. It was then that the difference between the anti-Zionism of the *ancien* Left and that espoused by its new incarnation was established. As Robert Wistrich has argued, in becoming a ‘code word for the forces of reaction in general,’ Zionism assumed a global importance for the contemporary Left that not even Marx and Lenin could have foreseen. Consequently, ‘[t]he extreme Left in western societies not only denigrates Israel and Zionism in a systematic manner, but its irrational hostility frequently spills over into contempt or antipathy towards Jews and Judaism as such.’²⁷ This is graphically illustrated by a survey of Left-wing newspapers and pamphlets from the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s – a period which spanned the Yom Kippur War and the Lebanon war and which witnessed the spread of Palestinian terrorism against civilian targets, sometimes with the participation of European terror groups such as the *Red Army Faction*, better known as the ‘*Baader-Meinhoff Gang*’.

What is remarkable is that the same vulgar Marxist formula – made up of incendiary denunciations, constant parallels between Israel and Nazi Germany, portentous warnings about the extent of Jewish power in the United States, facile guarantees that Jews should not fear the Palestinian armed factions, and downright lying about historical facts – has sustained what passes for comment on the Middle East conflict in the journals of the Left for nearly forty years. For example, in 1969, *Socialist Worker* declared that ‘Zionist gangs... ruthlessly wiped out Arab villages and herded the people into concentration camps’²⁸ (the latter claim is one which no serious Arab writer on the Palestinian issue has ever made). One year later, the same paper, without a shred of evidence, asserted that ‘Zionist dockers from Greece’ had served as ‘scab labour’ to break the strike organised in 1936 by the Arab Higher Committee against the British authorities in Palestine (even if this claim was true, the subsequent annihilation of the Jewish dockers of the northern Greek port of Salonika by the Nazis should give pause for thought)²⁹. Palestinians who hijacked civilian aircraft were saluted as ‘brave... their cry must not go unanswered.’³⁰ In 1976, following a successful Israeli raid to rescue hostages held by Palestinian terrorists at Entebbe Airport – all of them Jews deliberately separated from the non-Jewish passengers who were released – *Socialist Worker* sneered: ‘Page after page of propaganda about “plucky little Israel” has poured from the presses, without a word about the 1.5 million Palestinian refugees.’³¹

Young Socialist, a paper published by another Trotskyist group, the Workers Revolutionary Party – which counted the actress Vanessa Redgrave among its members and enjoyed financing at different times from the Libyan and Iraqi regimes – was just as inflammatory, if not more so. In 1982, during the Lebanon war, the WRP accused Israel of ‘a genocidal onslaught against the Palestinian and Lebanese people.’³² Photographs of anti-Israeli rallies highlighted banners with slogans such as ‘Israeli Nazi Troops out of Lebanon’ and ‘Begin is the Hitler of the 80s’. And, in a calumny that even *Socialist Worker* might have shied away from, the WRP claimed: ‘The Zionists are employing horrendous gas weapons such as the ones used by the Nazis against the Jewish people. Zionist imperialism is planning to turn Beirut into a gas chamber for the Palestinians.’³³ Another revolutionary socialist newspaper, *Big Flame*, made a similar assertion: ‘The Israeli methods in Lebanon can derive their inspiration from only one source: Nazi Germany.’³⁴

Pro-Arab organisations on the mainstream Left, no doubt encouraged by the actions of more ‘respectable’ bodies such as the UN General Assembly, which decreed in 1975 that Zionism was a form of racial discrimination, were not averse to making wild allegations. In a pamphlet published by the Labour Middle East Council, the pro-Palestinian Labour MP David Watkins echoed the outlandish conspiracy theories of the Arab press regarding Israeli ambitions: ‘A pre-emptive war against Syria and Jordan would enable Israel to occupy further large areas of these countries, including Damascus and Amman... The long-standing Zionist dream of an empire from the Nile to the Euphrates would then be appreciably nearer.’³⁵ How would this land-grab be assisted politically? ‘There would be no shortage,’ wrote Watkins, ‘of powerful calls for US acquiescence in such an operation.’ The underlying strategic aim, Watkins argued, was the consolidation of Israeli and American control of the oil fields in the Arab Gulf – a thesis which many on the Left would still find perfectly plausible.

Some of the most transparently antisemitic material can be found in the newspaper *Labour Herald*. Now defunct, the paper was co-edited by Ken Livingstone, at the time leader of the Greater London Council (GLC) and presently Mayor of London. As well as printing gushing propaganda on behalf of the North Korean regime ('It is impossible not to be impressed by the achievements of the Korean people...Pyongyang is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, full of magnificent buildings')³⁶, *Labour Herald*, with Livingstone at the helm, ran cartoons which outdid the other Leftists papers when it came to wounding and insulting Jewish memories. During the Lebanon war, the Israeli Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, was depicted wearing an SS uniform replete with a 'Death's Head' cap, with the Star of David replacing swastika on his armband. His right arm was raised in a Nazi salute and he stood upon a pile of corpses. The cartoon was headed, in gothic script, 'The Final Solution'. A speech bubble has Begin saying, in the rhythms and cadences of a stereotypical Jewish trader, 'Shalom? Who needs Shalom with Reagan behind you?'.³⁷

Another *Labour Herald* cartoon showed Begin sitting in a large chair crowned with the Nazi eagle. Behind him was a map of the larger Mediterranean area, with names of the Arab countries, as well as Cyprus, Iran and the eastern portion of Africa crossed out and replaced with the word 'Israel'. The Mediterranean itself is renamed 'The Zionist Sea'. Flanking him are boxes of weapons addressed to 'South American fascists' and 'South Africa'. Begin is speaking into the phone. In another evocation of the Jewish trader, he says: 'Settlement? Of course we'll have settlements.'³⁸

The articles and images described above were united by a singular aim: to show that the Jewish State had adopted the ideology and methods of the very same regime which had exterminated six million Jews during the Second World War. This dovetailed rather neatly with another claim which remains widespread on the Left: that the Zionist movement actively collaborated with the Nazis. Whereas for the neo-Nazis the Holocaust is a hoax, for the far Left 'the Holocaust now emerges as the Jews (or Jewish nationalism's) greatest crime...the autogenocide of the Twentieth Century.'³⁹ During the mid-1980s, this pernicious allegation departed from the pages of relatively obscure Leftist periodicals for the glamour of the London stage.

Perdition: A Dress Rehearsal

In 1986, the play *Perdition*, by the Marxist playwright Jim Allen, brought the accusation of Zionist-Nazi collaboration to the British public's attention for the first time⁴⁰. Until that point, the Left's discussion of Jews and Israel, like most of its discussions, had been conducted internally, with leaders defining the doctrine and foot soldiers repeating it to each other. Now, a thesis that had been dismissed by scholars of the Holocaust was suddenly granted a wider audience.

Perdition was based on a well-known libel trial brought to the Jerusalem district court in 1954 by the former Hungarian Zionist leader, Rudolf Kastner. The defendant in the trial was an elderly Hungarian Jew, Malkhiel Grunwald, who was charged with defaming Kastner when he accused him of collaborating with the Nazis as they prepared to exterminate Hungary's Jews in 1944. At the time, Kastner's intent had been to negotiate a deal whereby the German army would be supplied with ten thousands trucks in exchange for a stay of execution. But according to Grunwald, Kastner had facilitated, through his negotiations with Adolf Eichmann, the destruction

of Hungary's Jews while enriching himself personally. The court acquitted Grunwald of the libel charge and strongly criticised Kastner's behaviour in Hungary. Kastner himself was assassinated just before Israel's Supreme Court overturned the Jerusalem court's decision⁴¹.

In the hands of a talented dramatist, this story could have probed the nature and limits of the moral choice confronting the leader of a beleaguered community, as well as the complex motives of the survivor who made these allegations. In Allen's hands, however, any such nuances and subtleties were purged. In his own words, *Perdition* was a tale of 'privileged Jewish leaders' collaborating 'in the extermination of their own kind in order to help bring about a Zionist state, Israel, a state which itself is racist.'⁴²

The announcement by London's Royal Court Theatre that it intended to stage the play sparked a furious public debate. Many Jewish scholars and leaders pointed to gross distortions and inaccuracies in the text, asserting that *Perdition* was little more than standard antisemitic conspiracy theory with a Leftist tinge. European Zionists, the play charged, betrayed Europe's Jews while 'all-powerful American Jewry' (a line from the play) discreetly approved the strategy. Indeed, the text was replete with lines that equated the power of Zionism with that of Nazism ('the Zionist knife in the Nazi fist') and highlighted the selfishness of Jewish leaders ('To save your hides, you practically led them to the gas chambers of Auschwitz').

In January 1987 the artistic director of the Royal Court, Max Stafford-Clark, declared that his doubts about *Perdition* were grave enough for him to cancel its performance. Although Stafford-Clark made the decision on his own, Left-wing activists were quick to point to a Zionist 'conspiracy'⁴³. The film director Ken Loach, a close colleague of Allen, claimed that the theater had caved in to pressure from prominent British Jews such as Dr. Stephen Roth (the founder of the Institute of Jewish Affairs, which became the Institute for Jewish Policy Research) Lord Weidenfeld, and Lord Goodman; men, Loach said, 'who can pay their way.'

For anyone exploring the recent history of antisemitism on the British Left, the *Perdition* affair is seminal for at least two reasons. First, the immense press coverage the affair generated meant that extreme anti-Zionist claims won wider attention, particularly among Britain's liberally inclined intelligentsia; as the past was interpreted through the prejudices of the present—the perception of Israel as a racist, militarist state—it is not surprising that these claims were given serious and sometimes sympathetic attention. Second, the affair rehabilitated the myth of the nefarious, transcendental power of Jewish individuals and organizations, whether manifested in wartime Hungary (the subject matter of the play) or modern-day London (the reason for the play's cancellation). Since 2000, a similar Judeophobic discourse, which carries both implicit and explicit warnings about the dangerous extent of Jewish power, has resurfaced in Britain.

Conclusion: The Red-Green Alliance

The spillage of anti-Zionism into antisemitism is an increasingly perilous feature of British political life, as it is elsewhere in Europe. As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, this development is largely the consequence of a long campaign of delegitimisation which began on the far Left and spread into the mainstream. Hence, it

is critical to understand that the ‘New Antisemitism’ has firm historical foundations. Yet it is equally true that, since the end of the Second World War, the conditions which enable the expression of anti-Jewish sentiment in democratic countries like Britain have rarely been as permissive as they are now. To understand why this is the case, it is necessary to explore in greater detail an issue mentioned at the beginning of this paper: the growing intimacy between the Left and the Islamists.

The very existence of this alliance represents a decisive shift for the Left. Radical socialism and radical Islam are far from obvious bedfellows and a strict focus on the key texts of both does not yield any synergies. Indeed, for many Islamist theoreticians, communism and Zionism are two sides of the same coin. To take one of many examples, the pamphleteer Salah al Din al Munajjid argued that, since Marx was a Jew, communism and Zionism were ‘slightly different means for solving the Jewish question and for serving Jewish interests. The guiding force behind their unholy alliance was the desire to destroy the Muslim world.’⁴⁴ In the light of the failures of Arab nationalism and Soviet communism, ideas such as these have found a receptive audience in the Arab countries and the wider Muslim world.

Out of necessity, perhaps, Muslim activists in Britain and Europe have taken a different approach to politics. In recent years, an alliance with the Left has become tactically prudent, given their shared concerns regarding discrimination, economic marginalisation and US foreign policy. Even so, this does not mean that traditionally liberal or progressive ideas have taken hold within Muslim communities. An abiding distaste persists for many of the issues which the Left has championed, such as women’s equality and gay liberation.

Moreover, while other minorities in Europe are generally identified by their original nationality (Indians or Ghanaians or Jamaicans), those from Islamic countries are merged together as ‘Muslims’, despite coming from vastly different cultures such as Bangladesh, Somalia and Egypt. This is not, however, the consequence of external prejudice. Muslim minorities have not been Islamicised because of a hostile press and public unwilling to appreciate communal and ethnic differences. The adoption of a Muslim identity which transcends such differences has been initiated in part by their own communal organisations and in part by anti-racist bodies⁴⁵. One result of this has been the entrenching and strengthening of organisations such as the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) which, while participating with non-Muslims in the political process, utterly disdains the secular character of western societies.

Given the key doctrinal differences among various Islamist schools, it hardly needs mentioning that not all of them sanction the participation of Muslim organisations in the politics of non-Muslim societies. For those groups committed to the revival of the Khilafah (Islamic Caliphate) through jihad, collaboration with non-Muslims is forbidden. Other groups, in the salafist tradition, scorn political activity altogether. The groups which have reached out to the Left, and which seek to extend Muslim influence through political activities, are those influenced by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood⁴⁶.

In Britain, the consolidation of London – nicknamed ‘Londonistan’ – as a centre of Islamist publishing and organising since the 1980s, the growing politicisation of Britain’s Muslim minorities on issues from the angry demonstrations against Salman

Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, through to the ongoing debate over state funding for Muslim schools, and the realisation that Muslims can flex electoral muscle, have all contributed to the formation of the 'Red-Green' Alliance. For the Left, groping for a cogent response to the post-Cold War order, there are clear advantages to an alignment with Muslim organisations: an empathetic constituency, the prospect of winning votes which might otherwise go the established parties, ideological renewal through an alliance with the 'oppressed'. For those Muslim organisations which take a more nuanced view of politics, a partnership with the Left offers the prospect of appealing for support beyond their own communities on a range of issues.

In particular, the issue of Palestine is a central campaign; so far, the Islamists have been extremely successful. 'Freedom for Palestine' was one of the main themes of the massive demonstration against the Iraq intervention which took place in London early in 2003, jointly sponsored by far Left organisations and MAB. At the European Social Forum, which took place in London in October 2004 with generous financial support for the Greater London Authority (GLA), dozens of workshops and seminars were held on the subject of the Palestinians, including one session which attacked Zionism specifically. And when organisations like MAB, which openly supports the Palestinian terror group Hamas, are finding an increasingly receptive audience on the British Left, whether in the 'Stop the War Coalition' or the 'Respect' political party, and when even extreme Right publications like 'Spearhead' maintain that 'Zionism' is *the* major threat in Britain, the political outlook is worrisome. Furthermore, the stakes are higher than many realise. As Giles Kepel has argued, since the Madrid bombings of 2004, Europe has emerged as 'the primary battlefield on which the future of global Islam will be decided.'⁴⁷

Much has changed, but much has stayed the same. The denial of victimhood to the Jews, the plundering of the Holocaust to condemn Israel⁴⁸, the conspiratorial portrayal of Jewish power and the inherent illegitimacy of Jewish self-determination are all constants. However, the Judeophobia of the British Left is integrating, ideologically and organisationally, with its Islamist counterpart. Consequently, British political discourse in the mosque, the street and the salon has been infected. This last assertion is not intended to subsume peculiarities and differences into a single framework; rather, the aim has been to discern a general pattern of Judeophobia and antisemitism in Britain which, ominously, continues to develop.

NOTES

¹ Irving Howe, 'New Styles in "Leftism"', *Dissent* 13 (Summer 1965), reproduced in *Selected Writings 1950-1990*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1990, pps. 193-220

² See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1968 and *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press, London, 1986

³ Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, Manchester University Press, 1986, Regis Debray, *Prison Writings*, Penguin, London, 1975

⁴ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, op cit. p. 40

⁵ See the report in *Socialist Worker*, No. 122, 15 May 1969

⁶ For a comprehensive overview of contemporary trends in anti-Jewish discourse, see Paul Iganski and Barry Kosmin (Eds.), *A New Antisemitism? Debating Judeophobia in 21st Century Britain*, Profile Books, London, 2003 and Ron Rosenbaum (Ed.) *Those Who Forget The Past – The Question Of Antisemitism*, Random House, New York, 2004

⁷ See Dave Hyde, 'Europe's Other Red-Green Alliance', *Zeek*, April 2003, available at http://www.zeek.net/politics_0304.shtml

⁸ See Daniel Goldhagen, 'The Globalization of Antisemitism', in *Forward*, 2 May 2003

⁹ Sudan was embroiled in a civil war against Christian and animist minorities in the south until 2004. In 2003, Arab militia backed by the Sudanese government began an ethnic cleansing campaign against non-Arab tribes in the western Darfur region. See Samantha Power, 'Dying in Darfur', *The New Yorker*, 30 August 2004. Syria, meanwhile, has a record of persecuting its Kurdish minority. See Mustafa Nazdar, 'The Kurds in Syria', in Gerard Chaliand (Ed.), *People Without A Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, Zed Press, London, 1980

¹⁰ As the Austro-Marxist Karl Kautsky put it, 'We cannot say we have completely emerged from the Middle Ages as long as Judaism still exists among us. The sooner it disappears, the better it will be, not only for society, but also for the Jews themselves.' Karl Kautsky, *Are the Jews a Race?*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1926, also available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1914/jewsrace/index.htm>

¹¹ Raymond Williams, 'Why Do I Demonstrate?', in *Resources of Hope*, Verso, London, 1989, p.62

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Leon D. Epstein, *British Politics in the Suez Crisis*, Pall Mall Press, London, 1964, p.2

¹⁴ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Faber and Faber, London, 1991, pps. 367-69

¹⁵ See, for example, Simon Tisdall, 'Bush and Kerry dance to the tune of Ariel Sharon', in *The Guardian*, 20 October 2004

¹⁶ The Soviet Premier, Nikolai Bulganin, accused Israel of 'playing with the fate of the world.' See Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, Penguin, London, 2000, p. 181

¹⁷ Epstein op cit., p. 177

¹⁸ The Palestine National Covenant, 1968, reproduced in Yehuda Lukacs (Ed.), *Documents on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict 1967-83*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pps. 139-43

¹⁹ See Maxime Rodinson, *Israel and the Arabs*, Pelican, London, 1968, pps.74-5. See also 'Eden Shredded Suez Secrets', in *The Sunday Times*, 6 September 1998

- ²⁰ See the section on Suez in Michael Oren, *Six Days of War*, Penguin, London, 2002, pps. 9-12
- ²¹ David Cesarani, *The Left and The Jews, The Jews and The Left*, published by Labour Friends of Israel, London, 2004, pps. 60-71
- ²² Isaac Deutscher, 'The Israeli-Arab War, June 1967', reprinted in *The Non-Jewish Jew*, Merlin Press, London, 1981, pps. 126-52
- ²³ Deutscher, 'Israel's Spiritual Climate', in *The Non-Jewish Jew*, op. cit. p. 111
- ²⁴ Fawwaz Trabulsi, 'The Palestine Problem', in *New Left Review* No. 57, September/October 1969
- ²⁵ Akiva Orr, 'Whirlpool of Instability gives hope to Arab Liberation Forces', in *Socialist Worker*, No. 84, June 1968
- ²⁶ W.D. Rubinstein, *The Left, The Right and the Jews*, Croom Helm, London, 1982, p. 9
- ²⁷ Robert Wistrich, *Left-Wing Anti-Zionism in Western Societies*, in R. Wistrich (ed). *Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism in the Contemporary World*, London, Macmillan, 1990, p. 48
- ²⁸ *Socialist Worker*, No. 103, 4 January 1969
- ²⁹ *Socialist Worker*, No. 160, 26 February 1970
- ³⁰ *Socialist Worker*, No. 187, 19 September 1970
- ³¹ *Socialist Worker*, No. 488, 7 August 1976
- ³² *Young Socialist*, Vol. 7, No. 12, 12 June 1982
- ³³ *Young Socialist*, Vol. 7, No. 16, 3 July 1982
- ³⁴ *Big Flame*, No. 107, July/August 1982
- ³⁵ David Watkins, *The World and Palestine*, Labour Middle East Council, London, 1980
- ³⁶ *Labour Herald*, Vol. 2. No. 49, 12 August 1983. The article is headlined 'Recognise North Korea!'
- ³⁷ *Labour Herald*, Vol. 2. No. 18, 7 January 1983
- ³⁸ *Labour Herald*, Vol. 2. No. 35, 6 May 1983
- ³⁹ Rubinstein, op. cit. p.115
- ⁴⁰ *Perdition* was published in 1987 by the anti-Zionist publishing house Ithaca Press
- ⁴¹ See Leora Bilsky, 'Judging Evil in The Trial of Kastner', *Law and History Review*, Vol.19 No. 1, Spring 2001
- ⁴² Quoted in David Cesarani, *The Perdition Affair*, in Wistrich, op. cit, p. 54
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, p.57
- ⁴⁴ Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 76
- ⁴⁵ Nick Cohen, 'Muslim is not a dirty word', in *New Statesman*, 4 October 2004
- ⁴⁶ See Giles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, Harvard University Press, 2004,

p. 265

⁴⁷ *ibid.* p. 241

⁴⁸ A notorious example of the abuse of Holocaust imagery involved the poet and critic Tom Paulin, who, after telling *Al Ahrām* in 2002 that ‘Brooklyn-born’ Jewish settlers should be shot, wrote a poem which described Israeli soldiers as the ‘Zionist SS’; as this chapter has demonstrated, such invocations of Nazism have plenty of precedents

About the author

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