

## Nationalism and left-wing people



“LEFT-WING PEOPLE” is a pretty large and ill-defined notion. Yet it has some salience when we come to talk of nationalism and nationhood. Modern cultural figures like Billy Bragg speak for many when they attempt to rescue ‘the nation’ from the right-wing crowd. The talk is always about some positive ‘progressive’ version of England. The England of emancipatory battles, of popular histories, of struggles up from below, against the powers that be at the top of society.

To be sure this approach has spawned a great many dodgy histories. These are histories and versions of the past that share our concerns in the here and now. It is often imagined that medieval divines and dissenting priests thought and spoke about the class relations that confronted them as if they were modern people. Similarly, the bold farm labourers of the left-wing imaginary, those risking transportation to penal colonies in Australia, would almost have felt at home amongst public sector trade

unionists in today's Hackney. At all times it seems as if those on the left are engaged in a perpetual search for themselves in the past, when we all know that none of us could have existed in that past – we could not have thought what we think, done what we have done, or been what we are today, at any time in the past.

Where left-wingers stand on nationalism often has this imaginary character – it is a world of contradictions which are slathered over with qualifications and exceptions. Now you see it, now you don't.

It was Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 who laid the foundation of the left's official (so to speak), approach to nations and nationalism:

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!

A lot of time and blood has flowed under the bridge since these words were penned. Yet they gave unequivocal expression to the left's historic hostility to the idea of nations and nationalism.

Yet from its earliest days the socialist movement, of all stripes and tendencies, has had to confront nations and nationalities as inescapable features of the social and political terrain within which they have strived to build the world anew. Rosa Luxemburg, a Pole opposed to Polish nationalism, Vladimir Lenin, a Russian, hostile to great Russian chauvinism, greeted the First World War as internationalists committed to opposing the war, because the mass of common soldiers, the workers and peasants in uniform, had nothing to gain from the struggle between the empires of Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, the Ottoman Turks, and Russia's Tsar.

However, when the Bolsheviks seized power in

Russia in 1917, nothing stopped them from fighting to preserve Russia's imperial territories from the Baltic to the Pacific against nationalists of one kind or another. This resulted in many military engagements, the most important of which, was the Polish-Soviet War, 1919-1921. This war grew out of the confusion of the Bolshevik's struggle against Ukrainian nationalists, led by Symon Petliura, and the Polish forces of Józef Pilsudski. This three-cornered fight resolved itself into a battle between the Soviets and Poland, in which, much to the dismay of the left, the working class and peasantry rallied to the cause of Polish nationalism struggling to re-establish Poland as a sovereign state after centuries of partition between Russia, Prussia, and Austria.

The Bolsheviks, espousing the cause of Soviet internationalism, attempted to present their war with Poland as essentially a class struggle against the Warsaw bourgeoisie and the Polish aristocracy. This enterprise was a dismal failure and in March 1921 the Soviet government accepted their defeat by signing the 'Peace of Riga' with the government of Poland, in a ceremony held in the state of Latvia that had, like Poland, Lithuania, Finland, and Estonia, recently won its independence from Soviet Russia.

Nations and nationalism were clearly not merely metaphysical notions which could be ignored; the Bolsheviks in Russia, and the left throughout Europe could not escape the idea of nationhood and the powerful manner in which it interrupted, or cut through the Marxist priority of the unity of workers in class struggle. Yet, anti-nationalism, or internationalism has long remained a key element of left-wing thought. And, it is with the Jews that the left's opposition to nationalism has taken its most virulent and disastrous course.

At the end of the nineteenth century Jews were an ethno-religious minority within many societies and were particularly numerous in the Western areas of the Russian Empire, which embraced much of what is now, Ukraine, Belorussia, Lithuania, and Poland. This

vast Yiddish-speaking Jewish population did not have a national presence and existed in a perpetually precarious condition amid the ingrained antisemitism of the Christian peasantry, intelligentsia, and working class, of the region.

Notwithstanding, this, Lenin had gone so far as to oppose formation of the Bund, the General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, in the late nineteenth century. As a result, the Bund finally broke with the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1903. (Indeed, the Bolsheviks dissolved the organisation entirely in 1921, by absorbing it into the Communist Party.) The Bolshevik's hostility to the Bund was sustained despite the fact that it was an organisation of Jews explicitly opposed to Jewish nationalism: opposed to *klal yisrael*. In fact, the Bund was founded in the same year as the first Zionist Congress, in outright opposition to nationalism and Zionism. The objective of the Bund was to give cultural expression and political coherence to the Yiddish-speaking working class in Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine, to establish full equality for Jews, to pursue the emancipation of women, and strengthen Yiddish arts and letters.

So, Lenin and his Bolshevik party, pioneered opposition, not simply to Jewish nationalism in the form of Zionism, but also to Jewish cultural and political self-organisation. The broad left's idea was that Jews should resolve the problems of their specific experience and oppression, by absorption into the ranks of the working class. There was no need, no need whatsoever, for Jewish consciousness, Jewish cultural organisation, and certainly not for a Jewish nation.

In the late nineteen thirties and early forties, Abram Leon, wrote *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation*. In this work he develops a dense account of why the status of Jews as a "people-class" could only be overcome by socialism. Yet despite the fascist reality arising

around him, despite his stalwart opposition to Stalinism in the Soviet Union he was able to write:

The ferocious persecutions against Judaism render stark naked the stupid bestiality of anti-Semitism and destroy the remnants of prejudices that the working class nurse against the Jews. The ghettos and the yellow badges do not prevent the workers from feeling a growing solidarity with those who suffer most from the afflictions all humanity is suffering.

And the greatest social explosion the world has ever seen is finally preparing the liberation of the most persecuted pariahs of our planet. When the people of the factories and the fields have finally thrown off the yoke of the capitalists, when a future of unlimited development opens up before liberated humanity, the Jewish masses will be able to make a far from unimportant contribution towards the building of a new world.

This does not mean that socialism, brought to maturity by a wave of a magic wand, will remove all the difficulties that stand as obstacles to the solution of the Jewish question. The example of the USSR shows that even after the proletarian revolution, the special structure of Judaism – a heritage of history – will give rise to a number of periods. During the time of the NEP [New Economic Policy of the Soviets 1921-1928] for instance, the Jews of Russia, utilizing their traditional business experience, furnished numerous cadres for the new bourgeois class. Moreover, the great mass of Jewish small tradesmen and petty artisans suffered greatly at the beginning of the proletarian dictatorship. It was only later, with the success of the Five Year Plan, that the Jews penetrated en masse into Soviet economic life. Despite certain difficulties, the experiment was decisive: hundreds of thousands of Jews became workers and peasants.

This has been the basic position of the left since the days of Marx and Engels. It is not dissimilar to Richard Wagner's view in *Judaism in Music* (1850) that the solution to the Jewish problem was their disappearance. There was a murderous logic to Richard Wagner's outlook, but for the left, disappearance through assimilation was thought

to be the solution to Jews and Judaism. The hope was that religious ethnicities would ebb away into the dark past to be replaced by a new world of light and reason.

This wasn't to be. The widespread murder and persecution of Jews from the 1880s onwards, undermined the struggle for emancipation within the ordinary life of the Russian and Austrian empires, and led to the gradual emergence of nationalism amongst Jews. However, the Zionists' journey from an embattled nationalist minority to dominance amongst Jews was long and bitter, but it was inexorable, as the mass working class movements of Europe were undermined, first by Bolshevik tyranny, then by the grip of Stalinism, and finally, roundly defeated by Mussolini, Hitler, Dollfuss, Franco, and a raft of other dictators.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, emigration to America, or Britain and her Dominions, had proved to be the only practical response to the great pogroms of the period, 1880 to 1905. However, mass killings and pogroms resumed with a vengeance in Galicia, the Polish lands, and Ukraine, with the outbreak of war in 1914. Consequently, Zionism and emigration to Palestine, began to become the only option for many Jews. The tsunami of massacres which befell Europe's Jews in the nineteen thirties and forties, together with quotas and restrictions preventing Jewish emigration to the United States, to Britain and her dominions, resulted in consolidation of the Zionist outlook and programme.

This was the context in which the emergent nation state of the Jews began to come into existence in Jaffa in 1920. Both civil, political, and military institutions were established by Jews in Mandate Palestine, at that time ruled by the British. The Arabs responded by randomly killing Jews, but lacking national organisations and

consciousness, they relied upon the leadership of 'notables' – prominent wealthy families and landowners – that had always led the Arabs of Palestine, during the days when the territory between the Jordan and the Mediterranean had been within provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Despite revolts against the British and the Jews in the 1920s and 30s the Arab population did not create modern political parties or commence the process of nation building until well-after the proclamation of the state of Israel in 1948.

The foundation of Israel in its War of Independence, 1947-1949, took place at a time and in a region in which the states created by Britain and France, finally achieved their full independence from Paris and London. Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, all artificially created by borderlines drawn on French and British maps with brutal disregard to the ethnicity, history, or religious confession, of the peoples living in these territories.

Left-wing people found themselves in a quandary, accepting the new states, including for the most part, Israel. Israel in the fifties was often seen on the left as a socialistic progressive state. This view finally disintegrated following the war of 1967 which resulted in the Israelis turning from 'David' into 'Goliath' more or less overnight – ruling large numbers of Palestinian Arabs as occupiers, and strengthening the rhetoric and reach of Palestinian nationalism which had been forged during the struggles with Zionism in the 1950s and 60s.

The left in Britain and in many other places had divided nationalism and nationalists into 'good' and 'bad'. The good nationalists were those fighting the colonialism of Britain and France and the neo-colonialism of the Americans. In Israel-Palestine this resulted in the growth of fervent support for Palestinian nationhood and lethal hostility to the 'pretended' nationhood of the Jews.

In the minds of most left-wingers the Jews became colonisers, and the Palestinians heroic fighters against imperialism.

From the ethnic cleansing of 800,000 Palestinian Arabs from Israel in 1948, and the subsequent occupations, evictions, and mayhem created by successive Israeli governments, and the violence of the Israel Defence Force, the left has had little difficulty in endorsing Palestinian armed groups and political organisations, all of whom who seek the destruction of Israel. Many on the left have sought to cover their tracks with talk of two-state solutions, or even of a secular state of Arabs and Jews on the territory of what is now Israel. Yet, the impossibility of a peace based upon the eclipse, erosion, or annihilation of the Jewish state is plain for all to see.

The upshot is a left-wing culture in which the legitimacy of Jewish nationhood, 'bad' by definition, because colonial, is rejected in favour of the 'good' nationhood of Palestinian Arabs.

As Palestinian kids die in the rubble of Gaza, the Islamists of Hamas fire rockets into Israel, the *Morning Star* claims that "Gaza Protests Rocked Britain", and a motorcade of cars emblazoned with Palestinian flags careens along the Finchley Road towards Golders Green in north London with sound systems urging: "Fuck the Jews, rape their mothers, rape their daughters, Fuck the Jews."

I have no doubt, no doubt, at all, that most left-wingers in Britain will deny any link between themselves and this murderous crew out to terrorise North London's Jews, but the truth is most of the left have been supporting Hamas and other irredentist groups hostile to Jews and the existence of the state of Israel, for decades. Using well-worn formulae, like "you can never equate the violence of the oppressed with that of the oppressor", the Palestinians are given free-pass



for hating Jews, the random killing of Jews, and seeking the destruction of Israel.

The reality of 'ethnic cleansing' in the creation of modern states – Poland, Ukraine, Czechia, Turkey, Pakistan – is quietly forgotten along with the mass expulsion of Jews by Arabs from Iraq, Syria, and Morocco. Only the Jewish nationalists must be arraigned before the court of left-wing opinion for driving out Palestinian Arabs, because this ersatz left has resolved the question of nation and nationality into those it approves of like the Scots, the Catalans, and the Palestinians. (The Kurds, of course, remain a ticklish problem.) But, in compliance with the policies of Hamas, the Jews amongst all the peoples of the Earth, apparently have no legitimate right to nationalism or nationhood, because Palestine was given to the Muslims by Allah, for all time.

For most people on the left, the battle between Arabs and Jews for the same small corner of the world has become a *Passion Play* between good and evil, between the oppressed and the oppressors. It's a cleansing moral crusade in which one side, 'our' side – the Arabs and the Islamists – are on "the right side of history", while the Jews and Zionists must be bombed, rocketed, and boycotted into submission. We must not allow the history of the twentieth century to confuse or complicate matters. Consequently, the Jews are said to be interlopers and colonists in Palestine, the Arabs are natives, indigenous, the proper possessors of the land, call them what you will.

Meanwhile the Jews will refuse to surrender, and the state of Israel will endure.

**See *Zionism*  
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