

Shimon Peres (1923-2016)

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Friday's state funeral for Shimon Peres, former president and twice prime minister of Israel, brought imperialist leaders from all over the world to pay tribute, not so much to the individual as to the rapacious, land-grabbing, militaristic state he did so much to construct.

Peres, who died Wednesday at the age of 93, was the last of the generation of founders of the Israeli state in 1947 to remain active and influential in Israeli political life.

In his eulogy, US President Barack Obama ranked Peres with "the other giants of the 20th century that I've had the honor to meet, like Nelson Mandela and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth."

As is so often the case, the American president's rhetoric managed to turn reality on its head. The life of Peres, he claimed, "showed us that justice and hope are at the heart of the Zionist idea."

On the contrary, the life of Peres, which tracks the origins and development of the state of Israel, demonstrates that modern day Zionism was a movement founded not on hope, but disillusionment and despair. It was the product of the historic defeats of the working class, the betrayals of Stalinism and their impact upon a generation of Jewish workers who had turned to socialism and, of course, of the monstrous crimes of German fascism.

Born in what was then Poland in 1923, Peres emigrated to Palestine in 1934. All of his relatives who remained behind were murdered in the Holocaust.

The Zionist solution to what was then referred to as the "Jewish problem" was the carving out of a Jewish state in Palestine, in alliance with imperialism and through the expulsion of more than three-quarters of a million Palestinians from their homes by means of massacres, terror and intimidation.

The party with which Peres was affiliated, Mapai (Workers' Party of the Land of Israel), was the dominant political force from the period preceding the founding of Israel through to its merging into the Israeli Labor Party in the 1960s.

It was this party, above all, that propagated the myth that the founding of Israel was bound up with some new type of egalitarian society and even socialism.

The so-called "Labor-Zionist" movement, however, bitterly rejected a genuine socialist perspective, based on uniting Jewish and Arab workers in a common struggle against imperialism and its native agents. Instead, they provided a "socialist" veneer for a reactionary ethno-religious bourgeois nationalist movement founded on the expropriation of the Palestinian Arab population. The logic of these politics was to bear its bitter fruit over the course of Peres' political lifetime.

Friday's funeral orations, like the media obituaries, were steeped in hypocrisy and historical lies, hailing Peres as an intrepid apostle of "peace," drawing in part on his role in the negotiations which led to the failed 1993 Oslo Accords, in part on his role, particularly as president from 2007 to 2014, as a mild critic of the most rapacious actions of the Israeli government, particularly under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In reality, Peres was deeply implicated in many of the foulest historical crimes associated with the establishment, expansion and militarization of the state of Israel. Throughout his seven-decade career in the Zionist state, he personified the saying about the man who "knows where all the bodies are buried."

At the age of 21, Peres was given his first military-security assignment by David Ben-Gurion, the leader of Mapai, head of the Jewish Agency and first president of Israel: making reconnaissance maps of the Sinai Desert, in anticipation of coming wars between the Jewish settlers and the Arab population of the region.

He rose rapidly in logistical operations that sustained first Haganah, the Jewish militia, and then, after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1947, in obtaining equipment and supplies for the Israeli navy. In 1951, Ben-Gurion named him director general of the Defense Ministry, where he was responsible for developing the domestic Israeli armaments industry, negotiating French weapons supplies, including the Mirage jet fighters, and obtaining French assistance for the nuclear research facility at Dimona which eventually produced Israel's stockpile of hundreds of nuclear bombs.

His good relations with French imperialism facilitated the alliance of Israel, Britain and France in the 1956 war with Egypt, which led to the first Israeli conquest of the Sinai Peninsula. But the Anglo-French forces were compelled to withdraw from the Suez Canal because of opposition from US President Dwight Eisenhower, as US imperialism displaced the former colonial overlords as the dominant power in the Middle East.

Peres went into electoral politics in 1959 and was given a favored place on the Labor Party electoral list by Ben-Gurion. He held a seat in the Knesset for the next 48 years, holding cabinet positions whenever Labor was in power or in a coalition government.

Throughout much of this period, Peres was regarded as the arch-schemer and back-stabber of Israeli politics, hated by his party rivals and unpopular with the Israeli population. His political rise coincided with Labor's decline, and he never succeeded in winning a general election as the Labor Party leader, failing on five separate occasions.

Without going through an exhaustive examination of all the twists and turns, Peres became prime minister on two occasions, in 1984-86 in coalition with the right-wing Likud Party, when he agreed to alternate in office with Yitzhak Shamir, and in 1995-96 after the assassination of his Labor Party rival Yitzhak Rabin.

Peres played a major role in the crimes of the Zionist state throughout this period. After the 1967 war, in which Israel seized Sinai for a second time and also conquered the West Bank and the Golan Heights, Peres helped spearhead the colonization of the West Bank by what has now become an army of settlers, more than 200,000, most drawn from ultra-nationalist or ultra-religious backward elements, many of them American Jews who brought with them the contempt of US imperialism for “lesser breeds” like the Palestinians.

When Peres was defense minister in the mid-1970s, charged with rebuilding the Israeli military machine after the debacle of the 1973 war, he gave an enormous impetus to the West Bank colonization, issuing the slogan, “Settlements everywhere” and calling them “the roots and the eyes of Israel.” Later, after the 1993 Oslo Accords, he backed the colonization campaign that increased the settler population on the West Bank by 50 percent, in flagrant violation of the assurances given to the PLO.

His media reputation as a “peacemaker” relates mainly to Peres’ role, as foreign minister in the government headed by Yitzhak Rabin, in negotiating the Oslo Accords, culminating in the signing ceremony at the White House, brokered by US President Bill Clinton, and rubber-stamped with the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded to Peres, Rabin and PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat.

The agreement represented a historic capitulation by the PLO, the most militant of all the national liberation movements that had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which ended the ability of these organizations to maneuver between the United States and the Soviet bloc, and maintain at least a degree of independence, all of the bourgeois nationalist movements made their peace with imperialism.

Rabin was assassinated two years later by a right-wing Israeli fanatic; Arafat died in 2004, according to some theories poisoned by assassins working for the state of Israel. Peres, however, went on to another 20 years of high posts in the Israeli state, including succeeding Rabin as prime minister in 1995, leader of the opposition to a series of right-wing regimes, and then, after he left the Labor Party and joined Kadima, the “center” party established by another Israeli war criminal, Ariel Sharon, elected by the Knesset in 2007, at the age of 83, to serve a seven-year term as president, a largely ceremonial position.

It was during his second term as prime minister, in 1995-96, that Peres was responsible for a particularly bloody crime, when the government he led launched Operation Grapes of Wrath, a military assault on Hezbollah in Lebanon. In the course of this operation, the Israel Defense Forces shelled a United Nations camp in Qana, Lebanon, killing more than 100 Lebanese civilians who had fled there for safety.

Robert Fisk, veteran Middle East correspondent for the British newspaper the *Independent*, was an eyewitness to the Qana massacre and wrote about it in his column Wednesday, under the

headline, “The Butcher of Qana.” Fisk wrote: “When the world heard that Shimon Peres had died, it shouted ‘Peacemaker!’ But when I heard that Peres was dead, I thought of blood and fire and slaughter.”

He described the scene: “Babies torn apart, shrieking refugees, smouldering bodies. It was a place called Qana and most of the 106 bodies—half of them children—now lie beneath the UN camp where they were torn to pieces by Israeli shells in 1996. I had been on a UN aid convoy just outside the south Lebanese village. Those shells swished right over our heads and into the refugees packed below us. It lasted for 17 minutes.”

Peres launched the operation at least in part to bolster his military credentials for the election that he would lose to Netanyahu a few months later.

Another critic, Gideon Levy, writing in *Haaretz*, observed of Peres, “One cannot crown him a wondrous figure, as the whole world is doing now, without also describing his country. If Peres was a hero of peace, then the State of Israel is a peace-seeking country. Is anybody buying that? One cannot call it an occupier, a dispossessor, a pariah, while calling Peres a giant of peace.”

It is a mark of how far to the right official Israeli politics has moved that Peres, a militarist and supporter of mass murder, one of the founders of the Israeli state, was regarded as a leftist and peacenik by the current Netanyahu government. By the time of his death, the Israeli Labor Party with which he was identified, a shadow of its former self, had declared the “two-state solution” that he had promoted “unattainable” and was advocating an apartheid plan of imprisoning Palestinians inside fragmented Bantustan-like territories through a vast expansion of separation walls.

In a statement issued by the White House, President Obama described Peres as “the essence of Israel itself.” Given his record of militarism, the dispossession of the Palestinians, assassinations and massacres, that is indictment enough of the state of Israel.



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