
THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS
Israel, Palestine, and siding with the
oppressed at all costs

IT IS FIFTY YEARS since this astonishing film was completed, and forty-nine years since its release. Its context is the revolutionary war waged for the independence of Algeria from French rule between 1954 and 1962. The film is tightly focused, not on the nationwide insurgency, but on the armed and popular resistance in the city of Algiers during the late nineteen fifties. Its form, shot in black and white, by Marcello Gatti on the streets of the European quarter of Algiers, and in the narrow lanes and byways of the Casbah often has the appearance of newsreel, an impression that is belied only by the intensity of the narrative directed by Gillo Pontecorvo.

It is difficult not to, weep, clap, cheer, and weep again, in quick succession as the brutal struggle with the colonial authorities unfolds. We see the arrogance of *le petit blanc* – the white working class French Algerians – who are presented in cafes, bars, and at the races – as indistinguishable from *le grand colon*, the high officials, professionals, and businessmen who ruled the roost in the colony. We see this privileged caste of Europeans driven mad in reaction to terrorist bombings attacking an Arab road sweeper, and even savagely beating and kicking an Arab child selling soft drinks at the racetrack. We see the whites strutting through check points, unchallenged and indifferent to the repression around them, dancing in cafes and drinking in bars, the lords of all they survey – while the Arabs confined in the alleys and rookeries of the Casbah plot revenge and plan to wreak havoc on their oppressors.

The random killing of civilians, and the targeted murder of police and soldiers, by the Front de libération nationale, FLN, results in renewed repression. Para troops, lead by Colonel Mathieu (a character loosely based on the all-too-real General Jacques Massau), march into the city to the fevered adulation of great crowds of *le petit blanc* desperate for the defeat of the insurgency. Colonel Mathieu sets about torturing his way through the FLN cell structure. When challenged by reporters from Paris he responds with characteristic bluntness. "Should France stay in Algeria?" he asks. "If your answer is yes, then you must accept all the consequences"; this is followed by graphic scenes worthy of the flagellation of Christ, in which Arabs are beaten and blow torched to the accompaniment of Ennio Morricone's elegiac score.

The moral dilemmas at play are raised again when Colonel Mathieu parades Ben M'Hidi, a captured FLN leader, at a press conference. A journalist asks Ben M'Hidi how he can condone using women to take baskets with bombs into crowded cafes and bars, to which he replies by pointing out the vast superiority of French armaments with the pithy suggestion "Give us your bombers, sir, and you can have our baskets."

This defiant *bon mot* has been deployed down the years by the left to defend killings by the oppressed in a radical refusal to countenance any comparison of the violence of the oppressed with that of the oppressor. From Ireland to Israel, and in a great many other struggles the barbarism of the oppressed is justified. In *The Battle of Algiers* we see the FLN ordering the 'clean up' of the Casbah as drug dealers and "whores" who "talk too much" are repressed by revolutionary violence, and pimps and criminals are summarily condemned to death and murdered on the orders of insurgent leaders. A gang of revolutionary children taunting a drunk and rolling him, helpless, down a flight of steps, is contrasted with a virtuous wedding clandestinely conducted by an FLN official equipped with a briefcase, and the rubber stamps of his emergent civic authority.

So it is that the left forgives much and has historically suspended judgement and criticism of all those in struggle against colonialism and oppression. This involved turning a blind eye to the shooting up and bombing of refugee columns in the run up to the fall of Saigon, and a carefully averted gaze when the horrors of Pol Pot's regime became indefensible, although such mad depredations have always been explained as the consequence of the "American terror bombing" of Cambodia.

As communism collapsed and nationalist resistance to imperialism withered it's replacement by religious reaction has resulted in a world picture in which the only armed resistance to American and British imperialism is to be found among the patriarchal fighters of Afghanistan, Yemen, Nigeria, and Somalia, and amongst the religious fundamentalists of the Middle East and North Africa. This has placed the left in something of a quandary, perhaps best expressed by Tariq Ali, when he said that he admires the Taliban, although not their "social programme".

This predicament is perhaps most sharply revealed in the movement of solidarity with Palestine where many on the left have routinely aligned themselves with Islamists, both in Britain and in the Middle East – in alliances with people who deny the right of Israel to exist and consequently demand the liquidation of the Jewish state and the cleansing of the Jewish population, not simply from the Occupied Territories, but from Israel itself. Hamas and Hezbollah are in both word and deed explicitly anti-Jewish and none of the niceties of definition between 'Zionists' and 'Jews' are thought necessary.

However, the distinction between Zionist and Jews is of great importance to the pro-Palestinian left in Britain because it is on this distinction that their denial of anti-Semitism rests. It is a point insisted upon by the Jewish Socialists' Group and it is obviously true that Zionism, a nationalist political ideology, is not coterminous with Jew or Jewishness, a religious and ethnic designation. Consequently, pro-Palestinians in

the West hope that by holding fast to this distinction they'll be able to attack Zionism without being thought of as anti-Jewish.

This brings us to the pickle into which Ken Livingstone, Naz Shah, and Jeremy Corbyn, have now fallen. It is confusing because we can have no reason to suppose that any of these leading personalities actually 'hates' Jews in a visceral, personal, or emotional sense. The problem appears to arise simply from the fact that they have struck poses and taken up positions which appear to be anti-Semitic.

Ken Livingstone's recent suggestion that Hitler supported Zionism certainly appears to be anti-Semitic. The truth is that Hitler in the late twenties and early thirties did believe in deporting Germany's Jews. The Nazi's had a number of destinations for German Jewry in mind; Madagascar for example. Matters came to a head with Hitler's accession to power in January 1933, increasing the vulnerability of Germany's Jews tenfold. In response, the Zionist Federation of Germany with the support of the Jewish Agency signed a deal with the Nazis in August of that year which would allow German Jews to emigrate to Palestine and retain the value of much of their property, which would then be used to import German goods into Palestine. This deal, The *Haavara Agreement*, ran contrary to the worldwide campaign, led by Polish Zionists, to boycott German goods in protest against the Nazi's actions.

The fear prominent among German Jews was that support for the Polish and international boycott of Germany would in fact worsen, not improve, the position of Jews in Germany. So there was a split in Zionism and in the wider Jewish community about how to respond to the Nazi programme of attacking the rights of Jews in Germany. The Jewish Agency wanted to get as many Jews out of Germany with as much of the value of their property as they could. Whereas others thought that the boycott campaign

centred and orchestrated from Poland was the way to go.

Ken Livingstone in loosely referring to the Haavara Agreement and the desperate struggle to rescue Jews from the Nazis, (without regard to these tensions and tactical differences between Polish and German Jews, and between the Jewish Agency and much Zionist opinion in Poland and elsewhere) as evidence of Nazi support for Zionism is grotesque in the extreme. Livingstone along with much of the pro-Palestinian left is opposed, in principle, and in fact, to the existence of the State of Israel, which is why they support the explicitly anti-Jewish forces of Hamas and Hezbollah, and will clearly use any means to challenge the right of the Jewish state to exist.

The reason for this inexorable slide towards anti-Semitism is to be found in the left's historic commitment to anti-imperialism and the preparedness to tolerate all kinds of reactionary backsliding in nationalist movements. Inherent in the traditional left wing approach to colonial and neo-colonial struggles is unconditional support for those fighting for independence from their oppressors regardless of their social programmes or political outlook. Under the rubric of always refusing to equate the oppressor with the oppressed the barbarism of the colonial forces is always condemned out of hand, while the violence of the oppressed is always legitimated by their tyrannised status.

Now the colonisation of much of Palestine during the twenties, thirties, and forties, by the systematic purchase of land and other property from Arab notables by European Jewish refugees, and the creation of Jewish quasi-state civil and military institutions in Jaffa and elsewhere in the British Mandate from around 1920, resulted in the displacement of many Palestinian Arabs, leading to strikes, killings, and armed conflict between Arabs and Jews, and between Arabs and Jews and the British colonial authorities, in a three-cornered struggle, long before the outbreak of Israel's 'War of Independence'

in 1947-8. The war between Israel and a coalition of Arab armies, led by Jordan and Egypt, arose because of the rejection by Jordan and her allies in 1947 of the foundation of the Jewish state; the Arab forces wanted to strangle of the Jewish state at birth. This has been the de facto position of much Arab and Iranian opinion ever since and certainly reflects the outlook of those allies of the pro-Palestinian left, Hamas and Hezbollah. The demand for 'the right of return' to what is now Israel of those Palestinians who fled their ancestral towns and villages in 1948 (and their descendants) is in fact a demand for the deployment of a demographic move that would result in the disappearance of the Jewish majority, and the consequent collapse of the Jewish state.

Now, the pro-Palestinian left is committed to the slogan: from the "River to the Sea Palestine Will Be Free!" This is nothing less than an appeal for the ethnic cleansing of Jews from Israel-Palestine. The suggestion by Naz Shah for the forcible removal of Jews from Israel-Palestine to the United States was not a slip of the tongue or an emotional outburst, but an expression of the belief that Israel and her Jewish population should simply cease to exist.

It is at this point that the hard-held distinction between Zionism and Jews, so beloved by the left, begins to disintegrate. Because, the Arab objection to Israel is that it is Jewish – a Jewish state. The commitment of the pro-Palestinian left is that Israel should disappear because most ethnic Palestinians are Muslims and those that are not, are Druze or Christians – what they are not, is Jews. So, what is being contested is the right of Jews to have a state in Palestine, regardless of whether somebody might allow them to have a state in Patagonia or maybe Minnesota.

The result is that one cannot, despite the best efforts of the Jewish Socialists' Group, maintain a hard-and-fast distinction between Jews and Zionists; the philological distinction is obviously true and meaningful, but clearly not in the minds of most

Palestinians or of their armed organisations, or in the minds of most Jews. The right of Jews to possess one tiny state on a tiny patch of land is what is at stake.

How we got into this mess in which Palestinian Arabs and Jews have been fighting over the same tract of land for the last hundred years is a matter of record; during the first half of the twentieth century Jews fled from Europe and Russia and settled in large numbers in Palestine. The Jews found themselves in a land that had hitherto had no national existence or traditions, had been neither a state nor a country, but a province alternately ruled and populated by the Egyptians and Ottoman Turks, and finally by the British. The Jews created a state founded largely on the displacement of Arabs, a state which now oppresses its own Arab citizens, together with those Palestinians living in Gaza and in the Occupied Territories, which the Jewish settlers, illegally ensconced on Arab land, refer to as Judea and Samaria.

Extricating Jews and Palestinian Arabs from this murderous conflict everybody knows will be extremely difficult, and attempting to destroy Zionism and its Jewish state will not help matters forward. Only strategies designed to strengthen the Palestinians economically possess the possibility of breaching the deadlock. Consequently, I think that the United States and the European Union, in defiance of Hamas, of Netanyahu, and the Israeli right, should set about constructing a deep-water trading port and airport in Gaza, as a means of stimulating the economy of the Strip. It is only by such means that the war parties on both sides of the divide can begin to be pushed back from a permanent readiness to slaughter each other.

The simplistic posture in which the left always “supports the oppressed against the oppressor” has never had a good outcome, not in Algeria, not in Palestine, or indeed anywhere else. If the Labour Party and those on the pro-Palestinian left want to stop sliding towards anti-Semitism and alliances with anti-Jewish organisations and movements, they had

better stop demanding the dissolution of the Jewish state and start attempting to fathom out how to get the Jewish masses in Israel to support practical policies and programmes which aim to stop the oppression of Israel's Arab population, end the ghettoization of Gaza, and bring the military occupation of the West Bank to a close.