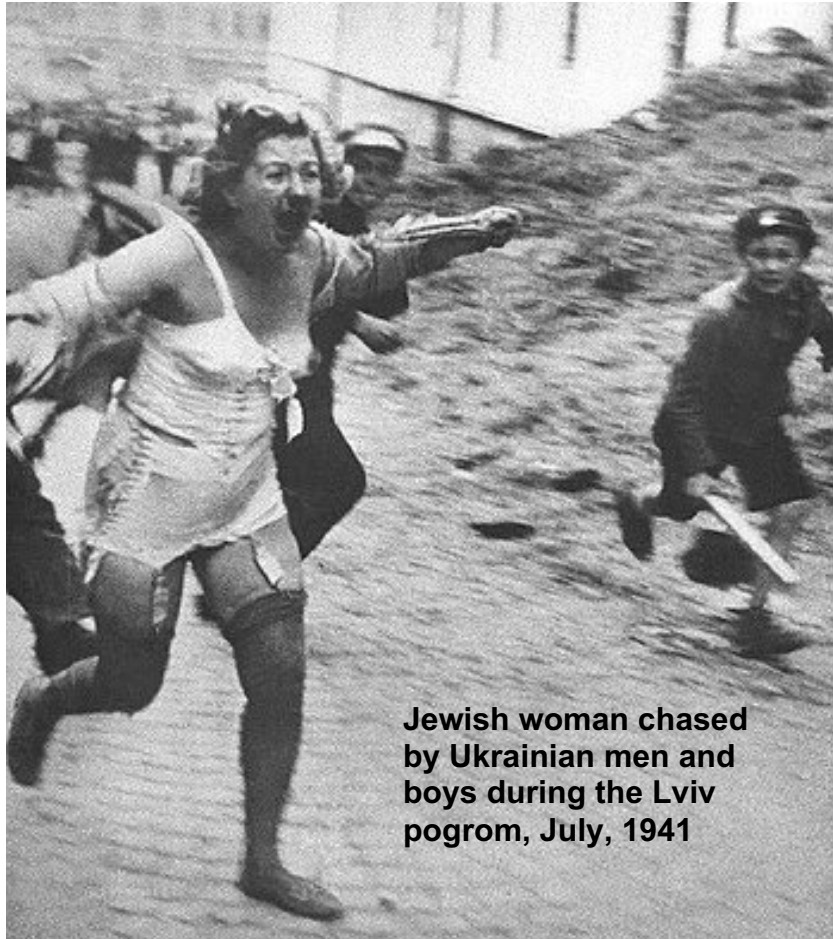


Antisemitism and Israel



Jewish woman chased
by Ukrainian men and
boys during the Lviv
pogrom, July, 1941

THE JEWISH STRUGGLE for civil rights in Europe lasted from the final decades of the eighteenth century until the 1930s. It involved the fight by Jews to establish their rights as full citizens of Europe's empires and states. Of course, it involved challenges to age-old Jewish religious, intellectual, and social conservatism, but above all the movement for Jewish Enlightenment was about fathoming out how Jews could live as full citizens alongside Christians. They wanted the right to live where they chose, to enter the universities and the professions, to own *real* property,

and to be able enter into any trade on the same terms as everybody else. They wanted to achieve these rights without surrendering their religious beliefs and observance. This was key, because conversion to Christianity had historically been the only way a Jew could achieve full civil rights.

By 1900 Jews had achieved legal equality throughout Europe with the exception of Russia, Romania, Spain, and Portugal. This process of emancipation, however, provoked the emergence of modern antisemitism as capitalism – the birth of a society dominated by commerce and commercial competition – began to spread inexorably across central and Eastern Europe. In circumstances of social disturbance, and economic instability, the medieval Jew hatred sanctioned by Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy (and taken up by Lutherans and others) morphed into modern antisemitism.

Jewish success in commerce, the arts, the professions, and Jewish attempts to break into farming and other activities they'd been traditionally barred from, provoked profound and organised hostility. The Opera composer, Richard Wagner, provides a flavour of this in his 'Das Judentum in Der Musik' – 'Judaism in Music' – which he first published in 1850. In his essay, Wagner identifies Jews as a threat to civilisation and suggests that the only solution to the Jew is their disappearance from the earth.

Karl Marx takes a similar tack by suggesting that the emancipation of the Jews will be accomplished by their disappearance as a distinct ethno-religious group through a process of assimilation. In 1946 Abram Leon's book *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation*, fleshed out this left-wing account by arguing that the historic emancipation of the Jews is to be accomplished by their disappearance into the mainstream of the working class.

From the right to the left the emergence of modern antisemitism resulted in calls for the disappearance of the Jews by deportation, murder, or assimilation.

By the end of the nineteenth century the wholesale repression and murder of Jews fatally undermined the aspirations of Jewish Enlightenment and of the belief that Jews could take their place in society on the same terms as everybody else. The new antisemitism, more febrile and active than medieval Jew hatred, proved more absolute, even more resolute and systematic in the killing and maiming of Jews. From Odessa to Vilnius, to Lviv, antisemitic peasants, merchants, and intellectuals, brought a brutal end to the idea that Jews would be able to take their place in society as equal and valued citizens.

As a result, some two million Jews fled to America and Jewish nationalism began to emerge as the only solution to what was proving to be the endemic nature of antisemitism. In 1882 Leon Pinsker published *Selbstermanzipation – Auto-Emancipation* in which he advocated the gathering together of Jews in Palestine, Syria, or North America. The Jews, “must become a nation” he argued, because “Judeophobia” was endemic in situations in which Jews were capable only of martyrdom – the answer was self-emancipation.

The events of the last few years in *enlightened* Germany, in Romania, in Hungary, and especially in Russia, have effected what the far bloodiest persecutions of the Middle Ages could not. The national consciousness which until then had lain dormant in sterile martyrdom awoke the masses of the Russian and Romanian Jews and took form in an irresistible movement towards Palestine. Mistaken as this movement has proved to be by its results, it was, nevertheless, a right instinct to strike out for home. The severe trials which they have endured have now provoked a reaction quite different from the fatalistic submission to a divine condign punishment [. . .] today, when a number of other subject and oppressed nationalities have been allowed to regain their independence, we, too,

must not sit a moment longer with folded hands; we must not consent to play forever the hopeless role of the “Wandering Jew.” It is a truly hopeless one, leading to despair.

Consequently, Pinsker concluded his pamphlet with the proposition that the only solution lay “in the creation of a Jewish nationality, of a people living upon its own soil” ranked as an equal alongside all other nations. Undeterred by the struggles of Hovevei Zion – The Lovers of Zion – and the failure of the Bilu'im pioneers in Palestine in the early 1880s nationalism became a major element in Jewish responses to antisemitism.

However, Jewish nationalism or Zionism did not immediately sweep the board, although from the Dreyfus Affair in France from 1894 to the Kishniev Pogroms in Russia in 1903 and 1905, it began to gain ground throughout Jewish communities from one side of Europe to the other. The belief that Jews could safely rely on their acquisition of civil rights or emancipation began to lose ground.

Finally, the pogroms which accompanied the outbreak of the First World War in what are now Ukraine, Poland, Czech Republic, and Romania, more or less put an end to any belief in the possibility of emancipation. Subsequent events – the rise of both Stalinism and Fascism throughout Europe – more or less guaranteed the victory of Zionism throughout Jewish communities everywhere. And, this was consolidated by the actions of Britain, Australia, Canada, and the United States in imposing strict quotas on Jewish refugees fleeing from fascism in the nineteen thirties.

Palestine became the only option for most Jewish refugees from around 1920. It was in that year that Jewish leaders in meetings in Jaffa started to pull the threads of their civil and military organisations in Mandate Palestine together into an embryonic Jewish state charged with advancing and protecting the rights of Jewish refugees from both the British, and the

families of notables, that had traditionally sought to represent local Palestinian interests under both Ottoman and British rule.

It is at this point that the struggle for the possession of Palestine between the Jews and Palestinian Arabs commences in earnest. There are massacres of Jews by Arabs in Jaffa and Hebron; bitter defensiveness, reprisals and revenge begin to characterise relations between Jewish colonists and Arab peasants and artisans. The British shift this way and that, alternately attacking the Arabs, exiling Palestinian leaders, while working hard to prevent Jewish refugees from entering the territory. Actions that eventually provoked a guerrilla war between the Jews and the Palestine Police Force and the British soldiers engaged in propping up the occupation.

Now, this complex and bloody history of Jewish refugees coming as colonists to Palestine has come to be represented on the left as a Zionist colonial venture, backed by imperialism. It has become a dumb show in which the legitimate nationalism of the Palestinians is ranged against Zionist colonialism. It is a process where the left plays fast and loose with history in their attempt to depict Palestinian nationalism as an anti-colonial anti-imperialist struggle against wicked Zionists.

The truth is, paradoxically, that Palestinian nationalism has only arisen and defined itself in struggle with the Jews since the early 1950s following the defeat of the Arab armies by Israel in the war of 1948. This was because the name "Palestine" under both the Ottomans and the British did not denote a country or a nation, but three different provinces in what are now Lebanon, Israel, and the Occupied Territories. For the British between 1920 and 1923 Palestine became a "geo-political entity" carved out of these Ottoman provinces south of what is now Lebanon.

Since the fifties and certainly since the early sixties Palestinians have during their modern struggle with the Jews in Israel emerged as a fully-fledged nation

striving for nationhood and freedom from domination and occupation by the Jewish state. The irony here is that both the Jews and Palestinian Arabs have established their legitimate claims to nationhood in the course of their struggles with each other over the same rather small piece of post-imperial territory.

Now, the left, in refusing recognition of the legitimacy of Jewish nationalism and of the Jewish state, places all its eggs in the Palestinian basket. The nationalism of the Palestinians is legitimate, it is said by many on the left, because it is a struggle against European colonialism established by the Jews in what are intrinsically Arab lands. Palestinian nationalism is anti-imperialist, while Zionism is simply yet another form of European colonisation. Hence, Israel is said to be an “apartheid” state committed to the colonial oppression of Palestinian Arabs.

Of course, the arguments fielded by the left are many and complex, but are often simply expressions of bad faith. For example, many are capable of arguing for a two-state solution while calling for the ‘right of return’ to what is now Israel of those Arabs driven out in 1948, including many hundreds of thousands of their descendants. This is done in the full knowledge that this would result in a Muslim majority and the collapse of the Jewish state.

It is *de rigueur* on the left to regard the territory between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean as Arab lands. This is the basis for support on the left of the Islamist organisations Hamas and Hezbollah who describe this territory as “lands given to the Arabs by God until the Day of Judgement”.

Consequently, opposition to Israel and to Zionism lies at the heart of the left’s antisemitism. Those on the left of the Labour Party accused of being antisemites are indeed antisemitic, not because they hate Jews (most of them don’t), but because they have decided that Jews have no right, amongst all the peoples of the earth, to self-determination, to a national existence, or to a Jewish state.

It is the fact that many on the left single out Israel and the Jews because of their ethnic nationalism without ever attacking Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Japanese, Chinese, or many other ethnic nationalisms in the world, that leads me to conclude that those socialists who habitually attack the existence of the Jewish state are antisemites. From my point of view ethnic nationalism is never a good idea, or a sound basis for the establishment of a state.

However, to ignore the specific circumstances that gave rise to Israel and to propose a single secular state of Arabs and Jews in Israel-Palestine against the present divisions is to be astonishingly blind to the actual circumstances on the ground. Indeed, it is worse, it is a specious demand resting upon a specious argument. The Jews have established a robust ethno-religious state which discriminates against those who are not Jews. This is intrinsically hostile to any universal conception of equal citizenship, but its dissolution in the foreseeable future would produce even more ethnic violence than its maintenance undoubtedly does.

In an echo of the assimilationism of Karl Marx and Abram Leon, many modern commentators, like Moshé Machover, do not think that the Jews internationally can be considered a nation. Diaspora Jews are not Israelis, despite their automatic right to Israeli citizenship.

The view that Jews do not constitute a nationality has deep roots on the left and led to Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Abram Leon, to oppose the idea of Jewish nationhood. To this day many prominent socialists support this tradition by opposing Jewish self-determination. They believe in assimilation as the solution to the 'Jewish question'. Traditional "Jew hatred" is not at issue here, but the opposition to Jews having the same rights as many other ethnic groups or ethno-religious communities to shape and determine its own future, is.

The displacement of 800,000 Palestinian Arabs by Israeli forces in 1948, and the killings associated with

this ethnic cleansing; the annexation of the West Bank by Jordan, and of Gaza by Egypt, in 1948-9; and, the subsequent Israeli occupation of the West Bank which began in 1967, are problems which certainly involve crimes committed by Israeli and Arab forces which must be addressed.

However, they cannot be approached simply by supporting the Palestinian Arabs against the Jews. This disastrous century-old conflict has been produced neither by the Jews or the Arabs – both are victims of forces and events well beyond the borders of Israel-Palestine.

If Jeremy Corbyn, Momentum, and the Labour Party, are ever to rid themselves of the slur and shame of antisemitism they're going to have to discard the idea that Israel is the product of European 'colonisation', they're going to have to look again at the history of Europe's Jews, particularly between 1880 and 1920, they're going to have to look again at the immigration policies of Britain, her Dominions, and of the United States during the thirties and forties. Fundamentally, they're going to have to rethink their opposition to Jewish self-determination, and revisit the history of Palestine and of European Jewry.