

Anti-Semitism

WHEN I WAS A KID Jews were both, exotic and familiar. 'They' were wealthy and lived on the top of the hill, in Hampstead and Golders Green – confusingly, I also knew that 'they' lived in Bethnal Green and Stepney, notoriously poor and embattled parts of London. My mum cleaned the houses of rich Jews in Hampstead. Consequently, she was able to introduce us to what in our neighbourhood at the time were the mysteries of black bread, pickled herring, and bagels – indeed she'd often worked for Jewish families since coming over from Tipperary as a maid-of-all work in the late nineteen twenties. My middle sister married a Jewish lad, John, whose father was active, along with my dad, in the Amalgamated Engineering Union. John's working class family, had been wealthy and bourgeois, but had lost everything when they fled from Vienna as the Nazis took over in 1938. My Mum, adored John, and took great delight in secretly getting one over on the Catholic Church when he participated fully in the mass at my eldest sister's wedding.

However, there was always a sour note at the back of everything. Sister Gertrude, the nun who taught my Catechism class was clear that the Jews had killed Christ. The repetitions of the creed, "I believe in Jesus Christ who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried . . ." made the point that the Roman governor had washed his hands and left the decision up to the 'High Priests' and the Jewish crowd who had connived at the condemnation of Christ, ensuring that the Son of God died on the Cross. So there it was, the blood libel, at the heart of Roman Catholic liturgy.

Suspicion, stoked over the centuries, ensured that Jewish craftsmen were excluded from guilds, while Jewish peasants and their families were corralled in separate villages, and Jewish artisans and merchants confined to urban ghettos like that founded in the Venetian Republic; the restriction of Jews to commerce, moneylending, and related trades, resulted in them being permanently ensnared by activities considered parasitical by the wider society.

The legal emancipation of Jews in the French Revolution, and in many parts of Europe during the course of the nineteenth century resulted in competition between Jews and Roman Catholics, striving to make their way amidst the insecurities of burgeoning capitalist societies. Jews newly admitted to the learned professions, created widespread dismay, by beginning to win the glittering prizes. The success of Jews in the universities and in a wide range of commercial and industrial fields stoked dangerous anxieties amongst Christians of all stripes throughout Central and Western Europe. This resulted in the emergence of the modern hatred of Jews, in which medieval prejudices morphed into anti-Semitism ratified by the ancient Christian blood libel newly decked out with thoroughly modern conspiratorial notions concerning the manner in which Jews “look after their own”, in which “they always stick together” to the disadvantage of those of us “not of the Hebrew persuasion”.

These, often bloody tensions, were greatly magnified by political instability in Eastern Europe and particularly in the Russian Empire which refined and perpetuated the blood libel against Jews with the publication in 1903 of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The *Protocols*, a grotesque forgery, tells of the way in which Jews engage in the ritual murder of Christian infants, and plan to create Hebraic world domination. Astonishingly, this fraudulent document is still circulated widely throughout the world. It finds its

rationalist echo in the deployment of notions like “the Jewish lobby” which we are supposed to believe determines American and British foreign policy.

As is well known the popularity of hating Jews enabled the Hitler regime in the 1940s to employ specialist squads to sweep through the Baltic States, Byelorussia, Ukraine and Eastern Poland, fearlessly killing the Jewish population of entire cities, towns and villages. Furthermore, widespread anti-Semitism enabled the Nazis to deport Jewish men, women, and children from all over Europe to specially designed killing centres where Jews could be murdered in a more systematic manner.

The German fascists discovered a great many allies and collaborators throughout Europe who actively participated in this, the greatest and most lethal pogrom of all time. To this must be added the routine compliance of police, town hall officials, clergy, bank managers, property speculators, landlords, furniture and antique dealers, railway administrators, train drivers, freight car handlers, and signalmen, in country after country either allied with Germany or occupied by the Wehrmacht.

This almost unimaginable tsunami of murders resulted in the desire to heap all blame on the Germans, as if the Nazis could have achieved this vast undertaking without indigenous support from every country they operated from. It has resulted in generalised amnesia, or in elaborate apologetics in which we are told, for example, that Pope Pius XII did all he could to put a stop to the slaughter, by talking to Nazi leaders “behind closed doors”, or that the Poles suffered too, “not just the Jews”. Indeed many members of parliament in Warsaw are at pains to bury the words of the historian Jan T. Gross who pointed out in 2000 in his book, *Neighbors*, that “One summer day in 1941, half of the Polish town of Jedwabne murdered the other half”. This was a reference to the massacre of Jews carried out by Polish Roman

Catholics (not by Germans), which to this day leads to shouts of “Treason!” and “Zionism!” being hurled by members of the Freedom and Justice Party upon those Poles who refuse to forget the wretched complicity of many of their country’s Roman Catholics in the murder of Jews.

Most grotesque of all these rationales has been the attempt to blame the Zionists – those Jews who from the eighteen nineties fought for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The Zionists we are often told collaborated with anti-Semitism and even with Nazi leaders, because fascist repression made it easier for them to encourage Jewish migration to Palestine.

It is at this point that anti-Semitism intersects with the outlook of the British left. The Labour Party and the socialist and communist left has a good record of opposing racism in all its forms, yet some on the left have got themselves into hot water concerning the manner in which hostility towards Zionism and the State of Israel can, and often does bleed into anti-Semitism.

The problem of Israel, the undoubted oppression of Israel’s Arab citizens, and of those Arabs living in Gaza, and under occupation on the West Bank, has resulted in alliances, implicit, and actual, between sections of the left and explicitly anti-Jewish organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah. Indeed many on the left deny both the need, and the right, of Jews to found their own state, and this position has resulted in widespread calls for the dissolution or even the destruction of the Jewish state contained in many charters, programmes, and slogans circulated by Palestinian organisations and supported by the left – “From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free!”

Many socialists justify this position by calling for a multi-faith secular state in which Jews and Arabs would live side-by-side in peace and harmony. In abstract terms this is indeed an excellent idea, but in

practice it is a disingenuous suggestion, often made by those on the left who wish to cleave to their alliances with armed insurgents in Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt. Although, the call for a secular Arab-Jewish state has impeccable socialist credentials it is specious because, we all know that conferring the right of return to what is now Israel on all Palestinian Arabs would result in the liquidation of the Jewish state, and the flight of the Jewish population to wherever they could find a safe haven.

The truth is a peaceful transition to a multi-racial, multi-faith state in Israel-Palestine would depend entirely upon the emergence of stable democratic political systems in all of Israel-Palestine's neighbours – something that is not in prospect any time soon.

Those on the left who demand the overthrow of the Zionist state evidently have a particular objection to the Jewish character of the state. Of course they would say that they object to 'Zios' or to Zionism, not to Jews as such. But from the point of view of Jews living in Israel or throughout the world, the distinction can often seem to be rather academic in a struggle where the right of Jews to have a state is in contention. One can see this in the absence of left-wing opposition to the existence of the state of Pakistan founded explicitly for and by Muslims on the partition of India in 1947 (and formally established as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1956) despite the terroristic expulsions of Hindus, Sikhs, and others, and widespread persecution and oppression of non-Muslims in that country to this day.

No, the left focuses its opposition to the idea of a confessional state upon Israel, and only upon Israel, claiming that the Jews alone among all ethnicities have no legitimate right or need to claim statehood.

This position is buttressed by sophisticated leftist analyses concerning the role of Imperialism and the colonial nature of the Zionist enterprise in building up the Jewish population of Palestine particularly

throughout the nineteen twenties, thirties and forties. There is no doubt that Zionism was and is a colonial enterprise that predicated the establishment of the Jewish state upon the displacement of Arabs from much of historic Palestine. This was conceived of as a gradual process in which increasing numbers of Jews fleeing persecution and murder in Europe would migrate to Palestine, buy land and other property, and establish a dense network of Jewish communities. This process was violently accelerated in 1948 with the declaration of the independence of Israel; the armies of a powerful coalition of Arab countries attacked the new Zionist state with the intention of strangling it at birth. They failed and as a consequence large numbers of Palestinian Arabs were driven into exile as they fled, terrorised by the victorious Jewish forces.

I have no doubt, no doubt at all, that the recent allegations of anti-Semitism aimed at those on the left of the Labour Party form part of a wider strategy designed to discredit the left, and destabilise the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. Clearly the Tories, and Labour's rightwing have a number of dirty tricks up their sleeve. However, the reason that charges of anti-Semitism are so lethal is because of the muddle created on the left by a blind hatred of Zionism and uncritical support for Hamas and Hezbollah.

This strategic alliance between sections of the left and frankly anti-Jewish forces in Palestine, and in the surrounding, largely Arab states, makes it difficult to sustain the illusion that the left's opposition to Zionism is in some important sense not an attack upon Jews.

If the left wants to dispel the impression of anti-Semitism it will have to stop dwelling upon the victimhood of Palestinians and strive to understand the manner in which Israeli politics has over the years been driven to the right by Palestinian attacks, just as Palestinian and wider Arab anti-Jewish sentiment is underwritten and reinforced by the violence of the

Zionist state. This is because the foul racism of many Jewish settlers in the occupied territories (they call Judea and Samaria) is more than matched by the unreasoning hatred of Jews common in Palestine and throughout the Muslim world. It is true that the Arabs have usually come off worse, much worse, in armed conflicts with Israel, but this brutal reality cannot justify the left's habit of always supporting Palestinians against the Jewish population of the Zionist state.

The criminal actions of the Israel Defence Force, and those of heavily armed settlers on the West Bank, are rooted in the notion of the necessity of 'defence in depth', which is why they disregard and violate the resolutions of the UN as a matter of routine. They do this because they have every reason to believe that Palestinian organisations, and their allies in the region, have never accepted the existence of the Jewish state and have, on the contrary, every intention of destroying it demographically by enabling the Palestinians who fled in 1948, and their descendants, to return to what is now Israel. This is why Palestinians engage in armed struggle, meet Israeli terror with terror, and with popular acts of mass resistance. Both sides are fighting for possession of the same territory.

Consequently, the left will have to dispense with its Manichaean conceptions – with its historic and simplistic opposition between the imperialist and the anti-imperialist – the interminable binary, figured as the struggle between oppressed and oppressor – in a situation in which both sides are oppressed and both sides are actual or potential oppressors, both sides are victims and victimised. If the Arab armies had defeated the Zionist forces in 1948, who could doubt that Jews in Palestine would have once again been oppressed and driven into exile? Who could doubt that if Israel had been roundly defeated in any of her subsequent wars that oppression and exile would have been meted out to the Jewish citizens of the Zionist state?

Israel was born from the concatenation of pogroms and massacres, from anti-Semitism, and from the frankly colonial solution opted for by Zionists. Its foundation created vast upheavals and great masses of refugees as Palestinians were driven from their ancestral homes, and large numbers of Jews were deprived of their possessions before being expelled, in the clothes they stood up in, by Arab police and soldiers from towns and cities across North Africa and the Middle East where they and their ancestors had lived for centuries.

It is a tragic situation born of tragedy.

Consequently, until, people on the left, stop denouncing the Jews for defending their state, and stop calling for the liquidation of Israel, while allying themselves, wholly and uncritically, with Palestinian and Arab forces, the charge of anti-Semitism will continually surface and be employed by those who want to denigrate socialists and radicals of all sorts.