

DISSENT

A Quarterly of Politics and Culture

Between Israel and Social Democracy: Tony Judt's Jewishness



French Popular Front rally for Leon Blum, 1936 (Parti Socialiste/Flickr)

By [Daniel Solomon](#) - August 6, 2014

On October 3, 2006, around 5:00 p.m., Tony Judt's phone rang. On the other line was Patricia Huntington, the president of Network 20/20, a New York-based professional networking organization. Judt had planned to spend the evening speaking to the organization's members about the influence of pro-Israel advocates over U.S. foreign policy, at the Polish Consulate on Madison Avenue. Huntington's call freed up Judt's evening schedule; the Polish consul general had cancelled the event.

The consul general's decision followed a rhetorical assault by various pro-Israel Jewish groups, including the Anti-Defamation League, led by Abraham Foxman, and the American Jewish Congress, whose director David Harris had called the Consulate — "as a friend of Poland" — to highlight Judt's allegedly anti-Israel advocacy. In the following days, Judt mustered a campaign against these apparent infringements against the historian's free expression. An [open letter](#) to Foxman, signed by over one hundred of Judt's colleagues and [later published in the *New York Review of Books*](#), to which Judt was a frequent contributor, accused the ADL director of fostering a "climate of intimidation." In response, Foxman [described](#) the original letter as an effort to "completely debase those values" of democratic speech that the undersigned themselves defended.

Judt died four years later, on August 6, 2010, from complications of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). If the cancellation of his speech at the Polish Consulate created a new climate of intimidation, Judt had hardly noticed. Obituarists, both familiar and unfamiliar, remembered the historian both as an eminent student of modern Europe — from 1995 until his death, Judt was the founding director of New York University's Remarque Institute — and as a public gadfly on the topic of Israeli politics. Many discussed this latter status as a synonym of Judt's Jewishness. Events like the Polish Consulate dust-up, or the controversy surrounding Judt's 2003 partial [defense](#) of a "one-state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, defined both posthumous portrayals of Judt's Jewish identity and, toward the end of his life, the historian's own understanding of his bibliography. In a eulogy-qua-review of Judt's collection of memoir-essays *The Memory Chalet*, Thomas Nagel described the historian's essay on the one-state solution, "Israel: The Alternative," as "a deliberately utopian fantasy that takes his rejection of identity politics to its limit." In this telling, Judt's last decade of public writing fully embraced the cosmopolitan, leaving little room for a provincial Jewish politics now fully in Zionism's embrace. For a dying Judt as well as for his obituarists, the hawkish nationalism of many of Israel's global advocates made contemporary Jewishness an ugly, reactionary enterprise.

Beyond Zionism and its discontents, however, Judt's Jewishness was a vibrant companion of the historian's aspiring cosmopolitanism. For Judt, the history of political cosmopolitanism — a politics that serves a common public, regardless of identity — was an outgrowth of a collective history of Jewish suffering. Fin-de-siècle and interwar France, the Nazi Holocaust, and Communist Eastern Europe — the epochs that weigh heaviest over Judt's work as well as over the century-long destruction of European Jewry — were the predecessors of an increasingly egalitarian European state. The biography of Judt, a next-generation descendant of Holocaust survivors, is also the story of the political left: the imagination of the universal through the preservation of the provincial. Four years after the historian's death, the tangled layers of Judt's Jewishness also inform a contemporary left still struggling to reconcile its own politics of identity.

The biography of Judt is also the story of the political left: the imagination of the universal through the

preservation of the provincial.

Tony Judt was born in 1948, three years after Allied brigades liberated the last of Nazi Germany's concentration camps. "I cannot recall a time when I did not know about what was not yet called the Holocaust," narrates Judt in *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, a posthumously published dialogue with Timothy Snyder and the most expansive public record to date of Judt's own biography. Judt's father was Polish, by way of Belgium, and his mother's family fled Chisinau, then a Russian center of anti-Semitic violence, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many of Judt's relatives who remained in Eastern Europe during the Second World War died in the camp. Toni, the first cousin of his father's for whom Judt was named, died at Auschwitz in 1942. "Tony" was a memento mori, a token of the family's recent loss.

The war turned North London, where Judt was briefly raised, into a dense hub for wealthier Eastern European Jewish refugees. The family's move to Putney, a London suburb, was an "act of ethno-self-rejection." In *Thinking*, Judt's every memory of his Putney years is a reminder of the era's fleeting Jewishness. Friday-night dinners, a common celebration of the Jewish sabbath, featured his aging grandmother, a stubborn champion of a spoken Yiddish culture nearly vanquished during the war. During family vacations in central Europe, an equally stubborn father tried his best to avoid all things German, a political culture then in the throes of de-Nazification. Trips to Belgium and Holland placed the family on the doorsteps of distant cousins with whom the Judts shared only their fortunate survival of the Holocaust. In its culture and its people, the Jewishness of his father's and grandmother's generations was decaying, if it could still be said to exist at all.

Like many young, mostly secular Jews of his postwar generation, Judt fashioned his early Jewishness against the backdrop of the infant state of Israel. He first visited Israel in 1963, as a new member of Dror, a socialist Zionist youth group. In an obituary to Judt, J.J. Goldberg, a former member of Dror's U.S. affiliate, [described the organization](#) as "a quirky mixture of doctrinaire Marxism and equally doctrinaire Greater Israelism." Dror was a logical fit for the fifteen-year-old who, two years prior, had received Isaac Deutscher's three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky as a birthday gift. Between 1963 and 1966, Zionism was Judt's primary window into both Jewish practice and left-wing politics. In 1966, fresh from a successful Cambridge entrance exam, he returned to Israel to pick oranges for Kibbutz Machanayim, in the northern Galilee region. In theory, the kibbutz was a living display of young Judt's egalitarian politics.

Of course, this egalitarianism occurred alongside Israel's growing segregation of its Arab citizens, a social reality Judt would only later confront. Judt's continued involvement with Dror was as personal as it was political. In *Thinking*, the historian describes a cast of role models, romances, and mentors that drew him deeper into Dror: among them, Zvi and Maya Dubinsky, a pair of evangelists for Israel's postwar kibbutz movement, and Jacquie Philips, later Judt's first wife and a fellow Zionist whom he often visited in London during his first year at Cambridge. In the spring of 1967, Judt joined Philips and other young Zionists to muster British support for Israel's looming war effort. During the 1967 war, Judt worked as auxiliary support for Israeli military units in the Golan Heights, the Syrian front of the regional conflict. After the war, the political remained personal, albeit in much less favorable ways. Judt describes post-1967 Israel as a revelation, in words that recall that venerable collection of ex-Communist confessionals, *The God That Failed*: "I had been indoctrinated into an anachronism, had lived an anachronism, and I now saw the depth of my delusion." If close friends in Israel's kibbutz movement had drawn Judt further into Zionism, their evident bigotry now repulsed him. For Judt, the xenophobia and militarism of a newly victorious Israeli society had been laid bare. The task of Jewish governance, now inclusive of Israel's military force, had polluted an otherwise noble concept of communal labor.

Public details of the historian's time in Israel beyond 1967 are scarce. It is not clear why, despite his apparent disillusionment, Judt returned to Israel in 1969, two years after his eye-opening encounter with Zionism's intolerant underbelly. After 1969, Judt would not return directly to the topic of Israel, much less the country itself, for another three decades. In *Thinking*, he reflects, "Jewish political engagement had absorbed all my adolescent attentions. But once I dropped it, it was as though I no longer saw, much less engaged with, Jewish issues in my professional life." The departure was a clean break. In the late 1960s, he stopped thinking about Israel, and at the turn of the millennium, he resumed.

On its face, Judt's abrupt pivot appears total. As a student of French history at Cambridge, Judt turned from the orange groves of Israel's kibbutzim to the research archives and social circles of Paris, where he spent a year-long graduate fellowship in 1970 and to which he returned many times in later years. Of course, the topic of Israel was never far; then as now, a firm opinion on "the question of Israel" was a shibboleth of the so-called public intellectual. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Judt's closest mentors, George Lichtheim

and Annie Kriegel, joined a heated French public debate over the young state's impact on postwar Jews and Jewishness. Despite the apparent interest of his mentors, Judt opted out; his published work during the period exclusively addresses the rebirth and fall of interwar French socialism.

While Judt's Jewishness was now tangential to his public work, the topics he engaged as a Zionist youth activist remained relevant to the young historian's studies in and about France. Judt's first three book-length publications are social histories of the modern French left. The first two, *La reconstruction de la parti socialiste* and *Socialism in Province*, each narrate the gradual expansion of French socialism from the seeds of nineteenth-century labor – that is, a fleeting mass politics both realized and tarnished by the coalition Popular Front government. Based on archival research in both urban and rural France, these works were an origin story of French socialism in the context of a deepening republican state. Both described how the French Socialist Party (SFIO), prior to its total dismantling by the Vichy regime in 1940, evolved from the material culture of French labor – its politics, its society, its means of production. The books were less concerned with the moral question of governance that occupied Judt's third text, *Marxism and the French Left*. There, "the real difficulty for the Left. . . was the question of whether or not the Left *ought* to govern in France."

This was not merely a matter of political wisdom; the moral possibilities of the French state were also at stake. The political parties of the interwar French left lacked a meaningful program of social and political change; when French socialists, radicals, and communists cobbled together the Popular Front government in 1936, their house was easily divided. Newly in power, the SFIO, which held the government's prime ministry, struggled to sustain the ideological orthodoxy that guided the Popular Front's early expansion of French social programs. Infighting among the governing coalition opened the left, and especially its prime minister Leon Blum, to right-wing assaults against the legitimacy of the Front's governance.

For Judt, the history of political cosmopolitanism was an outgrowth of a collective history of Jewish suffering.

Judt became transfixed by the "tragic figure" of Blum. Blum, a Parisian Jew, bore partial if significant fault for the collapse of the Front coalition, a fact both right- and left-wing opponents noted in the ugliest of ways. In a [1996 essay](#) on the French experience of the Second World War, Judt recalls a quote from a French paper affiliated with the Radical Party, a coalition member: Blum was a "a sexually polymorphous Rabbi" whose failures warranted the vitriol he received. Facing the "Scylla of Communism and the Charybdis of absorption into the Radical center," Judt added a decade later in *The Burden of Responsibility*, Blum displayed political courage – moral responsibility, in Judt's terms – and he was rewarded with ceaseless bigotry.

The anti-Semitism of Blum's opponents was obvious and widespread, and the crisis of French Jewishness it represented increasingly took center stage in Judt's moral tale of the Third Republic. The French Jewish community was not especially large – as across interwar Europe, the cultural and political influence of French Jews far outweighed the population's numbers. Instead, the violence and discrimination visited on French Jews like Blum was a microcosm of the civic failure of the Third Republic. If, as Judt writes in *Marxism*, public debate was an indispensable feature of the politics of the era's French left, the xenophobia of the Front's discourse belied its egalitarian aspirations. The anti-Semitism of Blum's opponents was not simply a tangent of the rotting French state; it was the rot itself.

As Judt gained distance from his "Jewish decade," the historian's Jewishness returned as a direct subject of his public work. Again, the personal intervened. During the early 1980s, Judt began a long separation from his second wife, Patricia Hilden. In *Thinking*, he describes a new friendship with Jan Gross and Irena Grudzinska-Gross, whom Judt met as a visiting sociology professor at Emory in 1981. The Gross couple were Polish expatriates, permanent refugees from the Polish government crackdown against Warsaw university students in March 1968. Theirs was the story of thousands during the final wane of Eastern European Communism: educated, high-culture dissidents who fled en masse from the violence of their respective regimes. Through the Gross couple, among others – Stanford's Hoover Institution, a small community of Czech activists, a group of sympathetic British book smugglers – these dissidents became Judt's new social circle.

In *Marxism*, the historian had begun to consider the plight of Eastern European Communism and its French fellow travelers; he continued this study in *Past Imperfect*, an impassioned analysis of the moral failures of the postwar French intelligentsia. Judt structures the work as a series of essays against fragments of a French public discourse: the self-justified violence of postwar retribution, political purges and show trials across the Eastern bloc, the anti-Americanism of those who opposed the new postwar order. If Judt had taken a circuitous route to the task of the public intellectual, *Past Imperfect* was his arrival. The tone of *Past Imperfect* is piercing and righteous, a vast departure from the cautious descriptiveness of texts like *Marxism*. A new moral

vocabulary followed from Judt's tone; *Past Imperfect* is as much about defining the terms of political liberalism as it is about the intellectual history of the Left Bank of Jean-Paul Sartre and his milieu. The moral oversights of the French intelligentsia were much more than a matter of the left's political future, as they had been in *Marxism*. This history was a cautionary study of moral engagement—how the intellectual defines justice, and how they work to achieve it.

The sources of Judt's new moral discontent appear obvious. The historian wrote *Past Imperfect* as a fellow at the aggressively anticommunist Hoover Institution, in the depths of his activism on behalf of Eastern European dissidents. During the late 1970s, "human rights" and associated concepts against the violence of the state became the partial territory of international activism against the Eastern bloc. Judt was cautiously supportive of the so-called "rights talk" of dissidents like Vaclav Havel, who also sought a new vocabulary beyond the violent obfuscations of authoritarianism. His support was not total; as Samuel Moyn observes in an [obituary](#) to Judt, the historian vacillated between enthusiasm and ambivalence over the question of human rights for much of the following two decades.

Judt's growing engagement with questions of nationalism, less apparent than his anticommunism, also shaped his new vocabulary. As Judt's activism expanded, new relationships with Eastern European dissidents revealed new political questions about the inclusion and exclusion of ethnic minorities in the Eastern bloc. These questions were more provincial than the universal language of Havel's Charter 77 movement. Forty years later, Eastern Europe had not quite grappled with the political and moral consequences of the Holocaust, or of the massive demographic changes that the Nazi and Soviet "bloodlands" had wrought. The growth of nationalist politics following the fall of the Soviet Communism and its satellites made clear the ugly consequences of this oversight; the mass violence of the Second World War reemerged as a subject of public debate. Both the incendiary reception of *Past Imperfect* in France and a prominent post at New York University allowed Judt new access to publications beyond the academy. In the pages of the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Republic*, Judt addressed precisely these issues: how nationalism would shape a reunited Europe, and what it would mean for the slow recovery of the continent's Jews and Jewishness.

During the mid-1990s, the historian wrote prolifically about the Holocaust, but rarely directly. The mass murder of European Jewry was a double bookend of the postwar era Judt would narrate in his magnum opus—first as history, then as memory. The suffering of Europe's Jews and the continent's subsequent catharsis pervades *Postwar*, from the ambivalent rise of the European planning state to the creation of its supranational supplement. Europe's postwar order was constructed as a preventive safeguard against another Holocaust; in *Postwar*, the historian describes the influence of the recent memory of Nazism over Europe's technocratic planners. The memory of the Holocaust survived despite the longevity and expansion of the new European project. "The new Europe, bound together by the signs and symbols of its terrible past, is a remarkable accomplishment; but it remains forever mortgaged to that past," reads the work's concluding essay. The resilient memory of a provincial history makes urgent a pluralistic politics, European or otherwise.

Most times, Judt preferred not to frame his work in these terms. As early as 1979, in an essay against methodological trends in the practice of social history, Judt opposed what he viewed as an academic cult of "identity politics"—the isolated historical study of womanhood, or indigeneity, or blackness. The academic pursuit of "cultural studies," in his inelegant characterization, was "[crap](#)." The historian viewed the provincial study of identity as an affront to "the goals of a liberal education," as he wrote [in a 2010 essay](#). Academic studies of identity, he continues, "[reinforce] the sectarian and ghetto mentalities they purport to undermine." In *Ill Fares the Land*, a parting defense of a lost social democracy, Judt expressed nostalgia for a cosmopolitan public commons threatened by the privatization of goods, on the right, and the privatization of identity, on the left.

The diversity of Judt's own Jewishness contradicts this rigid contest between the cosmopolitan and the provincial. In Judt's public writing, the politics of the public commons is nothing more than the protection of its self-similar parts. For Judt, the question of Israel was an important tangent of the historian's own provincial Jewishness. The memory of the Holocaust was a force for political cosmopolitanism in itself; the eventual myopia of contemporary Zionism was the conviction that this memory could only be enshrined through an exclusionary nation-state. This was the central observation of Judt's defense of the one-state solution in 2003; it was also a logical finding of Judt's fragmented three-decade history of the European public commons.

Of course, the present-day resilience of European anti-Semitism is a significant—and hardly unique—counterpoint against Judt's hopeful cosmopolitanism, one of which the historian was plainly aware of. For Jews as well as for Roma, Muslim, and various Middle Eastern minorities, the protections of the European commons appear increasingly limited. But perhaps their inclusion in a common politics is a more moral goal

than others' exclusion.

Daniel Solomon is a writer based in Washington, DC. His writing has appeared online at the *New York Times*, *Pacific Standard*, *Al Jazeera America*, *The Week*, and *The Awl*.