

## **NO LEFT TURN: ISRAEL EAST AND WEST**

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On 10 July 2001, the Polish president, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, travelled to a ceremony in the little-known village of Jedwabne. He went to ask the Jewish people for forgiveness. In the stiff, summer heat of that same date sixty years earlier, up to 1,600 Jewish men, women and children were rounded up in the village marketplace. Some were beaten to death on the spot; the remainder were herded into a barn and burned alive. The records, unfortunately, are incomplete. But from what we know, it is clear that the Germans did have a role in assembling the Jews in the town square. There, however, their participation ended. It was not the SS that perpetrated this crime. It was ordinary, everyday Poles.<sup>1</sup>

To his great credit, Kwaśniewski's apology was unambiguous: 'We must beg the souls of those who died and their families to forgive us,' he said. 'Today, as a man, citizen and president of the Polish Republic, I ask pardon in my own name and in the name of those Polish people whose consciences are shocked by this crime.' Unfortunately, there were many Polish people whose consciences were not shocked by that crime. The local priest said he would not participate in 'lies'. There were reports that the mayor had had to seek police protection for asking his people to face up to the past. And opinion polls showed that a small majority across the country believed Poland had nothing to apologise for in any case.<sup>2</sup>

Surveys in recent years suggest that antisemitic prejudices in Poland remain widespread. This year, one put dislike for Jews at 45 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Others indicate that some antisemitic attitudes may actually be growing rather than diminishing.<sup>4</sup> And in Central and Eastern Europe, it is not just Poland. A survey published by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in 2004<sup>5</sup> found that more than a third of Jews in Hungary – the country in the region with by far the largest Jewish population (around 70,000) – thought there was a 'high level' of antisemitism in the country. Other surveys on the former communist world show a pattern of denial in some quarters over the role of local collaborators in the rounding up and deportation of Jews to death camps during the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> The picture is a depressing one.

Interestingly, though, it stands in stark – indeed, striking – contrast with observable attitudes to Israel. Poland and the other new members of the European Union from Central and Eastern Europe are remarkably untainted by the kind of mass hostility to the Jewish state so prevalent in the West. Universities have not become stalking grounds for anti-Zionist propagandists. Unions do not spend their time passing resolutions against Israel. Newspapers are not filled with invective against the 'Zionist entity', or by the writings of those who feel obliged to rise up in its defence. Political demonstrations are not decorated with Palestinian flags. Nor do they ring to the sound of ritual denunciations of 'the war criminal Sharon', as so often in the west of the continent, regardless, it seems, of what the demonstration is ostensibly about. Political parties, at least in the mainstream, discuss other things. The Israel–Palestine conflict is on the political agenda, to be sure, but only barely.

This, then, presents us with a conundrum. Those who would argue that antisemitism lies at the heart of modern Europe's obsession with Israel are forced to confront the reality that that part of Europe which carries with it the most baggage from the Holocaust (setting aside the special cases of Germany and Austria) and where traditional antisemitic prejudices remain the most widespread is the least hostile to the state of Israel. Antisemitic prejudices have not translated into virulent anti-Zionism. Antisemitism, or, at least, antisemitism alone, it seems, cannot therefore be at the root of the problem. So what is?

The most plausible answer is to be found in an understanding of the profoundly different way in which post-communist political cultures are configured as compared with their counterparts in the West. It is here, arguably, that we come face to face with the primary explanatory factor driving hatred of Israel in Western Europe and holding it in check in the East. That factor is left-wing ideology,<sup>7</sup> which remains a significant energising influence in the political culture of the West while being conspicuously absent further east. Why should this be? History, as ever, offers some arresting perspectives.

## **Socialism unmasked**

For seven and a half glorious months in 1968, Czechoslovakia conducted an experiment that would change the image of left-wing politics for ever, at least in Eastern Europe. Alexander Dubček's promise to give socialism a 'human face' led to a Prague Spring in which censorship was relaxed, economic reforms were enacted and 'civil society' sprang into action for the first time since the communist takeover twenty years before. Dubček's agenda was codified in the heady words of the Action Programme adopted at a plenary session of the party Central Committee on 5 April:

A more profound democracy and greater measure of civic freedoms will help socialism prove its superiority over limited bourgeois democracy and make it an attractive example for progressive movements even in industrially advanced countries with democratic traditions.<sup>8</sup>

The 1968 experiment, however, had two big problems which quickly emerged as fatal flaws. The first was that as soon as the communists relaxed their grip, it became embarrassingly clear that socialism, regardless of the facial makeover, was not what people wanted. Events started to spiral out of control. Students started discussing the crimes of Stalin, *and Lenin*. Ordinary people began to wonder why their standard of living had slipped so far behind that of the West. Former political prisoners formed K-231, a pressure group demanding a review of their cases. What started as an attempt to reform socialism was quickly turning into a nationwide movement to jettison it. A move to liberal democratic capitalism was the next logical step. Then there was the second problem: the Soviet Union invaded.<sup>9</sup>

The tragedy of Czechoslovakia in 1968 sent ripple effects across the world. Western socialists had yet another example of Soviet tyranny to explain away, following the invasion of Hungary twelve years earlier, the Nazi–Soviet pact which facilitated the start of the Second World War, and growing evidence of the truly extraordinary magnitude of the crimes of Stalin and Lenin. The case for the defence, as it were, was looking increasingly thin, as a rising generation of New Right ideologues was only too keen to point out. But it was inside the Soviet bloc itself, despite the superficial appearance of post-invasion stability, that the deepest changes in attitudes were beginning to take place.

The very concept of the reformability of the socialist system would now be put in question. Not publicly and not by the communist elites, of course. But by thinking sections of society: by teachers, writers, underground journalists, playwrights, philosophers and many others. Some became dissidents. Others kept their thoughts to themselves and to those they hoped they could trust. The anti-capitalist alternative to the liberal democratic system of the West was thus subjected to the closest of critical scrutiny, and was found wanting in every crucial respect. Intellectuals across the region who had once called themselves socialists, in what they came to realise was a mistaken faith in a potentially benign form of socialism, gradually ceased to do so.<sup>10</sup> Many, Václav Havel most notable among them, had profound concerns about the materialistic tendencies of modernity, its lack of believable ideals, its post-religious anomie. They were not naive, but they became convinced that such problems would have to be wrestled with from within the liberal democratic, capitalist scheme of things. The post-1968 intellectual *Zeitgeist* shifted irreversibly away from the Left. The new opinion-forming elites which flooded into government, media and business following the fall of communism twenty-one years later were overwhelmingly imbued with the politics of the Right – a particularly enlightened and in many cases fully modernised form of right-wing thinking, but Right-wing thinking nonetheless. Neither had they forgotten who in the West had helped them during the darkest years of communist rule, and who had sided with their oppressors. The consequences for attitudes to capitalism, the United States and ultimately Israel, would be profound.

The guiding ideological paradigm for all mainstream parties in Central and Eastern Europe since the end of communism has been neo-liberalism. Some parties are avowedly neo-liberal – the Freedom Union in the Czech Republic, for example. Others call themselves

Social Democrats – the Democratic Left Alliance in Poland, for instance. Some, such as Slovakia's KDH, call themselves Christian Democrats. Others, like Fidesz in Hungary, have infused their political programmes with nationalism. But regardless of what they call themselves, all such parties have been engaged in one overarching project over the past decade and half: the construction from scratch of a liberal democratic, capitalist system. Social democrats – often former communists – have privatised industry and deregulated prices with as much enthusiasm as conservatives, and have sometimes outdone them. The theory and practice of building share markets, bond markets and foreign exchange markets have engaged the minds and passions of all. While East European countries such as Slovakia have instituted flat tax rates, German and French elites push the European Union to stop them from doing so. Governments across the region have also worked hard to integrate themselves in global and trans atlantic structures such as the World Trade Organisation and NATO. The bond with the United States is constantly upheld as a central aim of foreign policy. In early 2003, it will be recalled, every single one of the eight former communist countries preparing for membership of the European Union and NATO<sup>11</sup> signed up to letters of support for the US invasion of Iraq.

The move provoked uproar in Paris and Berlin, and jubilation in Washington. The hopes of President Chirac and Chancellor Schröder for a united European front against the Bush administration lay in tatters. The US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, drew his now (in)famous distinction between the old anti-American Europe of the Franco-German axis and a 'New Europe' epitomised by the pro-US countries of the former communist bloc.

It is true that public opinion in all countries of the region was, and remains, opposed to the invasion. But crucially, that opposition was not accompanied by the kind of mass demonstrations which took place in the West, suggesting that it was softer and less committed in nature.

In Poland, it is also true that pro-American sentiment among the general population has waned somewhat since the end of communism. A poll in early 2005 suggested that generally positive feelings towards Americans have dropped to 45 per cent (still among the most positive in the survey, which canvassed attitudes to a variety of nations) from 62 per cent in 1993.<sup>12</sup> However, almost uniquely in the world, Poles emphatically backed George W. Bush in the US presidential elections of November 2004.<sup>13</sup> The most important of the Central European countries thus offers a sharp contrast with prevailing opinions about President Bush in the west of Europe. One such poll in France put support for Bush's opponent, John Kerry, at 87 per cent, with just 13 per cent backing Bush.<sup>14</sup>

Anti-Americanism, it seems, has little or no mileage in the mainstream political debate. And then there is Israel. Modern antipathy to Israel in the West is almost exclusively the preserve of the Left, as observers of West European politics are becoming increasingly aware. Vehement opposition to the Jewish state is accompanied, in such quarters, by similar levels of hostility to the United States, which is no coincidence. Israel is seen, rightly as it happens, as a core component of the global capitalist project. Those who argue contemptuously that Israel is a beach-head for American values in the Third World are not, in fact, too far from the truth. Israel is, after all, the only state in the region which approximates to the kind of law-based capitalist democracy operating in the United States. People who oppose the United States for what are alleged to be its global ambitions to turn the world into a mirror image of itself can hardly be neutral about the fate of one of the United States' staunchest allies in the heart of the Middle East – a region which contains the most aggressively anti-American political culture in the world. It is in the nature of the ideological Left to see things this way.

It may be that there is another aspect of political culture, present in the West but absent in the East, which could also help explain disproportionate Western hostility to Israel: post-colonial guilt. However much of a distortion this may be, it is possible that the relentless television images of 'rich white' Israelis engaged in conflict with 'poor non-white' Palestinians bring back disquieting memories in the West European collective consciousness. Since decolonisation and its aftermath have been central issues in important West European countries for much of the post-Second World War era, it could be that there is an inbuilt tendency among some in the opinion-forming elites to exculpate themselves of such guilt

feelings by projecting them onto a seemingly comparable example in the modern world. That, in fact, is how many anti-Israeli commentators, mainly once again on the Left, express themselves – routinely describing Israel as a ‘colonial power’ oppressing ‘indigenous peoples’. Such references have little resonance in Central and East European countries, whose people cannot see themselves as having participated in the imperial project. On the contrary, for most of their recent past they have been colonised by others: the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. There is, therefore, no post-colonial persona to exculpate. In so far as this is a contributory factor, it reinforces hostility to Israel in the West, while, once again, falling flat in the East.

In Western Europe, hostility to or at least ambiguity about the entire capitalist project, especially in its free-market formulation, is an enduring feature of the political, academic and media establishments. To be sure, the old Left does not have a stranglehold on the Western establishment. Any such suggestion would be absurd. But its presence and its influence remain unmistakable.

The eastern part of the continent thus emerges as an invaluable test case, shedding new and unexpected light on the true nature of the root causes of Western opposition to Israel. Its young political establishment has been constructed largely in the absence of, and in crucial respects in opposition to, a powerful leftist ideological tradition. That tradition has been thoroughly discredited by direct historical experience. Both anti-Americanism and its anti-Zionist twin, therefore, find their scope for expression constrained. The lens through which such prejudices are magnified has been broken.

### **Antisemitism and anti-Zionism revisited**

Evaluating the position of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe is awkward. In so far as the state of Israel now forms a central component of modern, secular Jewish identity, the region’s Jews are clearly in a far better position than their counterparts in the West. On the other hand, in terms of the prevalence of traditional antisemitic prejudices, the balance seems to tilt the other way, although there are far fewer Jews on whom such sentiments can be visited. Poland has a Jewish population of around 8,000. The Czech Republic has 6,000 Jews, as has Slovakia.<sup>15</sup>

What is interesting, though, is that it is not just Jews who are subject to the old antipathies of elemental racism. The survey quoted at the beginning of this essay on Poland, which found 45 per cent of respondents expressing antipathy to Jews, found 59 per cent expressing antipathy to Arabs – the least popular national or ethnic group among thirty-two listed in the survey. (And try asking a Czech, Slovak or Hungarian what they think about the Gypsies or Roma.)

It could be that popular prejudices about Jews in Central and Eastern Europe do in fact drive sentiments towards Israel, but are then trumped by even greater hostility to Palestinian Arabs. The evidence for this, though, is not convincing.

A survey by the German Marshall Fund of the United States in 2003,<sup>16</sup> for instance, asked respondents to register their feelings towards both groups on a thermometer scale of 0 to 100 – 0 representing the coolest possible reading and 100 the warmest. Poles gave a score of 33 to Israel and 35 to the Palestinians – almost identical readings. Another interesting finding comes out of the survey; Poles were cooler towards both Palestinians and Israelis than were West Europeans, and indeed Americans. Europeans gave exactly identical readings – 43 in each case – to both Israelis and Palestinians, while Americans were much warmer towards Israel – 60 – than they were to Palestinians – 39.

The survey is thus illuminating in various respects. It indicates that even in Western Europe, feelings among the general population towards Israelis and Palestinians are similar, being mildly cool towards both. The same is true in Poland, the biggest of the former communist states in the region, albeit at a lower level.

Taking all this together, we are left with the impression that the obvious disparity between hostility to Israel in the debate in Western Europe and its absence in the East is not a function of popular prejudices in *either* region about Jews, Arabs or Palestinians, or even of

broad sentiments towards the state of Israel. Rather, it suggests that it is among the politically engaged – the elites who drive the public debate – that key attitudes towards Israel are disproportionately concentrated.

The available evidence for this conclusion is strong, though admittedly not conclusive. Consider a report by the Pew Research Center released in April 2002<sup>17</sup> in which respondents in major West European countries were asked to rate their sympathies for the Palestinians and the Israelis in the specific context of the Middle East conflict, and not merely in the more generalised and amorphous way in which respondents were asked to rate their feelings to both peoples in the German Marshall Fund survey referred to above.

In France, 36 per cent favoured the Palestinians compared with 19 per cent favouring Israel. In Germany, a special case because of the memory of the Holocaust, 26 per cent favoured the Palestinians against 24 per cent favouring Israel. In Italy, it was 30–14 in favour of the Palestinians and in Britain 28–17. (In the United States, 41 per cent favoured Israel, with just 13 per cent favouring the Palestinians.)

However, this question was put to *all* respondents, regardless of their place in society. In each case, the combined opinions of those who supported both or neither, or who didn't know, formed by far the largest category. Most ordinary people, it seems, don't know or don't care.

But there is more. The question as phrased might have already been expected to elicit decisive opinions from more elite-level and/or politically engaged respondents since the Israel–Palestine conflict is so high on the political agenda. In other words, it would seem probable that those who did express clear preferences, and expressed a clear opposition to Israel, are likely to have been drawn from the more politically aware sections of society. But we do not merely need to assume this. Pew also offered a breakdown of sympathies towards the Palestinians according to educational level in the European countries surveyed. Since higher levels of education can reasonably be expected to bring people closer to the opinion-forming elites – the universities, the higher-level newspapers, etc. – we would expect results from this section of the survey to be different, if the proposition that the key driver of sympathies for one side or the other is the way in which the political establishment is configured holds. Specifically, we would expect to find greater sympathy for the Palestinians among more than among less educated people. And this is exactly what we do find. Support in France for the Palestinians rises to 51 per cent among better-educated people and drops to 30 per cent among the less educated. In Germany, support for the Palestinians rises to 40 per cent among the better educated and drops to 21 per cent among the less educated. In Italy, it rises to 34 per cent in the first case and drops to 27 per cent in the second. In Britain, better-educated people's support for the Palestinians rises to 36 per cent and drops to 25 per cent among the less educated.

The absence of fully comprehensive polling data inhibits the production of final proof – unfortunately, Poles and other East Europeans were not included in the survey. (However, one poll in the Czech Republic did suggest that general sympathies in that country rested with the Israelis rather than the Palestinians – by a margin of 22 per cent to 5.<sup>18</sup>)

But it does seem clear, when we combine the available polling data with the observable realities about the way the political debate is conducted, that the opinion-forming elites in the West are much more hostile to Israel than both their own general populations and their counterparts in Eastern Europe, especially Poland.

The atmosphere towards Israel in the political life of Poland was summed up neatly in January 2005 by Poland's chief rabbi, Michael Schudrich: 'The bottom line,' he said, 'is that Poland has become one of the greatest, if not the greatest, ally of Israel in the European Union.'<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to imagine such a ringing endorsement of the general state of affairs from many chief rabbis in Western Europe. Jan Gebert, a former board member of the Polish Union of Jewish Students, described a picture of political life in Polish universities that many would also find extraordinary in the West:

I never even heard about a student resolution dealing with the conflict . . . Pro-Palestinian organisations are just not very active in the universities. Poland, you see, is a very pro-

American country. The United States is more pro-Israeli than Western Europe, for example. And we tend to follow the American lead.<sup>20</sup>

### **Leftist ideology and mainstream political culture**

Although Eastern Europe exhibits widespread traditional antipathy to Jews, its political and opinion-forming establishments are not consumed with opposition to the most potent symbol of Jewishness in the modern world: the state of Israel. The central reason is that the formative experiences of the dominant elites have brought them to a more mature understanding of both capitalism and its alternatives as compared with their counterparts in the West. On the issue of Israel, as on so many others, the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, though materially behind, are conceptually ahead.

The comparison with the situation in that region, therefore, offers formidable evidence that Western hostility to Israel also goes beyond traditional antisemitic prejudice. Rather, the key factor, it appears, is the status of leftist ideology as a feature of the mainstream political culture. Israel is a vital part of the US-led capitalist project – a microcosmic representation of that project right on the front line of one of the world’s most heated geopolitical and ideological conflicts. It is inconceivable that the old European Left could, in such circumstances, do anything other than align itself in implacable opposition to the United States’ key ally, using any and every excuse to batter Israel’s image and delegitimise the country’s very existence. Success for the state of Israel would have huge consequences for the global balance of power, moving it significantly in the United State’s favour. In the mindset of the old Left, the fortunes of the two countries are inextricably linked.

Perhaps, though, it is worth considering one final thought on the matter. Just because traditional antisemitism does not seem to be a significant factor at play here, this does not mean we should exclude the possibility that there is a specifically leftist antisemitism that is. The vocabulary and the imagery of modern leftist hostility to capitalism, after all, fit remarkably well with some of the most enduring stereotypes of Jews as mean-spirited bankers, conspiratorial controllers of the media and as a people who do not belong, getting fat off the exploitation of others. Israel – the ‘Global Jew’ – as some have put it, is criticised in many of these very same terms. Once again, the example of Eastern Europe is instructive. A political culture where these categories have been largely expunged from the political discourse by the vivid memory of their application in the cause of oppression is that much less likely to succumb to such temptations.

It is surely a possibility which needs thinking about. Leftist ideology, after all, has claimed to be democratic but has produced despotism. It has claimed to be liberationist but has produced repression. It has claimed to be against poverty but has entrenched it. Why for one moment, therefore, should we take at face value leftist claims to be in the vanguard of history in the battle against racism, in this case antisemitism? To be sure, leftist antisemitism would be a different beast from, say, the antisemitism of Europe’s 19th nineteenth-century Catholic peasantry. But that is to be expected. Leftist authoritarian governments have always been very different (and usually much worse) than traditional forms of authoritarianism. The ideological Left *is* different. Is it really so difficult to accept, at least as a basis for discussion, that antisemitism has now mutated in a specifically Leftist direction?

But that is another story. We are clearly only at the beginning of what will be a long and complex journey of discovery which needs far more evidence than is currently available before it can be completed.

The clues in our possession, though, are suggestive, to say the least. Political cultures that are configured to include substantial representation by the ideological Left are much more prone to produce virulent hostility to Israel (and the United States), than those that are not. And traditional antisemitism, though worrying in itself, does not have a substantial role to play.

In the end, as the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe illustrate to us so clearly, the puzzle here is a puzzle about the Left.

## NOTES

- 1 *AFP*, Warsaw, 10 July 2001: 'Poland seeks to come to terms with past over Jewish massacre'. See also *AP*, 9 July 2002: 'Investigators say no new charges to be brought over Jewish massacre in wartime Poland.'
- 2 From the above-cited *AFP* article.
- 3 CBOS poll, January 2005: *Stosunek do Innych Narodów*.
- 4 Dominik Uhlig, 'Anti-Semitism Is Faring Well', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 1 February 2005.
- 5 *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary*, JPR Report no. 1, 2004.
- 6 See JPR website at <http://www.axt.org.uk/antisem/archive/index.htm> for reports on the state of antisemitism in selected countries. Also see the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) report *Evaluation of Available Data on Antisemitism in the 10 Candidate Countries of Eastern and Central Europe*, Ljubljana, 2004.
- 7 By left-wing ideology, I refer to that strand of political thinking which lies on a continuum at one end defined by those who are ambiguous about their support for capitalism and at the other by those who are outright hostile to it. I do not have in mind the political thinking of Blairite New Labour supporters in Britain or centrist Democrats in the United States, for example, who are completely supportive of liberal democratic capitalism while offering mild reforms to mitigate some of its negative consequences. I do not believe that it is sensible to refer to adherents to such thinking as leftist, even though they may refer to themselves as such.
- 8 A translation of the *Action Programme* is to be found at the back of Dubček's autobiography: A. Dubček, *Hope Dies Last*, HarperCollins, London, 1993.
- 9 For more on this, see my book *Czechoslovakia: The Velvet Revolution and Beyond*, Macmillan/St Martin's Press, New York, 2000, pp. 25–30.
- 10 There were exceptions, such as the Trotskyist Czech dissident Petr Uhl, but they were very few and far between.
- 11 The Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary had already joined NATO in 1999.
- 12 CBOS poll cited above.
- 13 'Poll Shows Poles Would Re-elect Bush'. *AP*, 30 October 2004. The survey by the PBS agency put support for Bush at 41.1 per cent and support for John Kerry at 31.9 per cent. If those figures had translated into voting in a British-style first-past-the-post general election, Bush would have won by a veritable landslide. It is true, however, that other Central European countries were less supportive of Bush. It is also, of course, true that support for Bush even in Poland is not absolutely coextensive with support for the United States. Nor is the opposite true. However, it is probably fair to say that a country which backs George Bush has to be pretty pro-American to do so.
- 14 'French would back Kerry in US poll, wary of Bush', *Reuters*, 1 October 2004.
- 15 See the above-cited European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) report *Evaluation of Available Data on Antisemitism in the 10 Candidate Countries of Eastern and Central Europe*, Ljubljana, 2004, pp. 8–11 for detailed information on Jewish populations across the region, including pre-Holocaust comparative figures.
- 16 German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Transatlantic Trends Survey 2003*, p. 16.
- 17 The Pew Research Center, *Americans and Europeans Differ Widely on Foreign Policy Issues*, 17 April 2002.
- 18 CVVM Survey quoted by the CTK news agency on 20 June 2002, 'Czechs Blame Both Sides in Israel–Palestine conflict – Poll'.
- 19 'Jews, Poles Grow Closer 60 Years after Holocaust', *Reuters*, 19 January 2005.
- 20 Interviewed by the author on 10 March 2005.