

Stern: The Man, The Gang & The State, produced by Al Jazeera Documentary and directed by Hossam Sarhan

Jean Shaoul
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Film director Hossam Sarhan has made an important documentary, *Stern: The Man, The Gang & The State*, delving into the little-known subject of the Stern Gang.

The film, shown recently in Sheffield where it got a very warm response, was hosted by the Sheffield Palestine Cultural Exchange and Sheffield Jews Against Israeli Apartheid. It is available on Al Jazeera Documentary, and deserves a wide audience among workers and young people.

Sarhan's previous work includes *The Exiles* (2021), about five young Egyptian activists from different backgrounds and political ideologies who met in Tahrir Square during the mass uprising against Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship in 2011. Living in exile since Abdel Fattah el-Sisi seized power in a military coup in July 2013, they came together again a decade later to talk about the revolution, why they thought the revolution had failed and the impact on their lives.

The Stern Gang, founded by Avraham Stern in 1939, was one of the Zionist terrorist gangs responsible for a wave of murderous attacks on both Palestinians and British officials in Mandate Palestine and the Middle East before the establishment of the State of Israel. Attacks led to the flight of more than 700,000 Palestinians from their homes in 1948 in what became known as the Nakba, or Catastrophe.

Under conditions where the fascistic government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has pledged to inflict a second Nakba on the Palestinians, it is vital that filmmakers and artists do not remain silent but use their films to bring out the historical record. This is what Sarhan seeks to do with his latest film.

To its credit, the film is not limited to the description and archival documentation of the terrible acts of violence, but explains the ideology underpinning them, using interviews with Stern's son Yair and supporters of the Stern Gang along with commentary to explain Stern's outlook and activities. Completed just before the start of Israel's long-planned war, it starts with a lengthy interview with Yair in his home in Jerusalem. Yair outlines his father's ideology and makes clear that he agrees with his father 100 percent. That he feels free to do so speaks volumes for the prevalence of the far right in Israel today.

Stern subscribed to Vladimir Jabotinsky's far right Revisionist Zionist movement that openly stated, in opposition to the mainstream political Zionist movement, that the establishment of a Zionist state in Palestine was impossible without the forcible transfer of the indigenous population. The Zionist state could only be established "in blood and fire". With the Jews a minority in Palestine, such a state would necessarily mean expelling the Arab population to ensure its

Jewish character.

Stern saw the Palestinians as alien forces that had no right to Palestine which belonged only to the Jews. In 1929, at the age of 22, he joined the Zionists' paramilitary organisation, the Hagana, "to protect the Jews" against the Palestinians but soon left because, he said, they didn't do much. He then joined the Irgun, the military wing of Jabotinsky's Revisionist movement, that considered the British as much the enemy as the Palestinians. The Revisionists argued that armed struggle against the British was the only way to secure a Jewish state in Mandate Palestine and the East Bank of the River Jordan, today's Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

As the film explains, while Stern, who had studied in Italy and was an admirer of Mussolini, understood the antisemitic character of the Nazis, he sought to build an anti-British alliance with the fascist powers with whose nationalist ideology he had much in common, as did many of the Zionists. Furthermore, he wanted the Jews forced out of Germany and Italy, including by military means, so that they would emigrate to Palestine. To this end, he made extensive efforts to establish links with the Nazis and the Italian Fascists on the basis that "My enemies' enemies are my friends," mirroring some of the Arab nationalists in Palestine, Egypt and Iraq who allied themselves with Germany to rid themselves of British imperialism. This policy led to a virtual civil war between the various wings of the Zionist movement during World War II.

In 1939, when war broke out between Britain and Germany, Stern, by then one of the Irgun leaders, rejected any support for the British against Germany. He argued that the British were the main enemy. There was no difference between the Nazi-fascist states and the Western democracies, between communists and social democrats, between Hitler and Chamberlain. When he failed to persuade the majority of the Irgun, who viewed him as a quisling and a traitor, he broke with the Revisionist movement. His faction became known as the Stern Group, or Lehi.

While both the mainstream Zionists and the Revisionists supported the British against Germany and joined the British armed forces in World War II, the Stern Group went on to carry out armed robberies to finance its activities and terrorist attacks against the British, the Arabs and Jews that it claimed were collaborating with them. Its violence killed and injured many unwitting bystanders and caused widespread anger in Palestine. The British, who thought his death would lead to the Group's demise, shot and killed Stern in February 1942 and imprisoned his immediate coterie, including Yitzhak Shamir, the future prime minister.

Stern's son repudiated the British police claim he had sought to escape their clutches, citing Stern's last letter on the morning of his death in which he vowed to fight to the finish, and gloated that it did not end the Gang's activities.

As Professor Ilan Pappé, author of several books about Israel's history, its ethnic cleansing of Palestine and treatment of its Palestinian citizens, explained, Stern viewed himself as engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle, akin to those in Britain's empire in Africa and India. But the activities of the Stern Gang, targeted against the Palestinians, whom it claimed had taken over the land that belonged to the Jews and were part of the British empire, were those of a right-wing movement with nothing in common with a revolutionary struggle to overthrow imperialism in the region.

The Irgun and the Stern Gang waged a pogrom on the Palestinians, attacking towns and villages and killing several thousand in a roughly 30-year period up to 1948. This intensified after the United Nations General Assembly vote in November 1947 to partition Palestine and create two, separate Jewish and Palestinian mini states. Their most infamous terrorist act—although neither the only nor the worst—was the attack on the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin on the outskirts of Jerusalem in April 1948, where they—along with the Hagana, the forerunner of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF)—massacred between 117 and 250 men, women and children, going from house to house to drive out Palestinians.

The film provides a timely reminder that Zionists of *all* political colours, including the mainstream Zionist paramilitary organisation, the Hagana, used terrorist methods to achieve statehood.

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, publicly at least, sought to disassociate the Labour Party-dominated Zionist mainstream from terrorism and absolve the Hagana of any responsibility for the massacre at Deir Yassin, laying the blame entirely on the Irgun and Stern Gang. He even apologised to Transjordan's ruler, who was sympathetic to the Zionists, for "the extremists in our own army." His successors today have no such qualms as they give the far-right settlers the green light to carry out pogroms against the Palestinians in the West Bank.

Deir Yassin was a watershed moment and one of the most important factors in driving more than 700,000 Palestinians from their homes in the 1948 Nakba. Stern's son acknowledged the brutality of Deir Yassin but justified it, saying "the context was war".

The massacre took place weeks before the outbreak of the Arab Israeli war on May 15, 1948. Pappé explains how Israeli archival documents show that, contrary to the official story put out by Israel, the Zionists had already driven out—via a mixture of expulsions, rumour and bombardment—391,000 Palestinians before the war had even started. The purpose of the war was to continue the ethnic cleansing already begun. While Israel claimed that the Arab armies invaded to drive out the Jews, their actual purpose was to stop the ethnic cleansing.

The Stern Group/Lehi assassinated Lord Moyne, Britain's Minister Resident in the Middle East, and led many other attacks on the British in Palestine. But its most notorious assassination in September 1948 was that of the UN mediator Count Folke Bernadotte, whom the Stern Group believed favoured the Palestinians at the expense of the new Jewish state. The assassination was ordered and planned by future prime minister Shamir. While the Group was declared a terrorist organisation days later, and most of its leaders were arrested and imprisoned, Shamir escaped in time to avoid arrest. A general amnesty was soon declared, and its members integrated into the IDF. Their

crimes were whitewashed by the state and, some 30 years later, Yair received from the Ministry of Defence a medal for his father's services to the state.

While the Stern Gang was disbanded after 1948, the film draws out how its racist and xenophobic-nationalist ideology now constitutes the official policy of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government of militarists, ultra-nationalists and religious bigots—all crawling out of the woodwork of Israel's crisis-ridden capitalist society—supported by the imperialist governments in Washington, London, Paris and Berlin that have armed Israel's genocide in Gaza and backed it politically and diplomatically.

Today, the ruling cabal has the legitimacy of the nation state and use of all its powers to carry out their policies of apartheid, ethnic cleaning and the final solution of the Palestinian question.

Netanyahu and company are Stern's political heirs in every sense of the word. The forerunner of Netanyahu's Likud party and his far-right coalition partners are the political descendants of the Herut Party that was formed by the Irgun, led by Menahem Begin, and the Stern Gang/Lehi, led by Avraham Stern and, after his death, Yitzhak Shamir. Decades later, Begin, like Shamir, became prime minister of Israel.

Like the Stern Gang, Netanyahu has embraced some of the world's most far-right and antisemitic politicians. These included US President Donald Trump, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, ruler of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

As Sarhan explained to this reviewer, "Israel/Palestine: it's a complicated issue, that's why you have to ask political questions."

He had been surprised by Yair's open support for his father's activities and ideology. It seemed, Sarhan thought, that "We can say anything because we won," which was why he gave him so much space in the film.

Sarhan commented, "What happened before and led up to October 7 was a continuation of the events of the 1948 Nakba." He explained, "The Palestinians have been caught up in a struggle against colonialism, imperialism, so that we are talking about class, the class interests of the capitalist class—oil and finance—and opposition from the working class. The Palestinian question is a supra-national question."

As a "supra-national question," Palestinian liberation demands a political perspective that corresponds with the struggle against oppression, war and its cause, the capitalist system. It requires an international socialist strategy, uniting Israeli and Palestinian workers and youth with their brothers and sisters throughout the region against capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression, for the United Socialist States of the Middle East, as part of a struggle for world socialist revolution.



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