

Israel's crisis and the historic contradictions of Zionism

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We are reposting the following article which first appeared on the World Socialist Web Site on May 29, 1998 after the state of Israel marked its 50th anniversary.

Israel marked the 50th anniversary of its founding under conditions of mounting political and social crisis within the Zionist state and escalating tensions with the Palestinian people in the territories still occupied by Israeli forces, as well as with the surrounding Arab world.

None of the official commemorations organized in Israel itself, nor the glitzy and superficial celebrations staged by Israel's friends in the U.S. and elsewhere, even touched upon the profound historical questions underlying the foundation of the Israeli state.

Within Israel's birth and evolution are concentrated the great unresolved contradictions of the 20th century. Its essential origins lie in one of history's greatest crimes against humanity, the Nazi Holocaust. The extermination of six million European Jews was, in turn, the terrible price paid for the crisis of the working class movement brought on by the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Communist International. Stalinism's crimes and its domination over the workers movement prevented the working class from putting an end to the crisis-ridden capitalist system, which found in fascism its last line of defense.

The defeats of the working class, the crimes of Stalinism and the horrors of the Holocaust created the historical conditions for Israel's creation and the Zionist movement's largely successful attempt, aided both by US imperialism and Stalinism, to equate Zionism with world Jewry. It was a movement and a state founded ultimately on discouragement and despair. Stalinism's betrayals produced disillusionment in the socialist alternative that had exercised such a powerful appeal to Jewish working people all over the world. The crimes of German fascism were presented as the ultimate proof that it was impossible to vanquish anti-Semitism in Europe or anywhere else. Zionism's answer was to get a state and an army and beat the historical oppressors of the Jewish people at their own game.

The tragic irony of this supposed solution is Israel's association of the Jewish people—traditionally and historically connected with the struggle for tolerance and freedom—with the brutal suppression of another oppressed population.

David Ben-Gurion read out the declaration of Israel's independence on May 14, 1948, the day before Britain's mandate over Palestine was to expire. Within less than a year, Israeli military forces had succeeded in carving out the country's present internationally-recognized borders, while over three-quarters of a million Palestinian Arabs were driven from their homes in a systematic campaign of terrorism and intimidation.

Ben Gurion described the realization of Israeli statehood as the "culmination of the Jewish revolution." It represented the achievement of the central political aim of Zionism, the Jewish nationalist movement founded in the latter part of the 19th century. Before World War II, Zionism had remained a relatively isolated movement, drawing its support primarily from sections of the Jewish middle class. Even within Palestine, there existed among Jewish workers a powerful class sentiment for uniting

Jewish and Arab workers in a common movement against capitalism.

While it took the Holocaust to turn Zionism into a state power, the real relations between the crimes carried out by Nazism against European Jewry and the Zionist movement have been the subject of systematic historical distortion. Israel is portrayed as the necessary haven for Jews fleeing the German death camps. Yet the attitude of Zionism toward the struggle to save Jews from extermination was not so simple.

This is one of many subjects which Israeli historians have begun to examine. Known as the "new historians," the "post-Zionist" or "revisionist" school, the emergence of this critical attitude toward Israel's history is one of the most profound signs of the growing crisis of Zionism as an ideology and of Israel as a society.

Among these new historians is Zeev Sternhell, the author of *The Founding Myths of Israel*, recently published in English. Sternhell's book debunks some of Zionism's most powerful myths, principally that those Zionist leaders who founded Israel were attempting to establish a new type of society based upon egalitarian principles and even socialism.

This historian establishes that Zionism was by no means unique. It arose as a peculiar expression of the trend of eastern European nationalism of the 19th century; one based not on universal democratic principles, but rather on exclusivist conceptions of racial, religious and linguistic hegemony. Ironically, a movement that claimed to stand for the liberation of Jews found substantial common ground with anti-Semites and right-wing nationalist precursors of German fascism.

Zionism, he writes, "was from the beginning the preoccupation of a minority, which understood the Jewish problem not in terms of physical existence and the provision of economic security, but as an enterprise for rescuing the nation from the danger of collective annihilation." It perceived the greatest danger of annihilation as coming from the assimilation of Jews into modern society, particularly through the attraction of growing numbers of Jewish workers to the socialist movement.

To the extent that the founders of the Zionist state attempted to identify Zionism with the labor movement, equality and socialism it was, Sternhell writes, a "mobilizing myth," designed to win working-class Jews to the cause of nationalism. He makes the case that this use of socialist phraseology had much in common with other "national socialist" movements seeking nationalist revival in Europe, ultimately giving rise to Nazism.

Certainly the case can be made that many other nationalist movements in the course of the 20th century, including Arab nationalism, which has represented itself as socialist and egalitarian, have utilized such a "mobilizing myth." In every case, such ideologies have the purpose of covering up the interests of the national bourgeoisie and suppressing the independent struggle of the working class.

As for Israel's justification as the sole possible haven for Jews fleeing Nazi oppression, Sternhell, as well as other historians—Tom Segev, author of *The Seventh Million, the Israelis and the Holocaust*, for example—have

presented ample evidence that the rescue of European Jewry was never a primary concern for Zionism as a movement, and that Ben-Gurion and other Zionist leaders reacted with indifference.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, with Nazism's threat to the Jews of Europe becoming ever clearer, Ben-Gurion spelled out the principle which was to guide the Zionist movement's attitude throughout the Holocaust: "Zionist considerations take precedence over Jewish sentiments...we should act according to Zionist considerations and not merely Jewish considerations, for a Jew is not automatically a Zionist." Throughout the war he argued successfully against those who suggested that the Jewish Agency in Palestine turn its attention from the building of "Eretz Israel" to the rescue of Jews from Nazism.

At the same time the Zionists lost no time in making use of the catastrophe in Europe for their own ends. Their efforts were successful, as Europe's stateless and homeless surviving Jewish population was directed to Palestine for very definite geopolitical reasons. Washington, which had closed US borders to Jews fleeing Nazi oppression, saw the emergence of the Jewish state in the Middle East as an instrument for asserting its own hegemony in the region at the expense of the old colonial powers, Britain and France.

Founded in the struggle to wrest control of the land from its Arab inhabitants, Israel was from its origins a militarized state, with the army serving as the central pillar of society. Surrounded by hostile Arab states and posturing as a new form of society, founded upon equality and vaguely socialist principles, the new state was widely perceived as an underdog, deserving of popular sympathy.

Both realities and perceptions underwent change, however, with the growth of Israel into the undisputed military force and sole nuclear power in the region. First came the 1956 Suez war, in which Israel briefly seized the Sinai Peninsula. The 1967 war redrew the map of the Middle East once again, setting the parameters of the current conflict. With US backing, Israel invaded Egypt, Syria and Jordan, laying hold of the West Bank of the Jordan River, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip, which it occupies to this day. Zionism and the state of Israel emerged as a force of aggression and expansionism. Israel has fought further wars in Lebanon, where it continues to occupy a "security zone" in the south.

Israel's initial military expansion was made possible by a massive and continuous infusion of US economic and military aid. Underlying the \$3 billion in annual aid, Washington's "special relation" with Israel has nothing to do with shared principles or sympathy for the historic oppression of the Jewish people. Rather, it backs Israel as a garrison state which serves to suppress the revolutionary strivings of the masses of the Middle East, while providing a means of extending US influence in this strategically vital oil-producing region.

Israeli militarism went hand in hand with the growth of reactionary political and social tendencies within Israel itself. Israel's occupation and administration of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, exercising a political dictatorship over roughly a million Palestinians, not only exposed the oppressive character of the Israeli state, but brought to the surface all of the contradictions embedded in Zionism as a movement.

In 1968 Zionist settlements were begun in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, on the theory that these paramilitary outposts would serve as a line of defense against attacks by Palestinian guerrillas on Israel proper. While the Labor Party government initially presented the settlements as no more than a defensive parameter, which would not preclude the handing back of the territories to Jordan and Egypt, the issue of the status of the West Bank and Gaza quickly became the focal point of Israeli politics.

The right-wing opposition under the leadership of Menachem Begin demanded that the territories be brought under Israeli sovereignty on the grounds that they were the Biblical lands of Samaria and Judea, promised by God to the Jewish people. Thirty years later the issue has yet to be resolved, despite the much-heralded Middle East peace brokered by the

Clinton administration and signed by both Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. One hundred and forty four settlements are scattered throughout the territories, inhabited by 160,000 settlers, many of them extreme nationalists and religious zealots who are heavily armed.

The settlements continue to grow at the rate of 9 percent a year, despite the agreement signed with the PLO. The Israeli government insists that its forces must control the access roads to these enclaves and their connection to Israel itself. This alone exposes the largely token character of any "independent" Palestinian state that might emerge from this process. The Palestinian Authority is left to police small patches of land, mostly impoverished cities, while it remains surrounded and cut off by Israeli troops. As the stalemate in the US-brokered talks makes clear, the Israeli state is not prepared to make any fundamental alterations in the present situation.

Israel's motivation for signing the Middle East accord was, in the first place, to forestall a revolutionary uprising by the Palestinian masses in the occupied territories, which had taken embryonic form in the intifada which began in 1987. Despite sustained and brutal repression, Israel proved incapable of putting down this rebellion without seeking the direct collaboration of the PLO.

At the same time, the Israeli ruling class was anxious to escape the punishing economic and social costs associated with the occupation, both in terms of military expenditures and the pariah status which Israel acquired throughout the Arab world and elsewhere.

But as the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 and the subsequent return to power by the Israeli right under Benjamin Netanyahu have shown, it is not so easy to escape the historical contradictions of Zionism. The settlement policy begun by the Labor Party spawned a right-wing nationalist, semi-fascist layer, which produced the assassin that claimed Rabin's life. Increasingly, the debate over the future of the settlements, as well as the associated question of the increasingly bitter conflict between religious and secular Israeli Jews, is spoken of in terms of a "civil war."

Wielding disproportionate power in the government, Israel's ultra-Orthodox political parties have increasingly imposed the dictates of Jewish religious law in areas previously deemed secular. All administrative control over births, marriages and burial arrangements has been placed in the hands of the Orthodox rabbinate, much to the consternation of Conservative, Reform and secular Jews. Orthodox members of the Knesset, who play a pivotal role in cobbling together coalition governments, are demanding laws that would close down roads and force an end to flights by El Al, the national airline, on Saturdays. Many communities have become bitterly divided between Orthodox and secular Jews, reaching the point of physical confrontation.

No less deep are the social chasms that have emerged in Israel. In a country that once claimed to need every Jewish immigrant for the labor of national construction, 8.2 percent of the population is unemployed, according to the official figures. The ranks of the jobless are concentrated in impoverished "development towns," like Ofkim in the Negev. Rioting broke out there six months ago after the town's unemployment rate reached 14.3 percent.

Ethiopian Jews also rioted last year over their treatment as second-class citizens. The resentment of Sephardic Jews, those originating in the Arab world, against the Ashkenazic, or European Jewish, establishment, has emerged as a volatile and pivotal factor in Israeli politics. Menachem Begin was able to manipulate this resentment in a rightward direction, to no small degree because of the glaring contradiction between the socialist pretensions of Israel's Zionist founders and the immense social polarization which exists in Israeli society today.

An essential economic contradiction continues to undermine both the Zionist project and the conception underlying the Middle East peace accord of a new economic partnership between the Israeli bourgeoisie and

its Arab counterparts. The fastest growing sector within Israel is the high-technology industry, which produces neither for the national nor the regional market. Fully 96 percent of Israel's exports and 93 percent of its imports are conducted with areas outside the region.

While the impasse over the occupied territories has largely frozen the growth of Arab-Israeli economic ties, the development of such relations would ultimately take place at the expense of the masses of working people, Arab and Jewish alike. The Arab world offers the Israeli capitalist the prospect of new reserves of cheap labor to further depress the living standards of workers in Israel itself.

Within the areas administered by the PLO in Gaza and the West Bank, meanwhile, the Palestinian workers are finding that their conditions of social oppression have only continued to worsen, while a small layer of government bureaucrats and businessmen with political connections are seeking their fortunes.

Fifty years after Israel's founding, the reactionary Zionist utopia of a national state in which the Jews of the world could find sanctuary, unity and equality has been realized in the form of a capitalist state created through the dispossession of another people and maintained through war, repression and social inequality at home. As the assassination of Rabin and other violent acts by the extreme right-wing forces cultivated by the Zionist state have shown, there is a danger that Israel itself will reproduce the conditions of dictatorship and civil war from which an earlier generation of European Jews fled.

The dead-end of Zionism is a peculiar expression of the failure of all movements that have based themselves on the perspective of nationalism to resolve any of the fundamental questions confronting the masses of working people. This is no less true for the Arab countries, where ruling cliques have manipulated nationalist sentiments and bitter resentment of Israel in order to divert the social struggles of the working class.

There is only way out of the malignant contradictions of Israeli society. That is to unite Arab and Jewish workers in a common struggle against capitalism and for the building of a socialist society, which would tear down the artificial borders which divide the peoples and economies of the region. Only in this way can the region liberate itself from war and oppression, fueled by the profit drive of foreign capitalists and the native ruling classes.



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