MOISHE POSTONE ONCE REMARKED about the German left: “No western Left was as philo-Semitic and pro-Zionist prior to 1967. Probably none subsequently identified so strongly with the Palestinian cause. What was termed ‘anti-Zionism’ was in fact so emotionally and psychically charged that it went far beyond the bounds of a political and social critique of Zionism.”

Postone’s diagnosis, that the Israeli-Arab conflict served as a projection-screen for the psychological needs of the German left, is just as valid for the new political current which, since the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in autumn 2000, has come to identify itself completely with the state of Israel.

Why the twisted psychological state of the German left should be of interest to anyone who is not forced by geographical proximity into direct confrontation with it is known only to the Platypus Review, which has published one of its most surreal excrescences—for there is no other possible interpretation of the text—“Communism and Israel.”

The idea that anti-colonial movements such as the Vietnamese Stalinists under Ho Chi Minh stood for universal emancipation, rather than being harbingers of the state-capitalist modernization of their societies, was shared by the Left, Old and New, the world over. This was ideology in the strict sense: it had a foundation in reality and could thus be criticized. In contrast, only German leftists could come to the conclusion that Ariel Sharon represents a triumvirate of Lenin, Durruti, and Walter Benjamin, and maintain that Israel is a sort of “dictatorship of the proletariat,” an “armed attempt by the Jews to reach communism while still alive.” This is not ideology but delusion, and, as such, it can be analyzed, but no longer criticized. Its psychological driving force is a macabre desire for the “revenge for the dead” attributed to Sharon’s politics—as if the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were a retirement home for the SS. Those who stand behind these politics often compensate for their impotence in Germany by identifying with the Israeli military. This perspective is an expression of the unfulfilled wish to settle scores with those Nazis who were sent not to prison or to the gallows, but to the heights of public office.

As Postone mentions, the German left after 1945 was initially pro-Israel. The awareness of living in the land of the perpetrators was formative; feelings of guilt and the need to represent a “better Germany” determined its relationship to the Jewish state. Socialist youth organizations demanded the opening of diplomatic relations with Israel, which the West German government, out of concern for the traditionally strong German-Arab relations, delayed until 1965. Young idealistic Germans travelled to Israel with organizations such as Action Reconciliation Service for Peace and volunteered on Kibbutzim. Israel was seen not only as the survivors’ state, but also as a pioneer state with socialist characteristics. The Kibbutzim were idealized and a blind eye was turned to the exclusion of the Palestinians.
The Six-Day War of 1967 shook the Left out of its stupor and brought about an abrupt shift to an anti-Israel position. The very marginal (and illegal) KPD had of course already followed the Soviet Union’s change in the early 1950s, which after initially supporting Israel thought that the Arab states would make better allies. The New Left, composed primarily of students, responded by providing a mirror image of dominant opinion in Germany, which was suddenly enthusiastic for Israel’s military conquests. Ulrike Meinhof, at the time still a columnist for the influential left-wing magazine *konkret*, described this climate aptly: “The success and relentlessness of the Israeli advances inspired bloodlust; theories of blitzkrieg ran wild; after 25 years, the BILD [a right-wing tabloid] finally won the battle of Stalingrad in Sinai.”

Meanwhile, as in most other western countries, the majority of the New Left fell prey to the myth of anticolonial revolution. This implied a clear-cut distinction between friend and enemy in the Middle East, a romanticization of Palestinian nationalism, and a demonization of Israel. A crude anti-imperialism was in full display, primarily by the pro-China, Marxist-Leninist “K-Gruppen”—which had about a 100,000 people file through their ranks during the 1970s—but also by elements of the so-called “non-dogmatic” left. The Leninist commitment to “the right of national self-determination” that had asserted itself in the workers’ movement against Rosa Luxemburg’s categorical anti-nationalism evolved into an all-encompassing worldview that posed the conflict between imperialism and the “oppressed peoples” as the key to world revolution.

The affinity of this worldview with modern antisemitism is obvious. It understands the capitalist mode of production not as an impersonal force of domination but tends towards a conspiracy theory. It does not offer any critique of production but castigates the “parasitic character” of imperialism, which is primarily associated with finance capital. The nation is not understood as a compulsory form that is to be abolished, but naturalized and placed in opposition to imperialism. The traditions and the simple, industrious life of “the people” are held up in opposition to “cosmopolitanism” and the “artificial,” “decadent” culture of the West. So-called revolutionary leftists seriously debated whether the Jews were a people (*Volk*) and hence entitled to found a nation-state. No one recognized that rather than the state being an expression of the allegedly natural category of the nation, the nation is in fact a historical product of the state. This form of anti-Zionism thus had more in common with the ideology of blood and soil than with any materialist critique of the Israeli state. The imagery used by the Palestine solidarity movement was rooted in the kitsch idea of a “Palestinian people” closely connected to the soil, while Jewish Israelis—the “Zionists”—often appeared similar to the Jews in the caricatures from *Der Stürmer*. Israel was portrayed by the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands–Roter Morgen* not as a bourgeois state under compulsion, but as “the most bloodthirsty and power-hungry bastion against the people,” and for the *Autonome Nahostgruppe Hamburg*, Zionism was considerably more than a national movement of Jews, namely “the enemy of humankind.”

This left-wing nationalism, inspired by Stalin and Mao, was bound up with the urge to present the Israelis as the ghosts of the Nazis. This was certainly an international phenomenon, as the widespread talk of “Zionazis” shows. On the other hand, this tendency was particularly pronounced within the Left in Germany, where it served the purposes of public exoneration. In 1969, the group Schwarze Ratten (Tupamaros West Berlin) that emerged from the anarchist subculture quite deliberately chose the date of
November 9—the anniversary of the Reichspogromnacht of 1938—to vandalize monuments commemorating the persecution of the Jews, and to plant a bomb in a Jewish community building. In their communiqué, they asserted that Israel was “historically illegitimate” and that “Jews expelled by fascism have themselves become fascists, who in collaboration with the American people wish to erase the Palestinian people.” For the Maoist KPD, the Zionists were “the Nazis of our time,” and talk of the “Holocaust of the Palestinians” or of the “Final Solution of the Palestinian Question” was commonplace. All means were allowed in resistance to this so-called new fascism. When the Palestinian unit Black September carried out an attack on the Israeli Olympic team in Munich in 1972, Meinhof, by this time incarcerated as a member of the Red Army Faction, celebrated this as a “courageous action ... against Zionist soldiers who were appearing as athletes in Munich.”

8 And, in what was probably the most explicit expression of this policy, in 1976, a unit from the “Revolutionary Cells” together with the Palestinian PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) hijacked a French passenger aircraft and flew it to Entebbe in Uganda, in order to secure the release of political prisoners; the 80 Israeli passengers and 20 French Jews were held hostage, the other passengers set free.

While a blanket equation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism is untenable, it is no less true that the two became indistinguishable in large sections of the German left after 1967. Guided by the critical theory of Marx and Adorno, a much smaller part of the Left began to criticize this form of anti-Zionism in the 1970s. Its insights, initially confined to the margins, became more widespread with the bankruptcy of both Eastern state socialism and armed struggle in the West, and in the context of post-reunification Germany. Unlike the pro-Israel left of today, these critics of the prevailing form of German left-wing anti-Zionism knew that it is logically impossible to reject Palestinian nationalism while offering an apology for Israeli nationalism. Wolfgang Pohrt, a student of Adorno, once remarked, “There is no reason to assume that the Palestinians, if they were victorious, would behave differently from the Israelis. However, there is also no reason to expect the Palestinians to take from the bombarding of their refugee camps by the Israeli air force a different lesson from that which the Jews who founded Israel had taken: that one must expel and persecute, if one does not wish to be expelled and persecuted.”

9 It is ironic that the new pro-Israel left does not weaken anti-imperialist ideology and its antisemitic excrescences, but strengthens them. For years, when anti-imperialists complained indignantly that criticizing Israel constituted a taboo, it was a transparently defensive argument. The pro-Israel left has made this lie true: “All criticism of the state of Israel is antisemitic.”

10 Confused young “anti-fascists” now wear t-shirts on which they pledge themselves to the IDF and Israeli flags adorn some leftists’ living rooms. The old anti-imperialist defensive assertion that whoever is attacking left-wing antisemitism is in fact only an apologist for Israel has received a certain foundation in truth.

Only beyond the ideological schema of leftist ideologies that mirror one another can the conflict in the Middle East be grasped as part of the existing global misery. What condemns the vast majority of Palestinians to poverty in their existence is, to an extent, superfluous and devalued labor-power, a fate they share with millions of slum-dwellers the world over and one that would hardly be altered by founding a Palestinian state. Historically, Palestinians were proletarianized by Israel, which separated them from the land, but because Labor Zionism did not want to integrate them as wage-laborers any
more than the Arab states were apparently capable of doing, for generations hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees have scraped together a wretched existence in Arab camps, dependent on the charity of international aid organizations. The retreat of secular promises for the future gives a mythical charge to the demand to return to the villages of one’s ancestors, and prepares the ground for Islamist rackets such as Hamas, who apart from the odd bits of welfare have nothing to offer but jihad on Israel. The perspective of moderate Palestinian nationalism amounts to nothing more than the autonomous administration of squalor. But the “communist” friends of Israel have made peace with the society that engenders such conditions on the following terms: “To a society to which hunger is no reason for production, suffering cannot be sufficient grounds for solidarity.”

Translated by B. D. Mayer


3. Translator’s note: It is perhaps worthy of remark that in the translation of “Communism and Israel” that appeared in *Platypus Review* 28, this phrase was rendered as ‘the armed attempt to reach communism alive’—the genitive der Juden, “of the Jews,” that appears in the original was silently omitted.


5. If the Platypus Historians Group aims to oppose both Israeli and Palestinian nationalism, it could not have sought out a worse authority than Lenin. Always opportunists, the Bolsheviks courted the national movements in Asia for tactical reasons all the more desperately the worse the revolution was doing in the West. The ‘Congress Of The Peoples Of The East’ in Baku in 1920 served as an indication of this tendency. In an attempt to curry favor with Islam, Zinoviev and Radek even called for a “holy war” against western imperialism. See Platypus Historians Group, “Catastrophe, Historical Memory and the Left: 60 Years of Israel-Palestine,” *Platypus Review* 5 (May 2008), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2008/05/01/catastrophe-historical-memory-and-the-left-60-years-of-israel-palestine/>.

6. Translator’s Note: This article renders the German “Antisemitismus” as “antisemitism,” without a hyphen or a capital s, primarily because the hyphen and the capital s imply that there exists something called “Semitism” or “Semites,” to which the antisemites are opposed.


