

Trotskyism and the Jews*

By John O'Mahony

"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".

Leon Trotsky, 15 June 1940
(*Writings 1939-40*, p.287)

IT is one of the strangest ironies of politics. Trotskyism, in most of its post-Trotsky mutations, embraces an "anti-Zionism" that in practice is nothing less than a comprehensive hostility to most Jews alive; yet Trotskyism in Trotsky's time and after was a movement in which people of Jewish origin played — and play — a massive part.

It is not right-wing myth, but plain truth, that Jews have always played a very large part in the socialist and communist movement. Lenin once commented on the splendid vanguard role of Jews. Karl Kautsky, ceremoniously addressing a small Yiddish socialist journal in Britain early this century, urged Jewish socialists to work at bringing overall socialist theory, revolutionary determination, and an internationalist outlook to the British labour movement — to be the leaven that they, indeed, often were. The role Jews played had nothing to do with innate Jewish characteristics, but with the historical and social experiences of the Jews.

In the first half of this 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 murderously on the Jews.

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 the writings in this small collection, recently republished after 25 years by Pathfinder Press, 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. This collection records his progress on this question through the 1930s, though it unaccountably omits his last comment on the question, the text at the head of this article.

II

IN 1932-3, Trotsky discussed the "Jewish problem" with "Class Struggle", an American publication. He was asked: "What is your attitude to Palestine as a possible Jewish 'homeland' and about a land for the Jews generally? Don't you believe that the anti-

* Leon Trotsky on the Jewish Question, Pathfinder Press, £2



These cartoons portrayed Jews in traditional anti-semitic images, down to the bags of money decorated with the star of David blazoned with dollar signs. They were not in the Nazi but the Stalinist press — and, astonishingly, the *Jewish* Stalinist press! Drawn by William Gropper, they appeared in the Communist Party of the USA's Yiddish daily, the *Morning Freiheit* of New York, on 4 September and 3 October 1929. This was the time of the anti-semitic pogroms in Palestine, which the Stalinists insisted were an upsurge of revolutionary anti-imperialism. It was a major turning point for the left on this question (see text of article). The words on one read "He isn't a cripple — he only makes believe — he is an Arab — Jews beat him up!"; and the other: "The mask behind which he shoots"

semitism of German fascism compels a different attitude to the Jewish question on the part of Communists?"

Trotsky replied: "I do not know whether Jewry will be built up again as a nation. However, there can be no doubt that the material conditions for the existence of Jewry as an independent nation could be brought about only by the proletarian revolution. There is no such thing on this planet as the idea that one has more claim to land than another."

The establishment of a territorial base for Jewry in Palestine or any other country is conceivable only with the migration of large human masses. Only a triumphant socialism can take upon itself such tasks. It can be foreseen that it may take place either on the basis of a mutual understanding, or with the aid of a kind of international proletarian tribunal which should take up this question and solve it."

In the context of the debates of that time, Trotsky's statement "... there is no such thing... as the idea that one has more claim to land than another" was, I think, plain support for the old Communist International policy for the right of Jews to enter Palestine, in opposition to the new line which the Comintern pushed after 1929.

In a January 1937 interview, Trotsky explained: "During my youth I rather leaned towards the prognosis that the Jews of different countries would be assimilated and that the Jewish question would thus disappear in a quasi-automatic fashion."

The historical development of the last quarter of a century has not confirmed this perspective. Decaying capitalism has

everywhere swung over to and exacerbated nationalism, one part of which is anti-semitism. The Jewish question has loomed largest in the mostly highly developed capitalist country of Europe, in Germany.

On the other hand the Jews of different countries have created their press and developed the Yiddish language as an instrument adapted to modern culture. One must therefore reckon with the fact that the Jewish nation will maintain itself for an entire epoch to come.

Now the nation cannot normally exist without a common territory. Zionism springs from this very idea. But the facts of every passing day demonstrate to us that Zionism is incapable of resolving the Jewish question. The conflict between the Jews and Arabs in Palestine acquires a more and more tragic and more and more menacing character.

I do not at all believe that the Jewish question can be resolved within the framework of rotting capitalism and under the control of British imperialism.

And how, you ask me, can socialism solve this question? On this point I can but offer hypotheses.

Once socialism has become master of our planet or at least of its most important sections, it will have unimaginable resources in all domains. Human history has witnessed the epoch of great migrations on the basis of barbarism. Socialism will open the possibility of great migrations on the basis of the most developed technique and culture.

It goes without saying that what is here involved is not compulsory displace-

ments, that is, the creation of new ghettos for certain nationalities, but displacements freely consented to, or rather demanded by, certain nationalities or parts of nationalities.

The dispersed Jews who would want to be reassembled in the same community will find a sufficiently extensive and rich spot under the sun. The same possibility will be opened for the Arabs, as for all other scattered nations."

In subsequent history, the tragic conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine would not be adjudicated by a benign proletarian tribunal but by the United Nations set up by the victors of World War 2.

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 very loose use of the term nation to describe the Jews of the world may perhaps be explained as an unconscious by-product of his acceptance of the need for a territorial solution to the problem of the people "without a land" — the very idea he had scoffed at and fought against for most of his life as a reactionary utopia. He still says it is a reactionary utopia and a mirage in its bourgeois Zionist form. But now he counterposes to it not assimilation but a *socialist* version of the Zionist territorial state-creating solution.

What, for Trotsky, makes the Zionist project utopian and reactionary? The methods which flow inescapably from pursuing that project under capitalism and British rule in Palestine. The unpostponable task, for Trotsky, is the overthrow of capitalism, not a project for a tranquil corner in which to gather in the Jews and build a nation. With tragic accuracy, he says that such a search cannot save the Jews in the time available. After the socialist revolution, however, the Jewish people will need and be entitled to "a Birobidjan" because it is no longer reasonable to look to assimilation alone as the solution, or to have anything other than a supportive sympathy for Jews who cannot believe in assimilation. Trotsky finishes the February 1937 article: "How could any Marxist, or even any consistent democrat, object to that?"

III

THE revolutionary workers were defeated time after time throughout the 1930s — in Germany, Austria, France, Spain. The socialist revolution did not happen — not in time to save Europe's massacred Jews, to save the sixty million people who died in the Second World War, or to prevent Germany being pulverised and partitioned and having 13 million of its people driven out of East Prussia and Czechoslovakia. Not in time to stop the atom-bombing of Japan, or the expansion of Stalinist totalitarianism over ninety million people in Eastern Europe.

And history did not stop. The Zionists continued with their project and carved out the state of Israel in tragic conflict with the Palestinian Arabs.

The "reactionary utopian" solution to the Jewish question received an immense boost from the events of the world war. The need which Trotsky reluctantly came to realise for a Jewish national territory as part of the solution to the Jewish question was now felt with immense urgency by the majority of Jews. And it was made reality not in a benign socialist world after a workers' revolution, but in a world dominated by imperialism and Stalinism, realised by way of bitter communal and national conflict and within the framework of a Zionist-Kremlin, and then Zionist-US, alliance.

The Jewish state was established in a world which was not socialist but still dog-eat-dog. It was not mainly the Palestinian Jews who decreed that. In 1948, the territory allotted to the Jews by the United Nations was attacked by the armies of the surrounding Arab states, armies under the control of seconded officers of the British imperialist army. If the Jews had lost, they would have been massacred or driven out. The Jews won, and three-quarters of a million Palestinian Arabs fled or were driven out. Not many fewer Jews were driven out of Arab countries in the 1950s, though they would be assimilated in Israel, not, like the Palestinian Arabs, allowed to languish in refugee camps.

That is how things worked in a world still dominated by capitalism and Stalinism.

IV

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. Some French Trotskyists backed the Zionist guerrillas against Britain. The Shachtman group resisted the "Third Period" delusions, including the delusion that the expansion of

Stalinism was a deformed variant of working-class revolution, and rejected the vicarious Arab chauvinism of the "orthodox Trotskyists".

The Mandel-Pablo core group of "orthodox Trotskyism" came out for rights for Jews within a Middle East federation.

But the overall drift was towards the operation of gross double standards as between Jews and Arabs, and a comprehensive demonisation of Israel and of Zionism. As a rule, "Trotskyists" were vicarious Arab nationalists.

In the 1940s the "orthodox Trotskyists" were not entirely unabashed in their "Arabism" — they did not back the Arabs in the 1948 war — but for most of them it was altogether 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

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movement against the Vietnam war. Most of the "orthodox Trotskyists" drifted towards a root-and-branch "anti-Zionism" — that is towards the politics of post-1929 Stalinism on this question.

And worse. 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 ("Zion-



Trotsky's writings are "a blast of clean air through the swamps of hysteria"

ism") 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.

The horrors of Nazism had driven the great majority of surviving Jews behind the Zionist project, but views came to be established on the left which pictured the Zionists as powerful conspirators pulling strings in the era of Hitler, and sharing in responsibility for the Holocaust. The idea of a Zionist-Nazi conspiracy originated in the Soviet Union in Stalin's last years, but in the '70s acceptance of it came to be a hallmark of most of those who thought they were disciples of Trotsky.

You cannot get a more crazy version of the "world Jewish conspiracy" beloved of the old anti-semites than the one which sees "the Zionists" manipulating the Holocaust, that is, manipulating Hitler and the Nazis even as they killed six million Jews. A clear and logical version of these ideas would have to characterise Hitler as a blind tool of the "Jewish conspiracy". Yet such ideas, half-hidden often but implicit, are articles of faith in wide layers of the Trotskyist left. They are expounded in erudite, albeit crazy, books by Lenni Brenner and in the original version of Jim Allen's play *Perdition* (the book version has been bowdlerised).

The German socialist leader August Bebel once memorably defined left-wing anti-semitism as "the socialism of idiots". Much of the Trotskyist movement has fallen into an anti-Zionism — in fact, since it means comprehensive hostility to most Jews alive, anti-semitism — which is "the anti-imperialism of idiots".

All of this has nothing to do with Trotsky's politics, or with his developing position on the question. It is "the Trotskyism of idiots"! Bits and pieces of Trotskyist politics are deployed one-sidedly and used in the service of vicarious Arab chauvinism.

Internationalism is essential to socialism. It goes without saying that socialists are against Israeli nationalism, and that we condemn Jewish chauvinism and all its manifestations. But 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 nation-

alist 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.

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, vicarious Arab chauvinism — and, I think, elements of anti-semitism, recycled as "anti-Zionism" — into which much of post-Trotsky Trotskyism has disintegrated on this question. ■

The red flag in history

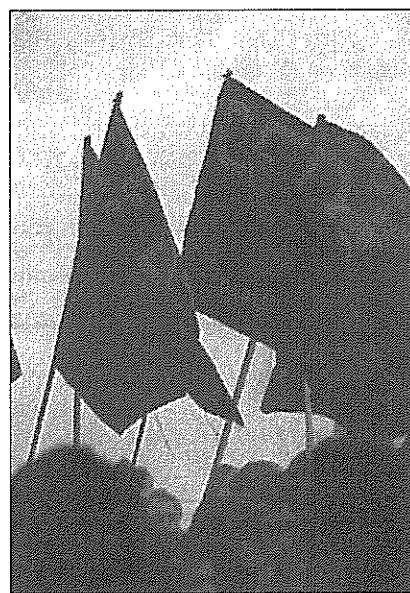
THE red flag was not always the symbol of revolutionary socialism. It was first introduced in Paris through the Riot Law of the 21 October 1791. A National Guard was armed for the purpose of suppressing any disturbances or rioting that might occur. That Guard had to display at such times a red flag as a signal that the authorities wanted the rebels to cease rioting otherwise blood would be shed. Only once was the red flag used in such a sense.

When the *sans culottes* (who were the revolutionists of that period) became more powerful, then, naturally, the riot law with the red flag was abolished.

But the significance of the red flag has entirely changed through a little incident in 1832. [French] General Lamark, one of the opponents of the kingdom, died, and the Republicans, who had then a great desire to fight, wished to make at his funeral a great demonstration against monarchy. That was on 15 June 1832. The spirit of revolt was ripe at the time and a great number of people followed the funeral procession. Suddenly a Republican horseman arrived carrying in his right hand a red flag, which was the spark that lit the flames of passion of the mass of the people. Immediately a struggle began in the streets, and for the first time the red flag was seen on the barricades in the hands of the rebels. From that time the red flag became the signal of protest against tyranny.

But the red flag had not yet become the symbol of revolt against the capitalist class. At the risings of the silk weavers in Lyons in 1831 and 1834 they carried a black flag as a sign of the hunger and need from which they so keenly suffered. Only in that great insurrection in France in 1848, which is known by the name of "the February Revolution" and in which the socialists played a great part — then only did the red flag become the symbol of revolutionary socialism all over the world.

The red flag means war and no peace with the present injustice and state of things! The red flag is stained with the blood of the workers! The red flag is the symbol of activity, life and progress. The different coloured flags of every national tyrannical Government are a parade of the powers that oppress, or for ridiculous national pride. The single colour of the red flag means solidarity, the brotherhood of the human race who desire to



usher in socialism, wherein peace on earth and goodwill to all may be possible.

Therefore, salute the red flag.

To the red flag!

Here's to the flag that's honest and clean,

Off with your hats and cheer;
It has braved for many a dismal year
The idiot jibe and sneer:
The only banner in the world
That floats o'er a cause that's just —
The Reign of Right, the end of Might,
The doom of the Gold-god's lust.

It has no stripe of blue for funk,
Or cowardly streak of white:
Its folds are red — all red as the blood
Of a heart that beats for Right.
The emblem true of a virile few
Who laugh in the face of scorn,
And brave despite in a selfless fight
For the good of a race unborn.

It brings the hate to the tyrant's eye,
It makes the bigot scowl,
It heeds no cant from sycophant,
Nor cares for the Jingo's howl:
'Tis the harbinger of a precious day,
That shall with its light dispel
The shades that blind, and chains
that bind
Our race to an earthly hell.

What! Wear a tricolour, Union Jack? —
The symbols of greed and stealth!
And haul from the mast of brotherhood
The flag of the Commonwealth?
I'd as lief help weeds in a garden
Where sweet flow'rets cannot grow,
As turn my back on the old red flag
For the tawdry rag of the foe.

John S. Clark

● The account of the red flag, a translation from the *Jewish Social Democrat*, appeared in the British De Leonist monthly, *The Socialist*, in January 1916.