

Trotsky on the Jewish question and Palestine

Born in October 1879, and murdered by a Stalinist agent in August 1940, Trotsky lived a life which almost exactly spanned the period from the beginning of systematic pogroms in Russia (1881) to the eve of the Holocaust. A Ukrainian Jew, he saw the westward migration of millions of Jews, stirred up by the Russian pogroms, across Europe and to the USA. He saw the growth of Jewish self-awareness in Europe in the later 19th and early 20th centuries.

Always an opponent of the Zionist movement, he warned in the '30s that Palestine could turn out to be a giant ghetto in which the Jews who had fled there might be trapped and massacred.

Yet it is plain from his writings that the experience of anti-semitism in the 20th century, not only in Nazi Germany and Poland, but also in the USSR under Stalin, radically changed Trotsky's views.

By the end of his life he believed that the persecution of the Jews and the effect of that persecution on the consciousness of the Jewish people had made the creation of some sort of Jewish state an inescapable necessity. Rightly, he rejected the idea that the Palestine programme of the Zionists could provide an immediate refuge for Jews facing the Hitlerites. The immediate solution was socialist revolution. But he viewed the demand for a separate Jewish state with growing sympathy. He asserted more than once that after a socialist revolution the Jews would have a state of their own if they still wanted it.

In an article on anti-semitism in Stalin's USSR (22 February 1937) Trotsky developed his reappraisal of the Jewish question in the light of early 20th century experience. He speaks of a future socialist version of the Zionist "methods of solving the Jewish question", methods "which under decaying capitalism have a utopian and reactionary character".

"Are we not correct in saying that a world socialist federation would have to make possible the creation of a 'Birobidjan' [an equivalent of the (in fact token) autonomous Jewish republic within the USSR] for Jews who wish to have their own autonomous republic as the arena for their own culture?"

Of course it is impossible to know in detail what Trotsky would have said once the Jewish state was established in 1948. It

is plain however that there would have been no place in his thought for the anti-Zionist demonology and international conspiracy theories which dominate much of the left today.

Trotsky's last comment on the issue before his death was:

"The socialist revolution is the only realistic solution of the Jewish question. If the Jewish workers and peasants asked for an independent state, good — but they didn't get it under Great Britain. But if they want it, the proletariat will give it. We are not in favour, but only the victorious working class can give it to them". (15 June 1940).

II

ON this, as on so many other questions, Trotsky's would-be followers did not after his death pursue his line of thought. In the 1940s, they were caught up in a world view akin to the Stalinism of the "Third Period" (1929-33) — the world socialist revolution was bubbling over, and everything had to be interpreted as part of it. Among the forces seen as part of the great sweep of Revolution and anti-imperialism was the "Arab Revolution".

Trotskyists stated plainly in documents of the 1940s (by Tony Cliff, for example) that anything other than support for the "Arab Revolution" against the Jews of Palestine/Israel would make it impossible for them to "integrate" into that "sector of the world revolution".

There was dissent, and in the 1940s the "orthodox" Trotskyists were not unabashed in their "Arabism". They did not back the Arabs in the 1948 war, (and the Workers' Party of Max Shachtman and Hal Draper critically supported the Jews). But it was different after the Six Day War of June 1967.

For the previous 19 years the Trotskyist attitude had generally included a de-facto acceptance of Israel's right to exist. After the Six Day War Israel became an often very brutal colonial power ruling a large Arab population in the West Bank and Gaza. It was the time of the great anti-imperialist movement against the Vietnam war. Most of the "orthodox Trotskyists" drifted towards a root-and-branch "anti-Zionism".

And now anti-Zionism meant not advocacy of Jewish-Arab working-class unity and opposition to the Zionist project of a

Jewish state, but support for the destruction of the existing Jewish state in the name of Arab or Palestinian "liberation". It meant siding with murderous repressive Arab states against Israel. The Trotskyist movement had moved a long way from what it had been even in the 1940s. As someone observed of religious denominations: sects change their doctrines more readily than their names.

"Zionism" — meaning anything other than support for the destruction of Israel — came to carry the same odium as "racism" and almost as much as "fascism". Israel ("Zionism") came to be seen as the arch-representative of imperialism. Real history was faded out. Anti-Zionism was used as a bludgeon to intimidate and stigmatise and prevent thought about the issue.

III

INTERNATIONALISM is essential to socialism. So is solidarity with the oppressed. It goes without saying that socialists are against Israeli nationalism, that we condemn Jewish chauvinism and all its manifestations, and that we side with the Palestinian Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza against the brutality of the Israeli army.

But neither correct condemnation of recent Israeli atrocities, nor general criticism of Israeli nationalism, exhausts the question.

Israeli nationalism does not exist in a vacuum. It is part of a network of interlocking nationalisms and national antagonisms. It is confronted by Arab

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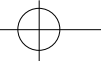
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nationalist and Muslim chauvinisms which for decades took (and some still take) as their goal the destruction of the Israeli state and nation. Any fair account of Israeli nationalism would therefore put it in its framework. The demurrals and condemnations would take account of the counter-nationalisms and condemn them also, with all the appropriate qualifications.

Yet the typical post-Trotsky Trotskyist's conclusion, from justified complaints about Israeli nationalism and chauvinism, is that the national organism itself does not have a right to exist. No such conclusions are made from the facts of Arab or Palestinian nationalism and chauvinism.

The "internationalism" is unequal because the condemnation of Israel is absolute and mortal, while condemnation of Arab chauvinism is only a moral stricture, and a series of admonitions. Support for Arab (or Palestinian) rights is not made conditional on them not being nationalists or chauvinists. They are the legitimate nation. The Jewish is the illegitimate nation. One lot of nationalists have positive rights; the other, only the right to surrender and submit.

For a long time, the PLO's old commitment to a "secular democratic Palestine", was used as a mechanism for disguising the double standards involved here: the Trotskyists accepted the *disguise* of one of the competing nationalisms. For in fact the call for a "secular democratic Palestine" could only be a disguised and mystified version of a demand for an Arab Palestine and for Israelis to disarm and surrender to their enemies. Internationalism became a vehicle for expressing an Arab-nationalist ultimatum against the Israeli Jews: be "internationalist", accept being a *religious* minority in an Arab Palestine, dismantle your national state, or deserve to be conquered!

That is not working-class internationalism, but pseudo-internationalism in the service of nationalism. A mystified political programme which implied the bloody subjugation or destruction of an entire nation, dressed up and presented in terms of anti-nationalism and anti-racism: such is the measure of the political decay of post-Trotsky Trotskyism!

And for what reason were Israeli Jews to be denied the rights of a nation? Because, as a national minority in Palestine in the 1940s, they fought and won, rather than bowing down to Arab nationalism, which would have subjugated them and driven them out if it could? No Trotskyist supports the mass "return" of the 13 million Germans driven out of Eastern Europe after World War 2...

The only Trotskyist programme for the Israel/Palestine conflict is one that advocates Jewish-Arab working-class unity, accepts the right of Israel to exist, and proposes the right of the Palestinian Arabs to have an independent state in the area where they are the majority — two states for the two peoples.

These writings of Trotsky's are a blast of clean air through the swamps of hysteria, ultra-left fantasy, and vicarious Arab chauvinism into which much of post-Trotsky Trotskyism has disintegrated on this question.

Communists before Stalinism

In the first half of the 20th century, Jewish workers lived in a world that stigmatised, scapegoated, and persecuted Jews. The pervasive Christian culture branded them in age-old sectarian terms as the accursed people, the God-killers who had rejected and then crucified Christ; the newer nationalist culture that increasingly gripped Europe's sundered nations before and after the First World War branded them as "aliens"; its racist sub-culture saw them as human vermin fit only for extirpation.

For decades the hounding and harrying would continue, now abating, now rising to a crescendo, until it would attain the mad paroxysm of the Holocaust, in which six million Jews, two-thirds of European Jewry, were systematically slaughtered in factories specially designed for the mass extermination of human beings.

In these conditions many Jews had the dearly-paid-for privilege of being able to see capitalism whole, in all its raw cannibalistic savagery, without the layered masks of conventional civilisation. So, naturally they came to make up a large part of the socialist army gathering its forces for an attempt to remake the world and create a civilisation in which there would no longer be class, or race, or national oppression.

But while some Jews became revolutionary socialists, other Jews became nationalists, committed to building up a Jewish nation in Palestine, where at the turn of the century resident Jews were still only a small community. Some nationalists — the most effective ones, in fact — were also socialists. Rivalry between "assimilationist" Jewish socialists and Zionists was often bitter, but the demonisation of Zionism that characterises much of modern Trotskyism was unknown. Zionists fought alongside the Red Army to defend the workers' republic after the Russian Revolution of 1917.

In Palestine, the tiny Communist Party emerged from the left-Zionist Poale Zion. Arguing for international socialist revolution as the road to salvation for the Jews, and against the Zionist project, the communists nevertheless had an approach very different from the latter-day left demonisation of Zionism. Should as many Jews as wanted to go there be allowed into Palestine? Of course they should, answered the Communist International and the Communist Party of Palestine, advocating Jewish-Arab unity within Palestine.

The shift to modern left "anti-Zionism" emerged as part of the Stalinisation of the Communist International. When in 1929 Palestinian Arab chauvinists mounted widespread attacks on Jews — the teachers and students at a religious college in Hebron, for example, were massacred — the Communist Party of Palestine at first called the attacks by their proper name, pogrom, as did the Russian and Comintern

press. Then the international Stalinist leaders decided that it was an anti-imperialist uprising, and that became the Comintern "line".

In fact, one of the Arabs' mobilising slogans was "The British are with us" (Britain then ruled Palestine, and British forces had clashed with Jews). But this was the "Third Period" of Stalinism. Everything — even a pogrom — could be and was construed as evidence for imminent revolution.

After 1930, a Comintern drive "Arabised" the heavily-Jewish CP. The leaders of the party had to be Arab, and the Jewish majority were thus second-class members. Breaking with the old Communist International policy, the CP became bitter enemies of Jewish immigration. German refugees from Hitler were met off the boat by Jewish CPers with leaflets telling them to go back home.

By 1936, when a serious Arab movement began in Syria and Palestine, this time having some anti-imperialist content, but in Palestine being essentially a pogrom movement against Jewish civilians, the CP was an active part of the campaign. Jewish CPers were assigned to plant bombs among Jews. For example, young Jewish CPers were assigned to blow up the headquarters of the Jewish trade union movement, the Histadrut.

Refusal to go with Stalinism on this question was one of the characteristics of Trotskyism while Trotsky lived. Trotskyists rejected the malignant fantasies of 1929 (for example, in an article by Max Shachtman in the US *Militant*, October 1929). Their comments on 1936 did not pretend that it was purely an anti-imperialist movement, or that there could be anything "progressive" about Arab-Muslim chauvinism against Palestinian Jews.

In this they reflected Trotsky himself. Throughout the 1930s Trotsky stood as the representative of the old attitude — support for Jewish rights, including the right to migrate to Palestine, while rejecting the Zionist project — and of sympathetic awareness that the world was closing in on the Jews.

● This material is excerpted and adapted from an article by John O'Mahony, Trotskyism and the Jews, in *Workers' Liberty* no. 31. The magazine with the full article is available for £1.50 including postage from AWL, P O Box 823, London SE15 4NA.

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www.workersliberty.org. Email: office@workersliberty.org.

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