

ANTISEMITIC ANTI- ZIONISM: THE ORIGINS AND CHARACTER OF AN IDEOLOGY

LFI POLICY BRIEFING

LABOUR
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WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION

ANTISEMITIC ANTI-ZIONISM: THE ORIGINS AND CHARACTER OF AN IDEOLOGY

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JULY 2023

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INTRODUCTION

DAME LOUISE ELLMAN

Anti-Zionism is a poisonous legacy of the Soviet Union. It has no place in a party of the centre-left

I've always been proud to believe in the Jewish people's right to self-determination and the State of Israel; in short, to be a Zionist.

But when I'm labelled a Zionist - as I frequently am - I'm keenly aware that it's not meant as a simple description of my deeply held beliefs, let alone a compliment, but toxic discrimination.

In the discourse of far-left activists, "Zionist" has become a shorthand for all that offends their supposedly progressive values: racist, supporter of apartheid, neoconservative hawk, neoliberal ally of the rich.

As a proud member of the Labour party for more than 50 years, I am none of those things; indeed, as a councillor, local authority leader, and parliamentarian, I always did my best to fight racism, promote internationalism, oppose inequality and stand up for those in need.

In the years before the Holocaust, anti-Zionism may well have been a legitimate strand of debate among Jews - one, indeed, advanced by some socialists. But the establishment of the State of Israel following the Nazis' murder of 6 million Jews with the help of collaborators, in their determination to annihilate the Jewish people, radically changed the nature of the debate.

The vast majority of Jews, including those who chose not to make Aliyah, realised, accepted and strongly endorsed the need for a Jewish homeland. Today, Israel remains an [important part of the identity of most British Jews](#).

This publication from Labour Friends of Israel seeks to both outline the current character of antizionism and its relationship to antisemitism, and trace its origins back to the pernicious war against Israel and the Jews waged by the Soviet Union.

But this is not an academic exercise. As both David Hirsh and Izabella Tabarovsky make clear in their contributions, antizionism is closely intertwined with, and feeds, antisemitism. Those of us who fought - and were subject to - antisemitism in the Labour party under its previous leadership know this all too well.

LABOUR'S PROGRESS

Nonetheless, too often during discussions on the nature of antisemitism in the party, and how it was best tackled and rooted out, the role of antizionism was ignored, downplayed or denied. It was argued that the significance of antisemitism in the party was exaggerated by the left's enemies and that it could be tackled at the same time as supporting the drumbeat of attacks on the world's only Jewish state. Zionism was not recognised as self-determination for the Jewish people in a majority Jewish state. Instead, it was seen as racist imperialism. The "anti-racists" could not recognise their own racism against Jewish people.

As I [suggested](#) when I rejoined the Labour party in September 2021, under Keir Starmer's leadership, Labour has made huge strides towards confronting anti-Jewish racists, stamping out the poison of antisemitism and addressing the toxic culture which allowed it to flourish. Keir has rightly recognised

that this work is not yet complete and that it is not simply a legal and institutional matter. Indeed, in his speech to the LFI annual lunch in November 2021, Keir [clearly identified](#) the root of the problem: antizionist antisemitism. This, he argued, “is the antithesis of the Labour tradition”:

It denies the Jewish people alone a right to self-determination;
It equates Zionism with racism, focuses obsessively on the world’s sole Jewish state, and holds it to standards to which no other country is subjected;
And it seeks to paint the actions of Israel as akin to the crimes of those who sought to annihilate European Jewry in the Shoah.

In his chapter, Hirsh brings much-needed clarity to the similarities, and close relationship between, antisemitism and antizionism. Antisemitism, he reminds us, is a fantastical worldview which paints all Jews as part of a malign and menacing conspiracy which is key to understanding both history and how the world works. Similarly, antizionism is an ideology which presents Zionism as “a pure, powerful, evil, in a way that is analogous to antisemitism’s invention of ‘the Jew’”. Thus antizionism sees Israel as being “central to, or symbolic of, every political or ideological corruption, cruelty or injustice on the planet”.

A POISONOUS SOVIET LEGACY

However, as Tabarovsky ably demonstrates, it is impossible to understand both the development of this ideology and the manner in which it came to influence elements of the global left without exploring the role of the Soviet Union in its promotion. Although the Soviets originally supported the establishment of the State of Israel, assuming that it would join the communist bloc, opposition to Zionism stretched back to the USSR’s earliest days, and antisemitism came to flourish under Stalin. However, it was the Soviets’ need to explain the failure of the Arab armies they had equipped and trained to destroy Israel in 1967 – as well as their concern about the desire of Soviet Jews to emigrate and the support this campaign elicited in the west – which led to the invention of the idea of an “international Zionist” conspiracy.

The Soviet propaganda machine spread this malign conspiracy far and wide, utilising both its own resources and tapping those of its fellow travellers far beyond the confines of the Iron Curtain. This would come to curdle and warp the thinking of the hard left, its view of Israel and its response to antisemitism with consequences that continue to be felt by Jews three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Like Hirsh, Tabarovsky also correctly identifies the parallels and connections between what we might call traditional antisemitism – that to which the far right has historically adhered – and the ideology of contemporary antizionism. The Soviet authors who produced, peddled and promoted the notion of an “international Zionist” conspiracy, she argues, were members of a loose far-right, antisemitic nationalist movement which emerged in the USSR in the 1950s. It’s no surprise then that the Zionologists’ ideas so closely track and parrot the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the most notorious and devastating antisemitic conspiracy theory.

As [recent research](#) from the US-based Anti-Defamation League cited by Tabarovsky exemplifies, there is “substantive correlation ... between belief in anti-Jewish tropes and anti-Israel sentiment”. None of this should be surprising given the manner in which modern antizionism has drawn upon, mimicked and replicated antisemitic myths which stretch back hundreds of year.

So how does Labour, as it prepares to shift from the politics of opposition to the responsibilities of government, continue to fulfil Keir’s mission of eliminating antisemitism from every last crevice and dark nook of our party?

TACKLING ANTI-ZIONIST ANTISEMITISM

There are five overlapping and interrelated steps upon which I believe we should focus.

First, prejudice thrives amid ignorance. The British Jewish community's sense of security will remain shaken for many years, perhaps indefinitely, after the shocking experience of the Labour party descending into antisemitism. Yet many Labour members may forget how quickly and easily our party slid into the hard left abyss. This horrendous part of Labour party history must never be forgotten. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Second, recognise that antizionism has no place in the Labour tradition. Labour – which endorsed the notion of a Jewish homeland even before the Balfour Declaration – has a long and proud history of support for Zionism. It is one which stretches back through time and across the party's wings and factions. By contrast, as Tabarovsky shows, antizionism is the product of Soviet propagandists. Its ideological home is thus on the fringes of the far left, not in a party of the mainstream centre-left.

Third, as Hirsh argues, there are troubling elements of both scale and substance when it comes to the debate around Israel on the wider left. Of course, “critical, measured, rational engagement with Israeli policy and culture” is both right and legitimate. Too often, however, we see an obsessive and disproportionate focus on the Jewish state combined with a level of ferocious, denunciatory criticism which is clearly designed to demonise and delegitimise Israel and dehumanise the Israeli people. Israeli governments should not escape criticism for their faults, but Israel should not be held to standards not expected or demanded of other democratic states, nor should its actions ever be compared to those who sought to exterminate the Jewish people less than 100 years ago.

The debate within the party about the Middle East must therefore be fair, proportionate and balanced. The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is a tragedy. We must continue to promote a negotiated two-state solution: the only way to realise the legitimate aspirations of both the Jewish and Palestinian peoples to self-determination and to guarantee Israel's most precious characteristic: its democratic and Jewish nature. We must be pro-Israel, pro-Palestine and pro-peace. Our place must always be by the side of peacemakers and progressives among both peoples.

A debate framed and conducted in this manner is the best guardian against a resurgence of antizionism. It is also the best route for a future Labour government to be a trusted, credible and respected international player in the struggle for peace, reconciliation and coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians.

Fourth, we must be constantly vigilant against those who seek to diminish or excuse antisemitism and shelter behind the lie that those who call it out are simply trying to silence criticism of Israel or weaponise the issue for political ends. This is offensive, untrue and antisemitic. As the American Jewish Committee's [Translate Hate Glossary](#) suggests:

One of the longest standing antisemitic attacks levelled against Jews is the “silencing” of their opponents. The false claim that Jews deem any criticism of Israel or the Jewish people as antisemitic, and wield the power of the antisemitic label to silence the opposition, is offensive and dangerous for productive discourse. The idea of “silencing” speech plays into the commonly used trope of “Jewish control”.

Finally, we must be wary of those, as Hirsh indicates, “who only denounce the antisemitism in the political communities that they already despise”. Those who peddle hateful language and lies about Israel – who compare it to an apartheid state or draw shameful analogies between its actions and those

of Nazi Germany – cannot claim to be opponents of antisemitism simple because they've attacked anti-Jewish racism on the populist right and far right.

Under Keir's leadership, the battle against antisemitism is being fought and won. To ensure that this victory is both complete and lasting, we must recognise the absolute centrality of antizionism in feeding this latest variant of the world's oldest hatred.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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FROM A CRITIQUE OF ZIONISM TO AN ANTI-JEWISH WORLDVIEW

DAVID HIRSH

Antisemitism paints 'the Jews' as joined together in a menacing international conspiracy. Antizionism similarly portrays an all-powerful Israel as central to all of the world's ills

Antisemitism replaces the infinite diversity of Jewish men and women with a single 'the Jews', which it imagines acts as a unified, hidden and evil force in the world. Antizionism, when it loses sight of the Jews who actually exist, and of the Israel that they actually built, does something similar. It refuses to see Israel in its complexity, contradictory, flawed and majestic, and it misses the overwhelming majority of Jews for whom Israel is, in one way or another, a part of their Jewish identity. Instead, antizionism draws its own grotesque caricature of Zionism as a single, monstrous, universal evil, and it constructs a whole worldview, or ideology, in relation to that demonic fantasy of Jewish nationhood.

THE HYPHEN: ANTI-SEMITISM AND ANTISEMITISM

Bear with me, this stuff about hyphens is not as pretentious or arcane as it sounds.

We write 'antisemitism' rather than 'anti-Semitism' because there is no 'Semitism' out there in the world that antisemites oppose. The thing they oppose is their own invention. They oppose the antisemitic notion of 'the Jews'. Actual Jewish men and women are diverse — they have different appearances, skin colours, beliefs and religious practices; they speak different languages and they are at home in different nations and classes. Antisemitism imagines Jews as being all the same. Any Jew is part of the same menacing conspiracy; antisemitism makes every Jew into a tentacle of one monster.

For example, the notion that the Jews control Hollywood assumes that all Jews in the movie business act in a collective, secret and malevolent, Jewish interest. They don't, they each do their own thing.

The term 'anti-Semitism' was invented by an antisemite to name his own worldview. We now write it without the hyphen, to emphasise that antisemitism is an ideology, a way of understanding the world that is based on fantasy, rather than a critique of something that exists. Antisemitism imagines 'the Jews' as the key to history, insisting that if you don't understand the Jews then you cannot understand how the world really works. But this notion of 'the Jews' is something different from the actual diversity of Jewish men and women, although this does not stop them targeting the latter in the hope of overcoming the former.

THE HYPHEN: ANTI-ZIONISM AND ANTIZIONISM

By contrast with 'Semitism', there is a Zionism that exists in the world and an anti-Zionism, which was a critique of it. But there is also an 'antizionism', without a hyphen, which invents a Zionism of pure, powerful, evil, in a way that is analogous to antisemitism's invention of 'the Jew'. This antizionism is a boundless ideology or worldview. Its concern is not confined to the prospect of Jews organising politically in their own defence or to the fate of Palestinian Arabs. The threat of this 'Zionism', which is conjured in the antizionist imagination, is universal. Antizionism imagines Israel as being central to, or symbolic of,

every political or ideological corruption, cruelty or injustice on the planet. For antizionism, Zionism stands between humanity and progressive change.

The way Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the former ‘supreme leader’ of Iran, used the concept of Zionism made this clear. Referring to Jerusalem by its Arabic name, Al Quds, Khomeini [declared](#): “The Quds Day is a universal day. It is not an exclusive day for Quds itself. It is a day for the oppressed to rise and stand up against the arrogant.” The day is marked annually with an antisemitic demonstration in Tehran, as well as similarly themed events in the centre of many free cities, including London.

Steven Salaita, an antizionist academic, [uses](#) the term ‘Zionism’ in the classically antizionist sense:

Zionism is part and parcel of unilateral administrative power. It lends itself to top-down decision-making, to suppression of anti-neoliberal activism, to restrictions on speech, to colonial governance, to corporatization and counterrevolution—in other words, Zionism behaves in universities precisely as it does in various geopolitical systems.

Making the distinction between anti-Zionism, as a response to Zionism, and antizionism, as an anti-Jewish way of understanding the world, helps us to think clearly about the politics that come with the relentless focus on Israel that we see around us on the left.

ZIONISM

The 20th century reinforced the lesson that history had taught many people in the 19th: that guaranteeing individual rights requires national self-determination. Nation states were formed in Europe in the image of modern France, which was constructed, institutionally and emotionally, by the French Revolution. Later, national movements across the world resisted colonial rule. Nations also struggled to regain self-determination against 20th century totalitarian occupation.

Today, it feels natural to Ukrainians to defend themselves collectively under the yellow and blue flag and it feels natural to Vladimir Putin to delegitimise Ukrainian statehood. Russian propaganda says that Ukraine is not an authentic nation, that it is invented by imperialism and that it is inherently Nazi. It deploys the antizionist discourse against Ukraine that the Soviet Union codified against Israel (see next chapter). Some antizionists have long said that Zionists are not really Jews at all, [but Khazars](#), a semi-nomadic Turkic people. Some of them have recently claimed that Ukrainians are also Khazars, most notably its Zionist president, Volodymyr Zelensky. They have thus found a way of portraying both of the inauthentic, Nazi, pro-imperialist, ersatz nations as a single, ‘racially’ identical, threat.

In the late 19th century, Theodor Herzl proposed that Jews should address the problem of living in antisemitic hostile environments by re-constituting their ancient national sovereignty, in a modern way, in Israel. Herzl had been part of the crowd that gathered to watch the public, antisemitic humiliation in Paris of the Jewish army officer Alfred Dreyfus. He was aware of the pogroms’ gathering threat in the East.

Since defeat in Roman times and the destruction of the Second Temple, some Jews always stayed in, or close to, Jerusalem (‘Zion’ in Hebrew scriptures), but many were dispersed all around the world, in the diaspora. Herzl called his programme for return, ‘Zionism’.

Some Zionist pioneers had already settled in Israel by the time the Nazis ruled Europe. Tel Aviv, founded in 1909, was growing as a predominantly Jewish city under the British Mandate. Jews had been returning to Jerusalem, and to other places too. Many lived in the kibbutzim, utopian socialist communities where

the land and the means of production were owned in common and the gendered division of labour would be abolished.

The key critique of Zionism at this time was that it was utopian. Zionism, it was said, had identified no social mechanism by which Jews would uproot themselves from their homes to move to Palestine.

Antisemitism was familiar, but not many yet feared an antisemitism capable of sweeping Europe, the Middle East and Russia clean of Jews. A Zionist, went the old joke, was a Jew who donated money to a second Jew so that a third Jew could go and live in Palestine. As late as 1940, Leon Trotsky's judgement was that, with the British becoming more interested in "winning the sympathy of the Arabs", migration into Palestine might turn out to be a "bloody trap" for Jews.

Most Jews were not serious about going to Israel until staying where they lived became terrifying. The foundation of the State of Israel was as much a result of the profound changes visited upon Jewish life as it existed in the middle of the 20th century as it was a result of the dreams of Herzl and the other men whose names now appear on the street furniture in every Israeli town. Israel was created by huge and murderous material factors as much as it was by an idea.

As the threat of the Holocaust approached, Palestine was one of the few places where Jews might find refuge. And, for the undead Jews of Europe, who limped away after the defeat of Nazism, it was one of the places where they could go; if they were not first interned in Cyprus on their way there by the British Empire. Many Jews expelled from their homes around the Middle East subsequently found refuge in Israel, and, later still, many Russian Jews, whose Jewishness had been suppressed by the Soviet Union, found their way there too.

Before the second world war, there had been significant Jewish and Arab migration into Palestine. As well as cooperation and economic growth involving both communities, there had also been conflict between them. In November 1947, the UN voted to divide the territory of the Mandate Palestine to allow the foundation of the State of Israel. Israel accepted this compromise but the Arab League did not. Instead, within hours of Israel declaring its independence in May 1948, it invaded and attempted to destroy the newly born state, but the Arab armies were pushed back.

Over the next few years, hundreds of thousands of Jews were pushed out of the ethnically or religiously defined 'Arab' and 'Islamic' states of the Middle East and many found refuge, or a new home, in Israel. Israel defeated two further attempts by the Arab League to destroy it in 1967 and 1973. Land that had been occupied by Jordan and Egypt after 1948 was then occupied by Israel in 1967. Some of it was returned to Egypt after the 1978 Camp David Accords and some was ceded, it turned out, to Hamas, in 2005. Arabs who lived in Israel, about 20 percent of the population, were recognised as full citizens while others who had been pushed out, or who had fled the fighting, were not allowed back. Israel retained control of the West Bank, where many Arabs lived, and it protected the settler movement there. In the 1990s, at Camp David in 2000 and in 2008 Israel offered to bring the settlers home and to cede Gaza and the West Bank to a new Palestinian state, but those offers were not accepted by Palestinian leaders.

ANTI-ZIONISM

'Anti-Zionists', were Jews who argued against the idea of Zionism. Some opposed it on the basis of universalistic socialism, others favoured Bundism, a cultural and political reconstitution of Judaism and Jewish self-defence where they already lived. Religious anti-Zionism opposed the secularisation of the mystical yearning for Israel into a worldly politics. Many Jews aspired either to assimilation where they lived or to migration to western Europe or America. Zionism also attracted Jews across the Middle East,

and, there too, there were other Jews who opposed it. Debates raged, but they were never settled in the realm of ideas. In Europe, they were settled by the Holocaust. Jews were murdered irrespective of their politics and aspirations.

Anti-Zionism, with the hyphen, a critique of the idea of Zionism, was ended as a practical movement by the Holocaust and by the creation of the State of Israel. Some Jews later began to use vocabulary of anti-Zionism again, and many other people around the world assimilated that vocabulary to themselves, but the movement to destroy an Israeli nation state that now existed was, in content, quite different from the pre-Holocaust critiques of the idea of Zionism.

Arguing about how Jews should respond to antisemitism was one thing; hoping to delegitimise a nation state that existed, and working for its destruction, was another. Who was utopian now? Anti-Zionism said that it just wanted a single territorial state in the whole of Mandate Palestine, that would be secular and democratic. But how could that come about?

Most Israelis are descended from families so powerless that they had been ethnically cleansed from their homes. Their human rights were ignored when they didn't have the power to enforce them; and they discovered that nobody else would enforce them either. They had also experienced three attempts by Arab nationalist armies to destroy Israel, stopped only by Israeli self-defence. So how would anti-Zionism persuade Israelis to dismantle their state and to dissolve themselves into a national community in which Palestinians might be the majority? The answer is that if anti-Zionism depended on persuading Israelis, then it was a passive and a long-term aim that had nothing to say about what should happen now. In reality, the only way to dissolve Israel into a larger state would be without the consent of Israelis – in other words, by conquest. Conquest has been unsuccessful, and it is inconceivable that it would lead to either a democratic or a secular state.

If anti-Zionists find a way to rewind the film of history to a time before Israel existed, perhaps they could rewind a little further, to before Jews were suffocated by communism, expelled as not belonging to the rest of the Middle East, and fed into a pan-European factory system of murder.

ANTIZIONISM

Counterintuitively, antizionism is as old as anti-Zionism, and it may be older still. If anti-Zionism was a legitimate, rational, critical engagement with Zionism, there was always also antizionism: an irrational, phobic, response to even the earliest sparks of Jewish political self-organisation.

When does criticism of Israel cross the line into antisemitism? If antizionism is a worldview that defines itself in relation to a demonic, fictional, Zionist other, then even a little bit of it is too much. But if it is a critical, measured, rational engagement with Israeli policy and culture, then it would not cross a line into antisemitism, no matter how much of it there was. Is too much criticism of Rishi Sunak racist? Is too much criticism of Liz Truss sexist? No, it depends on the type, not the volume, of the criticism. It depends on what is said, and how it is said; it depends on what unsaid messages or dog-whistles are allowed, or designed, to slip between the words. It depends on the emotional register of the discourse.

That is not to say that it is always easy to distinguish between criticism and antisemitism. There is certainly legitimate disagreement about what is antisemitic, or racist or sexist, and what is not.

It is true that it sometimes looks like an issue of quantity. Take, for example, the manner in which the number of UN resolutions denouncing Israel outstrips all of those denouncing the more serious human rights abusers put together. The ferocity of rhetoric denouncing Israel is, in some spheres of life, much greater. But, first, read what the resolutions say and analyse the content of the denunciations as well as

the amount: there is something else going on. And, second, we need to make sense of the ostensibly quantitative component. Criticism is hotter; it is more abundant; it is disproportionate; it is more emotional; it is more self-certain. Taken together, and in the complexity of real-world context, this is not just more, it is indicative of something different going on: maybe antisemitic motivation, whether conscious or not; maybe antisemitic effect of the normalisation of this kind of disproportionality; maybe a reluctance even to think about antisemitism.

THE LIVINGSTONE FORMULATION

It is easier to know what's what when we know which side we ought to be on. We all know that racism and sexism are disgraceful because in our liberal, left, democratic or scholarly political communities, there is strong consensus on these issues. By contrast, a divide over what is antisemitic cuts across those political communities. There are antisemites within liberal, left, democratic and scholarly communities but they are both unaware of it and angrily deny it. They think that the people who denounce them for antisemitism are making it up because they are the supporters of racism and apartheid, who want to hide the truth. Antisemitism is not a wedge issue that delineates us from the right, it is an issue that divides us within the left; and that also divides the right. Indeed, it is quite a reliable indicator of a problem when you see people who only denounce the antisemitism in the political communities that they already despise. To only recognise it 'over there', is to fail to recognise, and to whitewash it, 'over here'. First clean your own movement; only then, accuse the other side of having a problem.

Back in 2006, the then mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, was rightly challenged for some antisemitic remarks he had made, although they were relatively trivial. They had nothing to do with Israel. His response was interesting: "For far too long the accusation of antisemitism has been used against anyone who is critical of the policies of the Israeli government, as I have been."

It was a means of justifying his refusal to even engage, by means of an ad hominem counter-attack which claimed that those who brought up the issue of antisemitism were doing so in bad faith, knowing that it was not true.

Most political people know how to deal with the sexist who responds that the feminist hates men. They know too how to challenge the racist who responds that the liberal is trying to silence his criticism of affirmative action, or of 'cultural Marxism', or whatever it might be. But antisemitism cuts across the left and the right and there is no such consensus. The antizionist, accused of antisemitism, counter-accuses Jews and their allies of trying to delegitimise criticism of Israel or of 'weaponising' antisemitism against decent people who support the Palestinians. They accuse the person who raises the issue of antisemitism of 'Zionism'. They do not mean by this the diverse ways in which Israel is part of the Jewish identity of most Jews; they mean the homogenous, disgraceful Zionism of the antizionist imagination, which means 'racist', 'supporter of apartheid', 'supporter of colonialism' and 'dishonest and bad person'.

When Zionism is denounced in these terms, Jews are generally well aware that the denunciation points the finger at them, and not just at the abstract Zionists of the antizionist imagination. The accusation of Zionism deports most Jews from the 'community of the good' and it makes them politically homeless. Most antisemitisms in history have allowed clemency for exceptional 'good Jews' and this one does too. Jews who affirm, in the terms offered by antizionism, that Israel is an apartheid state, must be dismantled, and that accusations of antisemitism are part of a mendacious Zionist conspiracy, may be given leave to remain, for the moment, in the community of the good.

The accusation that Jews who say they have experienced antisemitism on the left do so because they are enemies of the left is a clear violation of the Macpherson Principle. This is the principle that says that

people who report experiencing racism should be taken seriously. The Livingstone Formulation creates an assumption that unless Jews disavow Israel and whitewash antisemitism, they should be assumed to be enemies of the left and of the Palestinians. The accusation against such Jews is that they pose as members of the union or of the party, but that really they are only pretending, in the hope of creating opportunities to weaken those institutions.

The Livingstone Formulation does not say that Jews are sometimes over-sensitive and that sometimes they get it wrong. Instead, it says that they make it up in the hope of silencing criticism of Israel. The report of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on Labour antisemitism [specified](#) the following, as a type of antisemitic conduct that amounted to “unlawful harassment” of Jews:

Suggesting that complaints of antisemitism are fake or smears. This conduct may target Jewish members as deliberately making up antisemitism complaints to undermine the Labour Party, and ignores legitimate and genuine complaints of antisemitism in the Party.

The Macpherson Principle does not say that every accusation of racism must be true, it simply requires they should be heard and investigated on the assumption that they were made in good faith. The EHRC report recognised that the Livingstone Formulation was regularly used against Jews in Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party and it observed that its effect was to accuse Jews of disloyalty. Offering exceptional status of belonging to the tiny minority of Jews who are willing to repeat the demonising phrases of antizionism does not address the problem.

It is still common to hear people say that the new leadership of the party, the right, the Blairites, the Tories, or whatever name is given to people deported from the community of the good, weaponise or fake antisemitism as a smear against Corbyn, the left and the Palestinians. References to antisemitism in the party as a “scam” are common. But it must be remembered that there was an overwhelming consensus amongst UK Jews that it was real. The effect of this denial is to paint that consensus as being somehow dishonest, racist and hostile to the left. A culture that positions Jews in that way, that teaches that view of Jews to its children, is an antisemitic culture.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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THE SOVIET ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY ANTI-ZIONIST DISCOURSE

IZABELLA TABAROVSKY

The Soviet Union spread an anti-Zionist discourse which drew on far-right antisemitism. Jews inevitably and invariably continue to suffer its consequences

One of the most striking aspects of contemporary anti-Zionist discourse is the extent to which it reproduces the tropes, motives and conspiracist explanatory logic of late-Soviet antizionist propaganda.

“Zionism is racism”; “Zionists are Nazis”; “Israel is an apartheid state”; “Israel is a tool of American foreign policy”; “the Zionist lobby controls American politicians”; “Zionists control the American media”; “Zionists invoke antisemitism to silence criticism of Israel”: These slogans, which antizionists today use frequently and widely, were developed and spread by the Soviet propaganda machine in its later years, targeting the global left and the developing world.

It is impossible to understand contemporary far-left discourse about Zionism and Israel without examining Soviet antizionist propaganda and the effect it had on the Jews of the USSR and socialist countries.

One of the crucial lessons of this history is that whenever a country’s political and cultural elites adopt conspiracist antizionist language, antisemitic outcomes for Jews follow. Given the extent to which contemporary anti-Israel discourse on the left replicates its Soviet predecessor, we cannot afford to ignore the lessons of this history.

SOVIET ANTIZIONISM: THE EARLY YEARS

Soviet antizionism can be traced to the very first years of the Soviet Union’s existence. But the nature of Soviet opposition to Zionism, and the language it used, changed dramatically both from 1917 to 1967 and then in the period until the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Vladimir Lenin, who condemned the antisemitism of the Tsarist regime and the culture of pogroms that it fostered, nevertheless vehemently opposed Zionism as a solution to the Jewish question on both theoretical and practical grounds. Bolsheviks accused Zionists of fragmenting the revolutionary movement by divorcing it from the Jewish poor. Furthermore, to suggest that the Jewish working class had more in common with the Jewish bourgeoisie, rather than with the proletariat of other nations, went against Marxist theory.

Bolsheviks, in fact, rejected the Zionist notion that Jews were a nation. This view was first elaborated by Joseph Stalin in a 1913 article [Marxism and the National Question](#), which was believed to have been strongly influenced by Lenin. Stalin argued that because Jews did not share a language, territory, economic activity, or culture, they were not a nation. From here, it followed that the only path forward for Jews under socialism was to assimilate. As for antisemitism, the Bolsheviks argued that it would vanish with the arrival of socialism, which rejected ethnic divisions and proclaimed internationalism and the friendship of all peoples.

Many of these ideas continue to dominate left-wing thinking about Jews and antisemitism today. The problem, however, is that antisemitism did not disappear with the arrival of Soviet socialism. To be sure, the Bolsheviks outlawed pogroms and right-wing antisemitic propaganda, and those Jews who accepted the deal the revolution offered them—full rights and social mobility in exchange for embracing the Soviet project, including atheism, and assimilation—flowered during the first decade of Soviet power. But religious and Zionist Jews who refused to shed their beliefs suffered brutal repression. Soon, Soviet internationalism would wither with regards to the Jews—if not in theory, then in practice.

STALIN'S ANTISEMITIC CAMPAIGNS

As Stalin began to consolidate his power in the 1930s, the country descended into ever-greater repression. In the climate of fear, moral panics, and the constant search for “enemies of the people”, paranoia and antisemitic conspiracy theories flourished. Under Stalin, the percentage of Jews in high-profile political and managerial positions, which had risen in the 1920s, began to drop. During the second world war, Russian nationalism, which was traditionally intertwined with antisemitism, blossomed. After the war, a group of prominent Soviet Jewish intellectuals were accused of “bourgeois-nationalist” sentiments (ie Zionism) and of serving American and Zionist intelligence. They were arrested, tortured, subjected to a sham secret trial and, in what became known as the [“Night of the Murdered Poets”](#), executed.

A broad antisemitic “anti-cosmopolitan campaign” followed. Accused of “bourgeois-nationalist” sentiments and foreign sympathies, Jews were purged from prominent positions. A similar campaign unfolded in Czechoslovakia, where Moscow engineered [the Slánský show trial](#). It targeted several prominent Jewish communists, accusing them, falsely, among other things, of working on behalf of Israel’s intelligence services. The trial unleashed a wild antisemitic frenzy in the country and the group was executed in December 1952.

Back in the USSR, the [Doctors’ Plot](#) affair followed in January 1953, with a group of leading Soviet Jewish doctors accused of plotting to poison top Soviet leaders. They were also charged with Zionist sentiments and working for foreign intelligence services. As rumours spread that Stalin was planning a mass deportation of Soviet Jews to the East, the only thing that saved them was the dictator’s death in March 1953.

Stalin’s post-war antisemitic campaigns contained a blend of antizionism and classic right-wing antisemitism. Under Stalin, not only was Jewish nationalism, or Zionism, viewed as contradicting Marxism-Leninism as in earlier years: antisemitic conspiracy theories now grew and propaganda painted Jews/Zionists engaging in plots to undermine the state. Stalin’s post-war thinking about Zionism and Israel was undoubtedly influenced by the disillusionment that set in once Israel made it clear that it was not going to become a Soviet puppet (notwithstanding the crucial Soviet support in favour of establishing the Jewish state) and was, in fact, taking a pro-American orientation. Shocked by the enthusiastic response with which Soviet Jews greeted the establishment of the state, and the adoring reception received by Golda Meir when she visited the USSR in September 1948, Stalin likely imagined he had a Jewish fifth column on his hands. This conspiracist angle would come to the fore in the massive campaigns that unfolded after the six day war.

SOVIET ANTISEMITIC ANTIZIONISM GOES GLOBAL

Until 1967, Soviet antizionism remained largely a domestic matter. But Israel’s unexpected victory in the six day war changed that. Convinced that the Jewish state could not have overcome Soviet-trained and Soviet-equipped Arab armies on its own, Moscow went searching for hidden factors to explain their defeat. Connecting Israel’s victory with the budding pro-emigration movement among Soviet Jews, and

the campaign among western Jews in their support, the Soviet security apparatus concluded that a massive conspiracy operated against Soviet interests globally. Leading this conspiracy were the dark forces of “international Zionism” and Israel in cahoots with American imperialism.

Exposing this imaginary “international Zionist” conspiracy became a top Soviet ideological priority in the last two decades of the regime’s existence. Soviet media and the state’s propaganda apparatus printed hundreds of books and tens of thousands of articles highlighting the sinister nature of Zionism and Israel, many of which were translated into dozens of languages and circulated to dozens of countries. Radio Moscow, which broadcast more than 1,000 hours per week in 80 languages, joined the campaign. The Novosti Press Agency, the main Soviet foreign propaganda arm, which worked in over 110 countries (and which at one point employed Andrew Murray, a future adviser to Jeremy Corbyn), played a critical role in placing these articles in the foreign press (including, in at least one case, the New York Times). Numerous Soviet friendship societies and front organisations - which worked to promote Soviet interests, mobilise sympathisers, and offer propaganda support - helped in this anti-Israel demonisation campaign as well.

The USSR engaged other channels as well to communicate these messages to the west. One was through direct interactions with western left-wing groups. For example, Hyman Lumer, the editor of Political Affairs, a theoretical journal published by the Communist Party of the United States, is documented to have requested support from senior party comrades in preparing “materials for unmasking the Zionist anti-Soviet campaign” during his trip to Moscow in 1971. His request was granted. The material Lumer collected was incorporated into his 1973 book Zionism: Its Role in World Politics. The book followed the general pattern of Soviet antizionist demonisation and included specific Soviet falsehoods that could be traced to the literature Lumer had received in Moscow.

Soviet embassies were another channel to bring Soviet conspiracist antizionist message to the world. For example, Soviet Weekly, published by the Soviet embassy in London, regularly republished Soviet conspiracist antizionist pieces.

Similarly, correspondence between Anatoly Dobrynin, the long-serving Soviet ambassador to the United States, and his superiors at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs illustrates the conspiracist thinking about Jews and Zionists that dominated Soviet foreign policy elites. In a series of memos, Moscow instructed its man in Washington to study ways in which Zionists “manipulated American public opinion” and members of Congress; investigate Zionist connections with “American monopolistic capital”; and examine which financial and industrial enterprises in America were controlled by “Jewish capital”. Moscow also asked Dobrynin to communicate Soviet conspiracist antizionist perspective to American politicians, media and progressive Jewish groups, and to persuade them that Zionists interfered in American domestic affairs and undermined Soviet-American relations. It tasked him with driving a wedge between Zionist and other Jews, and between Zionist Jews and non-Jewish Americans.

Moscow also drafted prominent Soviet academic institutions into the campaign, charging them with supplying theoretical foundations for its anti-Israel propaganda and demonisation. The KGB facilitated the creation of what one Russian historian called an “Antizionist International”: a group of institutions in various countries that reinforced each other’s antizionist messages through an echo-chamber of publications and conference talks. (This mechanism is described in greater detail in the author’s article [Mahmoud Abbas’ Dissertation](#).)

Soviet propagandists also sought to inculcate antizionist ideas beyond the USSR’s borders by working with Communist front organisations and multilateral organisations, such as the United Nations, which in 1975 adopted the infamous “Zionism is Racism” resolution. (This and other points in this section are described in greater detail in the author’s article [Demonization Blueprints: Soviet Conspiracist Antizionism in Contemporary Left-Wing Discourse](#).)

THE PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF ZION REVISITED

The body of work produced by Soviet antizionist propaganda in the wake of the six day war redefined Zionism, painting it as a sinister global conspiracist network that drew on Jewish/Zionist capital to control the media and politicians in key countries. It claimed that Zionism served the interests of monopolistic capital and its imperialist and colonialist aspirations. It described Zionism as racist and fascist, a Nazi collaborator, and an enemy of socialism, anti-colonial movements and all progressive forces in the world.

The striking correspondence between these ideas and those presented in the [Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#) (a notorious far-right forgery that, in the words of the British historian Norman Cohn, served as a warrant for the Nazi genocide of the Jews) was not accidental. The group of Soviet authors who produced these ideas were members of a loose far-right, antisemitic, Russian nationalist movement that emerged in the USSR in the 1950s. Known as “Zionologists”, and working under close supervision from a senior official in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, their singular achievement was to rewrite the antisemitic conspiracy theory of the Protocols as a Marxist-Leninist critique of Zionism fit for consumption by Soviet Communist elites and the global left.

The parallels between the two are striking. The Protocols talked about “international Jewry” seeking to dominate the world; the Zionologists’ output claimed “International Zionism” did so too. The Protocols accused Jews of seeking to control the media; the Zionologists argued Zionists did likewise. And, even more important than specific tropes, the Zionologists’ writings and the Protocols both rested on a fundamental belief that Jews/Zionists were involved in a sinister, inhumane conspiracy to undermine all that’s good in the world, which justified the concomitant anti-Jewish/anti-Zionist demonisation. In this update of the classic antisemitic conspiracy theory, the all-powerful Israel and Zionists manipulated American politicians and ran American financial and media institutions; Israel and Zionists stood behind every Soviet foreign policy failure; and Israel and Zionists sought to undermine the Soviet image by deliberately and falsely accusing the USSR of antisemitism.

JEW SUFFER CONSEQUENCES

One of the refrains of the late-Soviet antizionist propaganda campaigns was that its arguments were not antisemitic—they were only antizionist. Another was to claim that Zionists weaponised the charge of antisemitism to neutralise criticism of the state of Israel. (Both remain central to contemporary anti-Israel discourse on the left.)

That those claims were hollow is clear from the well-documented Soviet Jewish experience. In a country that proclaimed itself a staunch fighter against all forms of racism and racial discrimination, including antisemitism, Jews suffered extraordinary levels of discrimination. As the post-1967 Soviet antizionist campaigns wore on, every Jew became vulnerable to suspicions of Zionist sympathies. Numerous educational and professional opportunities were closed to them, from television to diplomatic work. Jews were prohibited from traveling abroad or taking jobs where they might interact with foreigners for fear of becoming an easy target for the Mossad. Jewish sacred books were dubbed Zionist literature and prohibited because they told the story of a Jewish return to the Promised Land. Jews in the rest of the Eastern bloc suffered a similar fate, with [Poland’s antizionist campaign of 1968](#) being the best-documented case.

The case of Soviet antizionism suggests that whenever conspiracist antizionism becomes widespread in a society, antisemitism against Jews soon follows. The [latest ADL findings](#), which note significant overlap

between anti-Israel sentiments rooted in antisemitic conspiracy theories and traditional antisemitism, confirm what millions of Jews from the Soviet bloc know from personal experience.

This historical background helps gain clarity on a question that confounds many today: Is it possible to be antizionist without being antisemitic? The analysis of Soviet antizionist and anti-Israel propaganda campaigns suggests that it is possible—under two conditions. First, one must learn to differentiate between criticism and demonisation and, second, one must consciously work to disentangle critiques of Israel from antisemitic conspiracy theory tropes that underly much of contemporary far-left antizionist discourse. Until the anti-Israel left has learned to do this, it will continue unwittingly to propagate right-wing antisemitic conspiracy theories under the guise of left-wing antizionism.

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