

The Forgotten History of the Jewish, Anti-Zionist Left

The roots of modern Zionism are in colonialism. This was the foundation of the Jewish left's opposition to Zionism in the 1930s and '40s, on the grounds that it is a form of right-wing nationalism and imperialism that is fundamentally opposed to working-class internationalism.



A Bundist rally in Brussels circa 1935. Photo: YIVO Archives

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's push to forcibly annex up to 30 percent of the occupied West Bank is exposing the violence inherent in imposing a Jewish ethnstate on an indigenous Palestinian population. While the plan is delayed for now, the human rights organization B'Tselem [reports](#) that, in preparation for annexation, Israel already ramped up its demolitions of Palestinian homes in the West Bank in June, destroying thirty that month, a figure that does not include demolitions in East Jerusalem.

The theft and destruction of Palestinian homes and communities, however, is just one piece of a much larger — and older — colonial project. As Palestinian organizer Sandra Tamari [writes](#), “Palestinians have been forced to endure Israel’s policies of expulsion and land appropriation for over 70 years.” Today, this reality has evolved into an overt apartheid system: Palestinians within Israel are second-class citizens, with Israel now [officially codifying](#) that self-determination is for Jews only.

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are subject to military occupation, siege,

blockade, and martial law — a system of violent domination enabled by political and financial support from the United States.

Anti-Zionists argue that this brutal reality is not just the product of a right-wing government or failure to effectively procure a two-state solution. Rather, it stems from the modern Zionist project itself, one established in a colonial context, and fundamentally reliant on ethnic cleansing and violent domination of Palestinian people. Jews around the world are among those who call themselves anti-Zionists, and who vociferously object to the claim that the state of Israel represents the will — or interests — of Jewish people.

Sarah Lazare spoke with Benjamin Balthaser, an associate professor of multiethnic literature at Indiana University at South Bend. His recent [article](#), “When Anti-Zionism Was Jewish: Jewish Racial Subjectivity and the Anti-Imperialist Literary Left from the Great Depression to the Cold War,” examines the erased history of anti-Zionism among the Jewish, working-class left in the 1930s and ’40s. Balthaser is the author of a book of poems about the old Jewish left called *Dedication*, and an academic monograph titled *Anti-Imperialist Modernism*. He is working on a book about Jewish Marxists, socialist thought, and anti-Zionism in the twentieth century.

He spoke with Lazare about the colonial origins of modern Zionism, and the Jewish left’s quarrel with it, on the grounds that it is a form of right-wing nationalism, is fundamentally opposed to working-class internationalism, and is a form of imperialism. According to Balthaser, this political tradition undermines the claim that Zionism reflects the will of all Jewish people, and offers signposts for the present day. “For Jews in the United States who are trying to think about their relationship not only to Palestine, but also their own place in the world as an historically persecuted ethno-cultural diasporic minority, we have to think of whose side we are on, and which global forces we want to align with,” he says. “If we do not want to side with the executioners of the far-right, with colonialism, and with racism, there is a Jewish cultural resource for us to draw on — a political resource to draw on.”

Sarah Lazare

Can you please explain what the ideology of Zionism is? Who developed it and when?
Benjamin Balthaser

A couple of things need to be disentangled. First of all, there is a long Jewish history that predates the ideology of Zionism that looks at Jerusalem, the ancient kingdom of Judea, as a site of cultural, religious, and, you can say, messianic longing. If you know Jewish liturgy, there are references that go back thousands of years to the land of Zion, to Jerusalem, the old kingdom that the Romans destroyed.

There have been attempts throughout Jewish history, disastrously, to “return” to the land of Palestine, most famously, Sabbatai Zevi in the seventeenth century. But for the most part, through much of Jewish history, “Israel” was understood as a kind of cultural and messianic longing, but there was no desire to actually physically move there, outside of small religious communities in Jerusalem and, of course, the small number of Jews who continued to live in Palestine under the Ottoman Empire —

about 5 percent of the population.

Contemporary Zionism, particularly political Zionism, does draw on that large reservoir of cultural longing and religious text to legitimize itself, and that's where the confusion comes.

Modern Zionism arose in the late nineteenth century as a European nationalist movement. And I think that's the way to understand it. It was one of these many European nationalist movements of oppressed minorities that attempted to construct out of the diverse cultures of Western and Eastern Europe ethnically homogenous nation-states. And there were many Jewish nationalisms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of which Zionism was only one.

There was the Jewish Bund, which was a left-wing socialist movement that rose to prominence in the early twentieth century that articulated a deterritorialized nationalism in Eastern Europe. They felt their place was Eastern Europe, their land was Eastern Europe, their language was Yiddish. And they wanted to struggle for freedom in Europe where they actually lived. And they felt that their struggle for liberation was against oppressive capitalist governments in Europe. Had the Holocaust not wiped out the Bund and other Jewish socialists in Eastern Europe, we might be talking about Jewish nationalism in a very different context now.

Of course, there were Soviet experiments, probably most famous in Birobidzhan, but also one very brief one in Ukraine, to create Jewish autonomous zones within territories that Jews lived, or elsewhere within the Soviet Union, rooted in the Yiddish idea of doykait, diasporic hereness, and Yiddish language and culture.

Zionism was one of these cultural nationalist movements. What made it different was that it grafted itself onto British colonialism, a relationship made explicit with the Balfour Declaration in 1917, and actually tried to create a country out of a British colony — Mandate Palestine — and use British colonialism as a way to help establish itself in the Middle East. The Balfour Declaration was essentially a way to use the British Empire for its own ends. On some level, you could say Zionism is a toxic mixture of European nationalism and British imperialism grafted onto a cultural reservoir of Jewish tropes and mythologies that come from Jewish liturgy and culture.

Sarah Lazare

One of the underpinnings of modern Zionism is that it's an ideology that represents the will of all Jews. But in your paper, you argue that criticism of Zionism was actually quite common on the Jewish left in the 1930s and '40s, and that this history has been largely erased. Can you talk about what these criticisms were and who was making them?

Benjamin Balthaser

The funny part about the United States, and I would say this is mostly true for Europe, is that before the end of World War II, and even a little after, most Jews disparaged Zionists. And it didn't matter if you were a communist, it didn't matter if you were a Reform Jew, Zionism was not popular. There were a lot of different reasons for American Jews to not like Zionism before the 1940s.

There's the liberal critique of Zionism most famously articulated by Elmer Berger and the American Council for Judaism. The anxiety among these folks was that Zionism

would basically be a kind of dual loyalty, that it would open Jews up to the claim that they're not real Americans, and that it would actually frustrate their attempts to assimilate into mainstream American culture.

Elmer Berger also forwarded the idea that Jews are not a culture or a people, but simply a religion, and therefore have nothing in common with one another outside of the religious faith. This, I would argue, is an assimilationist idea that comes out of the 1920s and '30s, and tries to resemble a Protestant notion of "communities of faith." But for the Jewish left — the communist, socialist, Trotskyist, and Marxist left — their critique of Zionism came from two quarters: a critique of nationalism and a critique of colonialism. They understood Zionism as a right-wing nationalism and, in that sense, bourgeois. They saw it as in line with other forms of nationalism — an attempt to align the working class with the interests of the bourgeoisie.

There was at the time a well-known takedown of Vladimir Jabotinsky in the *New Masses* in 1935, in which Marxist critic Robert Gessner calls Jabotinsky a little Hitler on the Red Sea. Gessner calls the Zionists Nazis and the Left in general saw Jewish nationalism as a right-wing formation trying to create a unified, militaristic culture that aligns working-class Jewish interests with the interests of the Jewish bourgeoisie. So that's one critique of Zionism. The other critique of Zionism, which I think is more contemporary to the Left today, is that Zionism is a form of imperialism. If you look at the pamphlets and magazines and speeches that are given on the Jewish left in the 1930s and '40s, they saw that Zionists were aligning themselves with British imperialism.

They also were very aware of the fact that the Middle East was colonized, first by the Ottomans and then by the British. They saw the Palestinian struggle for liberation as part of a global anti-imperialist movement.

Of course, Jewish communists saw themselves not as citizens of a nation-state, but as part of the global proletariat: part of the global working class, part of the global revolution. And so for them to think about their homeland as this small strip of land in the Mediterranean — regardless of any cultural affinity to Jerusalem — would just be against everything they believe.

As the Holocaust began in earnest in the 1940s, and Jews were fleeing Europe in any way they possibly could, some members of the Communist Party advocated that Jews should be allowed to go to Palestine if you're fleeing annihilation and Palestine is the only place you can go that is natural.

But that doesn't mean you can create a nation-state there. You need to get along with the people who live there as best as you possibly can. There was a communist party of Palestine that did advocate for Jewish and Palestinian collaboration to oust the British and create a binational state — which, for a host of reasons, including the segregated nature of Jewish settlement, proved harder in practice than in theory.

In any case, the Jewish left in the 1930s and '40s understood, critically, that the only way Zionism would be able to emerge in Palestine was through a colonial project and through the expulsion of the indigenous Palestinians from the land. In a speech by Earl Browder, chairman of the Communist Party, in Manhattan's Hippodrome, he declares that a Jewish state can only be formed through the expulsion of a quarter-

million Palestinians, which attendees thought was very shocking at the time, but it actually ended up being a dramatic undercount.

Sarah Lazare

You wrote in your recent journal article, “Perhaps the single most pervasive narrative about Zionism, even among scholars and writers who acknowledge its marginal status before the war, is that the Holocaust changed Jewish opinion and convinced Jews of its necessity.” You identify some major holes in this narrative. Can you explain what they are?

Benjamin Balthaser

I would alter that a bit to say I’m really talking about the communist and Marxist left in this context. I grew up within a left-wing family where opinion was definitely divided on the question of Zionism — yet, nonetheless, there was a pervasive idea that the Holocaust changed opinion universally, and everyone fell in line as soon as the details of the Holocaust were revealed, Zionist and anti-Zionist alike.

It’s undeniably correct to say that without the Holocaust there probably would have been no Israel, if just for the single fact that there was a massive influx of Jewish refugees after the war who would have undoubtedly stayed in Europe otherwise. Without that influx of Jews who could fight the 1948 war and populate Israel just after, it’s doubtful an independent state of Israel could have succeeded.

However, one thing I found most surprising going through the Jewish left press in the 1940s — publications of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, the Communist Party, and writings by Hannah Arendt — is that even after the scope of the Holocaust was widely understood, their official position was still anti-Zionist.

They may have called for Jews to be allowed to resettle in the lands from which they were expelled or massacred, with full rights and full citizenship, be allowed to immigrate to the United States, or even be allowed to emigrate to Palestine if there was nowhere else to go (as was often the case). But they were still wholly against partition and the establishment of a Jewish-only state.

What is important to understand about that moment was that Zionism was a political choice — not only by Western imperial powers, but also by Jewish leadership. They could have fought more strenuously for Jewish immigration to the United States. And a lot of the Zionist leaders actually fought against immigration to the United States.

There were a number of stories reported in the Jewish communist press about how Zionists collaborated with the British and Americans to force Jews to go to Mandate Palestine, when they would have rather gone to the United States, or England. There’s a famous quote by Ernest Bevin, the British foreign secretary, who said the only reason the United States sent Jews to Palestine was “because they do not want too many more of them in New York.” And the Zionists agreed with this.

While this may seem like ancient history, it is important because it disrupts the common sense surrounding Israel’s formation. “Yes, maybe there could have been peace between Jews and Palestinians, but the Holocaust made all of that impossible.” And I would say that this debate after 1945 shows that there was a long moment in which there were other possibilities, and another future could have happened.

Ironically, perhaps, the Soviet Union did more than any other single force to change

the minds of the Jewish Marxist left in the late 1940s about Israel. Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Union's ambassador to the United Nations, came out in 1947 and backed partition in the United Nations after declaring the Western world did nothing to stop the Holocaust, and suddenly there's this about-face. All these Jewish left-wing publications that were denouncing Zionism, literally the next day, were embracing partition and the formation of the nation-state of Israel.

You have to understand, for a lot of Jewish communists and even socialists, the Soviet Union was the promised land — not Zionism. This was the place where they had, according to the propaganda, eradicated antisemitism.

The Russian Empire was the most antisemitic place throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, before the rise of Nazism. Many of the Jewish Communist Party members were from Eastern Europe, or their families were, and they had very vivid memories of Russia as the crucible of antisemitism. For them, the Russian Revolution was a rupture in history, a chance to start over. And, of course, this is after World War II, when the Soviet Union had just defeated the Nazis.

For the Soviet Union to embrace Zionism really sent a shockwave through the left-wing Jewish world. The Soviet Union changed its policy a decade or so later, openly embracing anti-Zionism by the 1960s. But for this brief pivotal moment, the Soviet Union firmly came down in favor of partition, and that seems to be what really changed the Jewish left.

Without this kind of legitimization, I think we are all starting to see the Jewish left such as it exists return back in an important way to the positions that it had originally held, which is that Zionism is a right-wing nationalism, and that it is also racist and colonialist. We are seeing the Jewish left return to its first principles.

Sarah Lazare

That's a good segue to some questions I wanted to ask you about the relevance of anti-Zionist history to the present day. For a lot of people, Israel's plan to annex huge amounts of Palestinian land in the West Bank, while delayed, is still laying bare the violence of the Zionist project of establishing Jewish rule over a Palestinian population. And we are seeing some prominent liberal Zionists like Peter Beinart publicly proclaim that the two-state solution is dead and one state based on equal rights is the best path. Do you see now as an important moment to connect with the history of Jewish anti-Zionism? Do you see openings or possibilities for changing people's minds?

Benjamin Balthaser

In a way, Beinart's letter was seventy years too late. But it is still a very important cultural turn, to the extent that he is part of a liberal Jewish establishment. I would also say that we're in a different historical moment. In the 1930s and '40s, you can really talk about a kind of global revolutionary sentiment and a real Jewish left that's located in organizations like the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Socialist Party. And you can see that again in the 1960s.

Students for a Democratic Society, which also had a very sizeable Jewish membership, formally backed anti-Zionism in the 1960s, along with the Socialist Workers Party, and formed alliances with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee, which had also taken an official anti-Zionist position in the late 1960s. You could think about a global revolutionary framework in which Palestinian liberation was an articulated part — you could think about the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Palestine Liberation Organization as part of the fabric of global revolutionary movements.

Today we're in a much more fragmented space. On the same note, though, we're seeing the rebirth, or maybe continuity, of Palestinian civil rights movements, with Palestinian civil society putting out a call for decolonization — both out of their own traditions of liberation, but also looking to models from the South African freedom struggle.

For contemporary Jews who are progressive and see themselves on the Left, they're suddenly realizing that there really is no center anymore, there is no liberal Zionist position any longer. The center has really fallen away.

And we're faced with this very stark decision: that either you're going to be on the side of liberation, or you're going to be on the side of the Israeli right, which has eliminationist and genocidal intent that has always been there, but is nakedly apparent now. And so I think people like Beinart are waking up and saying, "I don't want to be on the side of the executioners."

The history of the old Jewish left and the new Jewish left of the 1960s shows us this isn't new.

Any liberation struggle is going to come from the oppressed themselves, so the Palestinian liberation movement is going to set its terms for struggles. But for Jews in the United States who are trying to think about their relationship, not only to Palestine, but also their own place in the world as an historically persecuted ethno-cultural diasporic minority, we have to think of whose side we are on, and which global forces we want to align with.

If we do not want to side with the executioners of the far-right, with colonialism and with racism, there is a Jewish cultural resource for us to draw on — a political resource to draw on. This history of the anti-Zionist Jewish left demonstrates that an important historical role in a diaspora has been solidarity with other oppressed people. That's the place from which we've gathered the most strength historically. So I look at this not as saying, "We're not going to reproduce the Communist Party of the 1930s and 1940s." We're saying, "We'll produce something new, but the past can be a cultural resource that we can use today."

Sarah Lazare

Who or what is responsible for the erasure of this history of Jewish, left anti-Zionism?

Benjamin Balthaser

I wouldn't blame the erasure solely on the Soviet Union or Zionism, because we also have to think of the Cold War and how the Cold War destroyed the old Jewish left, and really drove it underground and shattered its organizations. So I think we also have to see how the turn toward Zionism was understood as something that would normalize Jews in a post-war era.

With the execution of the Rosenbergs, the Red Scare of the late 1940s and '50s, and the virtual banning of the Communist Party, which had been throughout the 1930s and

'40s half Jewish, for much of the Jewish establishment, aligning themselves with American imperialism was a way for Jews to normalize their presence in the United States. And hopefully that moment has to some degree passed.

We can see the emptiness and barrenness of aligning ourselves with an American imperial project, with people like Bari Weiss and Jared Kushner. Why would someone like Bari Weiss, who describes herself as liberal, want to align herself with the most reactionary forces in American life?

It's a bloody matrix of assimilation and whiteness that emerged out of the Cold War suburbanization of the 1950s. Israel was part of that devil's bargain. Yes, you can become real Americans: You can go to good US universities, you can join the suburbs, enter into the mainstream of American life, as long as you do this one little thing for us, which is back the American Empire.

Hopefully, with the emergence of new grassroots organizations in the United States, among Jews and non-Jews who are questioning the US role in supporting Zionism, this calculus can begin to change. With the rise of Jewish Voice for Peace, IfNotNow, the Democratic Socialists of America, and the Movement for Black Lives all taking a serious stance against US support for Zionism, the common sense in the Jewish community has begun to move in a different direction, particularly among the younger generation. The battle is very far from over, but it makes me just a little optimistic about the future.