

Before the Holocaust:

Trotskyists debate Palestine

In this article Robert Fine looks at working-class socialist views from the late 1930s on Palestine.

The road towards the bloody debacle of 1948 — when half a million Arabs were driven out as the Israeli Jewish state established itself in war against invading Arab armies — was already clear then. Nazi persecution, and curbs by countries like Britain and the US on Jewish immigration, pushed the Jews towards Zionism and the Zionists towards anti-Arab chauvinism; Zionist advance, and the desperation of Arab peasants driven off their land and jobless, pushed the Arabs towards anti-Jewish chauvinism. The British administration in Palestine played "divide and rule".

Read backwards into history, the conventional left view of today would imply uncompromising support for the Arabs against the Jews in Palestine. That position was indeed represented on the left in the late '30s — by the Stalinists, and a small fraction of the Trotskyist movement.

Most of the Trotskyists — while differing among themselves on precise programmes — argued for Arab-Jewish reconciliation for class and anti-imperialist struggle.

"What was a relatively marginal deformation of a small section of the Marxist movement in the 1930s," the survey concludes, "appears to have become an orthodoxy in the 1980s."

British Colonialism

The tried-and-tested method of British colonialism was divide-and-rule. Palestine was no exception. The British authorities used every kind of device to set Jew against Arab and Arab against Jew. They didn't create these antagonisms but they exploited them to the full.

The British imperial interest in Palestine was essentially strategic. It was close to Suez, the gateway to India; it provided an air base en route to the Far East; it was a conduit for oil from Iraq; most important, through the naval base at Haifa, it was a base for British policy in the Mediterranean known as the 'Singapore of the Near East'.

The list of ways in which the British, consciously or inadvertently, incited national hatred between the Arab and Jewish peoples was long. Under the British mandate between the wars, there were four bloody Arab attacks on Jews (1920, 1921, 1929 and 1936-38). After the 1921 attacks, two leading anti-Jewish provocateurs were released from gaol and appointed by the British to the highest Arab offices in the land. The British used the Wailing Wall to set

gangs of Arabs against the religious Jews. The British administration suppressed all attempts at reconciliation between the two peoples. It attacked the Arab liberal party in Haifa which raised the slogan 'Peace Between Jews and Arabs'. It prohibited membership of the non-racial railroad workers union and brought in thousands of Egyptian workers to break the union. It proscribed the non-racial Achwath Poulim (or Labour Brotherhood). Instances of understanding were not frequent, but when they arose the colonial government put them down.

The effects (and perhaps purpose) of British policy on Jewish immigration and on the land question were equally divisive. It opened the door to some Jewish immigration (perhaps needing a counter-weight to Arab nationalism) and then closed it in fear of the consequences of a large Jewish working class. When the door was open, Arab chauvinism against the alliance of the British and the Jews was excited. When the door was shut (i.e. in 1938), Jewish chauvinism against Arab influence over the British was equally generated.

On the land, the British professed to protect the fellahin (Arab peasants) from eviction by the effendis (semi-feudal Arab landlords). It was formally forbidden to evict tenants unless they were given land elsewhere — except if they refused to pay higher rents or to work the land assigned to them! Jews, seeking an unlimited right of purchase and the freeing of land from all 'feudal' restrictions, opposed these ineffectual laws for the protection of tenants. Both the British and the effendis could then direct the anger of the fellahin not against their direct exploiters (the landlords) nor against their political oppressors (the British administration) but against the Jews.

For trotskyists like L. Rock (a pen-name for Tony Cliff, today a leader of the British SWP and advocating very different views) this was the starting point for analysis of the Palestine question. The fundamental conclusion Rock drew was that the task of anti-imperialists was not to support one or other national chauvinism — Zionism against Arabs or Arab nationalism against Jews — but to support one or other kind of reconciliation between Arabs and Jews, the better to fight British imperialism.

Arab and Jewish bourgeoisies

The national bourgeoisies who led the Jewish and Arab nationalist movements were both riddled with racism towards

their opposite numbers and thoroughly unreliable and inconsistent in their professions of anti-imperialism. The leadership of Arab nationalism was in the hands of the semi-feudal class of landlords, who used anti-semitism to deflect the anger of their tenants from themselves. They led the attempted pogroms of Jews. In 1921 they argued that Jews wanted to gain possession of the holy places and that they were importing bolshevism. In 1929 they pressed religious arguments in the cause of anti-Jewish agitation. In the 1930s, as Arab nationalism stressed the unity of all Arabs, Christian and Moslem, the destructive influence of Jewish immigration economically was put to the fore: "The Jews buy land and drive out the Arab peasants; the conditions of the Arab peasants is so hard because of Jewish immigration; Arab industry suffers because of the development of Jewish industry...therefore you must fight the Jewish immigration and settlement".

During the boom between 1932 and 1935, when the living standards of Arab peasants and workers improved alongside Jewish immigration, the nationalist leaders concentrated on the political set-up of the projected Zionist state.

With the decline of the boom in the latter half of the 1930s (according to Rock — it would be interesting to check his periodisation) the Arab nationalist movement was permeated with an exclusivist spirit of struggle against the Jews and became fertile soil for fascist ideas. German Nazis and Italian Fascists sent their agents to arm, finance and propagandise within the movement. As one contribution to *The New Internationalist* put it: "This movement does not incline to the Rome-Berlin axis only because it is assisted by the axis. The reverse is truer, that it is assisted by the axis because it is near to it in spirit". (Hoov (El Nour), N.I., June 1939)

The Arab ruling classes had always been ready to strike compromises with British imperialism at the expense of Jews. One of their main leaders, Djemal al Husseine, agreed that Palestine should become a British crown colony, provided that Jewish immigration was stopped. There was no fundamental conflict between British policy and the Arab upper classes; the Balfour Declaration promising a homeland for the Jews was opportunistically passed to win Jewish support during the First World War and was coupled with another declaration two years earlier to obtain the support of Arabs that Palestine would become part of an independent



Arab nation. The Arab rulers hated the Jews, however, not because Jews were agents of imperialism but because they represented the bourgeois modernisation of the economy and the abolition of feudal forms of landlordism. When the Arab nationalist leaders became more 'anti-imperialist' in the late 1930s, what they really meant was support for German imperialism against British. In this regard, they were not unlike the Afrikaner Nationalists in South Africa.

Jewish nationalists in the Zionist movement were of a very different species but they shared many of the self-same chauvinistic tendencies. Slogans like '100% Jewish labour, 100% Jewish production' were coupled with picketing against Arab workers who held jobs in Jewish enterprises. Even the left Haschomer-Hazair joined the picket lines, though they excepted Jewish firms where Arab workers had been engaged

for many years, but the further left Poale-Zion was against the pickets.

Generally, the Zionist movement was against political independence for Palestine. The extreme right, the 'Revisionists' under Jabotinsky, called for the establishment of a Jewish state on the basis of "an understanding between the Jewish legions and the strategic interests of British imperialism". Arguing that "we have no Arab policy" and that "history teaches us that all colonisations have met with little encouragement from the 'native' on the spot...and we Jews are no exception", Jabotinsky went on to argue that between Britain's interest in a stronghold in the Mediterranean and a Jewish Palestine surrounded by Arabs "there is almost a providential basis for a permanent alliance".

The centre-ground of the Zionist movement argued that for biblical reasons 'the Jewish and Arab claims are

not equal' with regard to Palestine. Originally supporting a 'bi-national' state, Dr Weizman moved to the position that "Palestine will remain as Jewish as England is English". Mapei supported the British plan for partition with retention of a British military presence.

Haschomer-Hazair demanded the fullest co-operation and equality between Arab and Jew, addressing a leaflet to Arabs in 1937 expressing the noble ideal of Arab-Jewish peace. This didn't stop it from picketing Arab workers and calling for the retention of the British Mandate. The whole Zionist movement supported British rule in Palestine in the late 1930s: not surprising perhaps given that 'independence' threatened to bring with it the rule of the anti-semitic Arab Nationalists and the tying of Palestine to German and Italian imperialism.

For revolutionary marxists like L. Rock the reactionary and chauvinist nature of both the Arab and Jewish national bourgeoisies — that is, the leaders of their respective national movements — was the second major premise of their analysis. Seeing these national bourgeoisies arm locked in a fundamental conflict, Rock concluded that the only way forward was to seek to split the national movements, with their legitimate anti-imperialist aspirations, from their respective leaderships.

National Liberation and the Jewish and Arab masses

Marxists had to recognise the separation of legitimate national demands from their chauvinistic and racist deformations and the separation of the interests of the masses from those of the leadership. These separations became increasingly difficult to make empirically toward the end of the 1930s, as the Arab and Jewish masses rallied behind their respective nationalist leaderships on increasingly chauvinistic lines, but they were crucial to make analytically.

The idea that Jews were an integral part of the imperialist camp — the idea held by extreme Arab nationalists and stalinists — was often based on a spurious analogy with whites in South Africa. But the so-called 'imperialist' role of Jews was hard to sustain. Jews made up more than half of the entire working class of Palestine. Skilled and unskilled labour were represented in both Jewish and Arab sections of the working class. But both Jews and Arabs were oppressed by an alien government and deprived of democratic rights. In the two cities where Jews were a majority, Jerusalem and Haifa, the Mayors were in accordance with decrees of the colonial administration Arab. In financial terms the Jews contributed 63% of the government income and in return received a mere 14% of public expenditure on education, 34% on public

works, etc. Labour legislation was as repressive for Jews as for Arabs. So much for the theory that Jews were agents of imperialism and played the privileged role of the South African white. The theory was in effect anti-semitism dressed up in left-wing, anti-imperialist apparel.

The British government always declared that it undertook measures of suppression against Arabs not to maintain its own rule but to protect the Jews. It always declared its desire to realise the establishment of a Jewish national home. This way it strengthened anti-Jewish currents among the Arabs without offering the Jews any concrete benefits. So when the British army demolished Arab villages, blew up hundreds of dwellings and killed villagers, Arab terror was directed not against the British government but against the Jewish population.

Every possible obstacle was put in the way of Jewish immigration by the British government. In Europe Jews were facing a catastrophe more profound than for any other section of the population. The writing of the Holocaust was already on the wall. The Jewish masses sought freedom from oppression. The Zionists were wrong to say that emigration to Palestine offered a solution to the millions of Jews trapped in Europe — who after all would facilitate their departure even if they wanted to go? — but migration was a democratic right which offered an escape for at least some Jews. The great influx of Jews into the United States was stopped by the Johnson Quota Law of 1924. Canada and South Africa followed suit. The stalinist state in Russia closed its doors to foreign Jews as well diverting the smouldering hatred of the masses away from the heights of the bureaucracy to the middle and lower layers, many of whom were Jews. (The right of Jews in the Soviet Union to their own autonomous republic of Biro-Bidjan had been suppressed under the guise of anti-nationalism along with the right of all other Soviet nationalities).

So when the terrible oppression of Jews under Grabski's regime in Poland and under Hitlerism in Germany occurred, where else was there to go but the shores of Palestine? When they reached these shores, they found British immigration policy so restrictive that the Zionist movement boycotted the official immigration channels in 1937 before they were virtually blocked off in 1938/9. There was nothing about Jewish immigration *as such* that was against the interests of the Arab masses. On the contrary the Jewish working class was a potential force for anti-imperialism and for breaking the stranglehold of the feudal landowners. The point at issue for marxists was not to stop Jewish immigration into Palestine — this was the role of British imperialism — but to dissociate the Jewish masses from an ex-

clusivist Zionism.

While the opposition of the Arab upper classes to Jews was thoroughly reactionary, the struggle of the Arab masses against Zionism was progressive. As L.Rock put it: "The upper classes are today successful in diverting the national struggle of the masses into anti-Jewish channels by means of the fact that the predominant majority of the Jewish population is Zionist. The anti-Jewish terror has only increased the influence of Zionism on the Palestinian Jewish masses...All this leads to a situation where today a great part of the Arab masses believe that through their struggle against the Jews they are furthering their own national liberation whereas in fact they are only making their struggle more difficult to the extent that they are strengthening the position of imperialism, Zionism and the feudal Arab leadership". (N.I., Nov 1938)

The rational basis of the antagonism of the Arab masses to the Jews — what allowed a clique of 'effendis' to gain control of a militant national movement of hundreds of thousands — was not (as the Zionists argued), only that the Jews created a modern labour movement and the supersession of feudalism by capitalist development. Their principle opposition arose from the fact that they saw in the Jewish population the bearers of Zionism, a political system based on national exclusivity and hostility to the aspirations of the Arab masses for independence and democratisation.

The Way Forward

The general conclusion drawn by L.Rock and his fellow-thinkers was that a consistent struggle for the easing of Jewish-Arab conflict was "only possible on the basis of the struggle against Zionism, against Arab national exclusivism and anti-Jewish actions, against imperialism, for the democratisation of the country and its political independence". What this meant concretely was the object of some debate.

Rock himself argued for the establishment in Palestine of a democratic independent republic, of a joint organisation of workers, of a joint struggle against national terror, all exclusivist tendencies, the right of immigration for all Jews and Arabs, the transfer of land from the landowners and religious institutions, the annulment of the debts of the fellahin, an eight hour working day, etc.

Others arguing within a similar framework, such as another contributor, 'Haor', argued that "the best way to realise the independence of Jews and Arabs is the partition of the country, in one way or another, into two free parts, not depending on one another...The patriots would not be satisfied, of course, with either of the parts, but the masses would turn their attention to their vital needs and at any rate the 'na-

tional aspirations' would not succeed in penetrating the spirit of the masses and distorting their struggle to the extent that they do today...Self-government of the Jews and the Arabs, each group within the limits of its own settlement, this is the correct and only solution...Therefore it is the correct way towards the full solution of the problem of the country, that is, the establishment of a system that will know neither 'majority' nor 'minority' but a single community of brothers living by its labours". (N.I., June 1939)

I don't want to enter this difficult debate between 'democratisation' and 'two-states'. What was more important were the premises they shared on the divisive role of British imperialism, opposition to the chauvinism of *both* the Zionist and Arab nationalists, recognition of the legitimate national aspirations of the Jewish and Arab masses, the need to *break* the unity of both Jewish and Arab nationalist movements, the need to build for reconciliation between the Arab and Jewish masses. It was a programme whose anti-Zionism was coupled with a powerful opposition to the reactionary leadership of Arab nationalism and the anti-Jewish poison they spread.

It was also a programme which rejected entirely the stalinist view, expressed by the Palestinian Communist Party, that the Jewish population was an integral part of the imperialist camp and the slogans they arrived at: 'Block Jewish immigration! Prohibit the sale of land to Jews! Expropriate the land of the Jews and arm the Arabs!' The stalinists drew the false analogy of Jews in Palestine and whites in South Africa. The stalinists preened themselves before the Arab population with anti-Jewish terroristic actions.

After the First World War members of the Comintern in Palestine, while being absolutely opposed to Zionism, declared at the same time that the Jewish population was not to be identified with Zionism and demanded the maximum freedom of movement for Jewish immigration into Palestine and material aid for Jewish immigrants. They declared that the struggle against Jewish immigration shifted the anti-imperialist struggle into anti-semitism and would only strengthen Zionist chauvinism among the Jewish masses.

With the turn to the right in the colonial policy of the Comintern under Stalin, the CPP in the 1930s began its struggle against Jewish immigration, saying that it was an immigration of conquest and that the struggle of the Arab nationalist movement was defensive.

After the First War, the Comintern in Palestine was for the protection of the Arab peasants against the landlords but at the same time demanded that Jewish settlement on large areas of uncultivated land be made possible. Under the stalinists the Comintern began in the

1930s its struggle against the right of Jewish settlement. In short, not only did the stalinists let themselves be taken in tow by the Arab feudal leaders, they themselves took a lead in developing the movement along anti-Jewish lines, It was perhaps small wonder that in May 1938 The New International printed an article by Palestinian Communists on "Why we quit the Communist Party".

Degenerated Trotskyism

Jack Weber (N.I., April 1938) made the point that: "anti-semitism is part of the cancer of Nazism that spreads poisonously outward from the centre of infection...into a world problem". Unfortunately, the trotskyst movement itself was not immune. It came out most sharply in an article entitled 'Zionism and the Arab Struggle' (N.I., Feb 1939) written by The Spark, the organ of the Workers Party of South Africa. The article represented an appalling capitulation to Arab chauvinism, anti-Jewish feeling and stalinist ways of thinking about the issue.

Their basic line was that the "modest" demands of the Arab bourgeoisie must be supported since they expressed "the will of a united people to attain national liberation". These demands were: first, that immigration, i.e. Jewish immigration should be stopped; second, that the sale of Arab land should be prohibited, that is to Jews; third, that there should be established a national government, that is, an Arab national government, in

Palestine. Spark argued that there was a special relation between the Jewish people and British imperialism, since the British "would greatly like to have a Jewish state as its outpost but under pressure from Arab nationalists was forced to concede the demands concerning immigration and land".

According to Spark, confusion had spread among the ranks of marxists who had been "swept off their feet" by the rising wave of anti-semitism. The problem with the stalinists, so it was said, was that while they supported Arab nationalists, they advocated moderation and compromise. What was needed was no compromise in the fight against the Jewish take-over of Palestine. In relation to the growth of anti-semitism in Europe, all The Spark had to say was that Zionists were trying to "cash in" on the sufferings of persecuted Jews and that between the persecution of Jews and Zionism there was "no connection whatsoever"! Spark drew the false analogy of Jews in Palestine and whites in South Africa, claiming that the function of Zionism was to squeeze profits out of the Native population (i.e. Arabs). It argued that the Jewish labour movement was 100% chauvinist — the left-wing talk of socialism designed only to mislead young Jewish idealists — and that while it was wrong to see all Jews in Palestine as Zionists, it was "understandable" that Arabs drew this conclusion.

The nub of the problem for Spark was Jewish immigration. Its argument went thus: "International socialists were always for free unrestricted immigration and for

complete freedom of movement as part of our democratic rights...It would therefore be ridiculous to assert that we are against free immigration. But the Jewish immigration into Palestine is something entirely different. It is an immigration with the avowed aim of destroying the rights of the native population...It is an invasion under the protection of imperialism. The aim of this immigration is to attain a majority in Palestine...Against this aim, to defeat them, the Arab people, the Natives of Palestine, have waged this war...The immigration question was and is the pivotal point in this struggle".

In the same breath as denying Jews the right of immigration into Palestine, Spark declared that the "solution" lay in "solidarity of Jewish and Arab workers" and "socialism"! As for the persecution of Jews worldwide, Spark declared that there was no anti-semitism in the Soviet Union while in the rest of Europe "their fate is intrinsically bound up with the fate of the working class...So for the Jews there is no special remedy except the advance in union with the working class". This was in 1939.

It is perhaps instructive that The Spark (or Workers Party of South Africa) voluntarily dissolved itself in 1939, many of its main activists to re-appear in 1943 under the guise of the ultra-nationalist and non-socialist Non-European Unity Movement. It is also instructive that its sentiments were strongly criticised in the pages of subsequent issues of The New International.

What was so terrible in Palestine was that there was a strong national differentiation between Jews and Arabs and on the other hand national unity in the Arab camp was very firm. It was therefore a grave error for The Spark to speak with enthusiasm of the Arab national unity which was displayed in the late 1930s. Marxists had to fight for free migration without falling into illusions about its liberating role and without adopting a chauvinistic attitude to this migration. How far the struggle against Jewish immigration distorted the anti-imperialist struggle was revealed in an incident reported by L.Rock: "A short time ago rumours spread in Palestine that the government was on the verge of stopping Jewish immigration, whereupon the Arabs organised joyous demonstrations in which they cried 'Long live Chamberlain! Long live England! The government is with us!'".

There was no possibility of independence for Palestine without the support of Jewish workers. As long as anti-Jewish terror and the struggle against Jewish immigration were retained, there was no possibility of the liberation movement receiving this support.

The great tragedy is that what was a relatively marginal deformation of a small section of the marxist movement in the 1930s, appears to have become an orthodoxy in the 1980s. Ridding our movement of its stalinist heritage is no easy road.

