

Left-Wing Antisemitism in the United States: Past and Present

Stephen H. Norwood | October 13, 2021

Antisemitism has been significant in American left-wing movements since their emergence in the nineteenth century. It was, however, much more strident on the far left—in the Communist Party, among Trotskyites, and in the New Left of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In recent decades, antisemitism has penetrated the liberal mainstream and has become normalized within the principal moderate socialist organization, the Democratic Socialists of America.

Foundations

The left's view of Jews and its understanding of antisemitism can be traced back to 19th century Marxist and anarchist paradigms. Karl Marx and the leading theoreticians of anarchism, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin, depicted Judaism as nakedly materialistic and anti-social. Describing the Jew as an unscrupulous moneylender and petty trader in his essay "On the Jewish Question," Marx (1844) claimed that "huckstering" was the Jew's "worldly religion." Drawing on the Christian stereotype of the Jew as obsessed with financial gain and lacking compassion, Marx maintained that "money is the jealous god of Israel, in face of which no other god may exist." The Jews were amassed in a dying social class—the petty bourgeoisie—relying increasingly on illicit methods to extract profits. "Petty bourgeois" to this day remains one of the most vicious epithets in the Marxist lexicon (Norwood, 2013). Marx wrote little about the Jewish question after the 1840s, "though when he referred to Jews in private correspondence his tenor was almost always negative" (Laqueur, 2006, p. 24).

Stephen H. Norwood is Professor of History and Judaic Studies at the University of Oklahoma. His six books include *Prologue to annihilation: Ordinary American and British Jews challenge the Third Reich* (2021); *Antisemitism and the American far left* (2013); and *The Third Reich in the ivory tower: Complicity and conflict on American campuses* (2009), which was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award in Holocaust Studies. Professor Norwood coedited the prize-winning, two-volume *Encyclopedia of American Jewish history* (with Eunice G. Pollack). He received his PhD from Columbia University.

The founders of modern anarchism were just as contemptuous of Jews as Marx was. To Proudhon, the Jew by temperament was a non-producer, “always fraudulent and parasitic.” Bakunin similarly referred to Jews as “an exploiting sect, a bloodsucking people” (Wistrich, 2012, pp. 46, 186). Wistrich further noted that Proudhon’s diary contained antisemitic statements that were even more inflammatory, anticipating those of the Nazis, such as “the Jew is the enemy of the human race” and the Jew “poisons everything” (Wistrich, 2012, pp. 185–186). Bakunin was surely aware that people would associate the term “bloodsucking” with the medieval blood libel, that Jews kidnapped and murdered Christian children to extract their blood to mix with the matzo at Passover.

The emergence of modern Zionism as an organized international movement in the 1890s precipitated new, equally vicious forms of antisemitic defamation. In the 1920s, branding Zionism “counterrevolutionary,” the Soviet government waged a concerted campaign to crush it within its territory and exiled thousands of Zionists to Siberian forced labor camps (Norwood, 2013). While respecting the nationalist aspirations of other ethnic and racial groups, it pressed Jews to assimilate. The eminent historian Robert Wistrich noted that in emphatically denying Jewish claims to be a people, Marxism resembled Christianity, and was “another universalist creed turned imperialist” (Wistrich, 1976, p. 10).

Islamic Pogroms/Communist Support

The American Communist Party (CP) often expressed intense loathing of Zionism, using antisemitic terminology, and conflated Zionism with fascism. On several occasions, it justified Muslim pogroms against Jews in Palestine and North Africa. In the early twentieth century, as the US became the world’s leading economic power, Communists increasingly conceived of Jews as plutocrats and Zionism as an imperialist menace. When Islamic pogroms broke out across Palestine in 1929, sparked by the antisemitic harangues of the grand mufti and other Muslim clerics, the CP cast the Arab pogromists as peasants fighting a class war against British imperialists and Zionist as “land robbers” (Norwood, 2013, p. 29).

In the 1929 pogroms in Palestine, the Arab slaughter of the Jews was unrestrained, with men, women, and children massacred indiscriminately. More than 130 Jews were killed. Jews were beheaded, castrated, and had their eyes gouged out, women were raped, and synagogues desecrated (Auerbach, 2009). The CP newspaper dismissed reports of these well-documented atrocities as Zionist fabrications. It went so far as to publish a cartoon invoking the Christian deicide accusation, depicting a huge cross with a Star of David on top of the

vertical bar and “for Arabs” on the horizontal bar (Norwood, 2013). In 1934, the CP similarly blamed the Zionists’ “fascist conduct” and French imperialism for the Islamic pogrom in Constantine, Algeria, in which Muslims murdered probably more than 40 Jews, with whole families burned alive (Norwood, in press).

Communist Reversal

Following the Soviets’ sudden reversal in 1947 of their opposition to creating a Jewish state in Palestine, the American CP endorsed the UN partition plan. In 1948, the CP backed Israel in what American Communists called the “Jewish War of Liberation” against six invading Arab armies. It condemned the US arms embargo on the Haganah—the Zionist military organization in Palestine—and President Truman’s refusal to extend de jure recognition to the Jewish state. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, many of the CP’s Jewish members—a sizeable proportion of the party—became enamored of Jewish culture. In 1945, the party established a School of Jewish Studies in New York, whose curriculum included courses on antisemitism and even Hebrew, a language the Soviets continued to ban.¹ A sizeable minority of the party remained sympathetic to Israel during the 1956 Sinai campaign, but most resigned shortly afterward when the majority pro-Egypt faction consolidated its control. In 1956–1957, the CP’s membership fell precipitously because of Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev’s disclosure of Stalin’s crimes, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and the fierce intraparty conflict over the Sinai campaign. As a result, the CP was permanently reduced to a tiny sect, and the American left remained dormant until a “New Left” emerged in the early 1960s (Norwood, 2013).²

Although at times the always minuscule Trotskyite movement criticized antisemitic policies in the Soviet bloc and in the United States, in 1946 they published one of the most pernicious antisemitic tracts the left has ever produced: Abram Leon’s *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation*. Leon went beyond previous Marxist writers in declaring that medieval prohibitions against Jews owning land or working as artisans were “a fable.” He claimed that Jews

¹ Notably, even during this period the CP’s newspaper claimed there was no antisemitism in the Soviet Union because Soviet Jews had abandoned “the theory that they were a chosen people, superior to the gentile” (Norwood, 2016, p. 124).

² Although the Communist Party never developed any electoral strength nationally, it exerted influence in some sectors of American life. Its peak membership, attained during the Popular Front period (1935–1939), never exceeded 75,000, but its rank-and-file was highly energetic. Moreover, as many as ten times that number passed through the party at various times. Even more people were exposed to party ideas through involvement in its many front groups. From the mid-1930s until the McCarthy period in the early 1950s, party members or fellow travelers led more than a dozen Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions and at times formed influential blocs in several others. In addition, the party had a presence in the film and publishing sectors (Norwood, 2013).

were psychologically drawn to moneylending. Guilds that excluded Jews were not motivated by “religious animosity or racial hatred”; rather, they did not want Jews because they considered usury and peddling dishonest (Norwood, 2013).³

Unlike the Communists, the Trotskyite movement remained consistent in its anti-Zionism. The Trotskyites denounced the struggle for a Jewish state as “criminal” and “imperialist” and opposed Israel in every war. They trivialized the Holocaust by equating it with the Allied bombing of Germany during World War II, vastly inflating the casualties of the air attacks. They depicted the German masses as victims of the Nazis, rather than as their supporters, ignoring their role in the antisemitic atrocities (Norwood, 2013).

Late 1960s New Leftists and Black Nationalists Embrace Antisemitism

At first the New Left devoted little attention to Jewish issues; by the late 1960s, however, as it abandoned its initial interest in “participatory democracy” and began to romanticize the Communist dictatorships in Third World countries, it became stridently anti-Israel and frequently overtly antisemitic. Discarding Marx’s faith in the revolutionary potential of the working class in industrially advanced countries, the late 1960s New Left found a “substitute proletariat” in the peasants of decolonizing Third World countries. That fierce Jewish resistance after World War II had forced the British colonizers out of Palestine did not count.⁴ The New Left disdained Israel as a parliamentary democracy, and, after the Six-Day War of 1967, as an important ally of the United States. As part of their effort to forge a relationship with revolutionary movements in the Third World, many New Leftists allied with violence-oriented African American militants, whom they perceived as speaking for Black people constituting an “internal colony” in the US.

The Black Panther Party (BPP), which identified as Marxist-Leninist and was willing to ally with radical Whites, helped introduce Holocaust inversion to the New Left. Israel became the new Third Reich and Jews the new Nazis. Holocaust inversion was a new way of demonizing Jews, by equating the Jewish state with the most genocidal and racist society ever to exist. The BPP had begun as Maoist, but because it received funds from the CP, it replaced Communist China as a model with North Korea, which was neutral in the Sino-Soviet dispute. For the

³ The major American Trotskyite group, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), published the first US edition in 1970. The SWP continues to praise and distribute this combination of economic antisemitism and anti-Zionist invective today.

⁴ As early as 1955, the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, which had convened to forge unity among the nations of Asia and Africa, excluded Israel, largely at the behest of intensely antisemitic Muslim nations, even though Israel is an Asian nation with half of its population from Asia and Africa.

Black Panthers, the core of the Middle East conflict was a war between heroic Palestinian guerillas and Israeli “pigs.” It called Israeli soldiers “fascist storm troopers,” and charged that Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War resulted in Arab refugees being forced into “modern concentration camps.” Like the Nazis, the Black Panthers directly associated Jews with criminality. They denounced Jews who operated businesses in African American neighborhoods as “bandit merchants” and denied any Jewish claim to Israel except by “robber’s right” (Norwood, 2013).

Since the late 1960s, the American far left has increasingly demonized Israel by recycling the shibboleths of the far right, so that the antisemitic vitriol from both extremes of the political spectrum has become virtually indistinguishable. In 1955, the American Jewish Committee commented that the Arab nations did not need to circulate anti-Zionist hate literature on a wide scale in the US because they could count on the American far right to do it for them. For example, Gerald L. K. Smith, the most prominent post-World War II American antisemite prior to Louis Farrakhan, distributed an Arab League pamphlet, *Jewish atrocities in the Holy Land* (1948), which resembled much of the anti-Israel propaganda that the New Left and its Black militant allies began circulating after the Six-Day War. The pamphlet invoked longstanding antisemitic images of Jewish immorality, depicting Israelis perpetrating “sadistic cruelties” on “an innocent [Arab] population, mainly composed of women, children, and old men” (Norwood, 2016, p. 125).

In 1967, shortly after the Six-Day War, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), positioned on the far left of the black nationalist movement, published an article similar to the Arab League pamphlet in its newsletter entitled “The Palestine Problem,” accusing “Zionists” of indiscriminately murdering and mutilating Arab men, women, and children. It was accompanied by a blurred photograph purporting to show Israelis shooting to death Arabs lined up against a wall. Its caption read: “This is the Gaza Strip, Palestine, not Dachau, Germany” (Norwood, 2013, p. 2). The article suggested that the Zionists’ primary motive in establishing a Jewish state in Palestine was their lust for wealth, a standard refrain in far right antisemitic propaganda. Viciously antisemitic illustrations also accompanied the article, associating Jews with murder, money, and racism. One showed a hand marked with a Star of David and a dollar sign tightening a rope from which Egyptian dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser and African American boxer Muhammad Ali were hanging. The other depicted Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan with dollar signs on his shoulders. The American Trotskyite newspaper *The Militant* denied that the SNCC

article was antisemitic and accused Jews who condemned it of “chauvinist hysteria” (Norwood, 2013, p. 4).⁵



Note. From “The Palestine problem,” *SNCC Newsletter*, June–July 1967.

Death and Rebirth

The New Left fell apart as a movement in the early 1970s, but its romanticization of the developing world and its emphasis on race rather than class found new support among liberals in the early 21st century. American withdrawal from Vietnam and the end of the military draft, both in 1973, helped bring about the New Left’s collapse. Richard Nixon’s landslide victory over Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern, a left liberal, in 1972, convinced many on the left that it was hopeless to press for progressive change. The long-term economic slump sparked by the 1973 oil crisis led college students, the New Left’s major constituency, to redirect their focus from political activism to practical career concerns. Working-class support for the left, an important part of its base in the first half of the 20th century, largely evaporated as a result of America’s deindustrialization and the emergence of a high-tech economy. When left-wing activism was revived in the early 21st century, it focused largely on

⁵ Estimates of the New Left’s following vary, but it was highly influential from 1964 to 1972, particularly in galvanizing opposition to the Vietnam War.

upper-middle-class concerns, such as the environment and climate change, racial and gender issues, and identity politics.

Many New Leftists later joined university faculties, where they helped shape campus views of Israel, Zionism, and antisemitism. They were now in a position to influence public opinion through their publications, media appearances, and speaking engagements. Scholars involved in, or influenced by, the New Left were instrumental in establishing the “whiteness school,” which contributed to the trivialization and denial of antisemitism as a part of the American experience. The whiteness school’s approach has been incorporated in many American history and social science textbooks. It maintains that European ethnic groups immigrating to the US prior to immigration restriction in the 1920s quickly acculturated, becoming “white Americans.” For the whiteness school, racial identity—white and black—remained the only significant line of division. It followed that as a result of Jews’ “whitening,” antisemitism ceased to be of any importance in the US.

Moderate Leftists Turn to Antisemitism

Holocaust inversion has gained favor with moderate leftists, as well as those on the far left. During the 2014 Gaza War, American Maoist and Trotskyite groups accused Israel of carrying out “genocidal attacks” on Arabs it had confined in “its Gaza concentration camp” (Norwood, 2016, p. 129). But not long after, the largest socialist organization in the US made similar pronouncements. At its 2017 convention, the 25,000-member Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), founded in 1982, which had for many years supported Israel’s right to exist, proclaimed its “solidarity with Palestinian civil society’s struggle against [Israeli] apartheid, colonialism, and military occupation” (Radosh, 2017). The apartheid charge is designed to associate Israel, the Middle East’s only democracy, with segregationist South Africa under white minority rule and with Nazi Germany. After the anti-Israel resolution passed the convention with about 90% of the vote, “the room erupted in chants of ‘From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free!’” (Riesman, 2018; Editorial Board, 2019). The slogan called for the obliteration of the Jewish state, with Jews reduced to a powerless minority in an undemocratic Muslim-controlled nation, driven out entirely, or annihilated. Many DSA members are active in the Democratic Party’s progressive wing, and four of them are members of the US House of Representatives.

During the 2021 Gaza War, the DSA drew a parallel between Israel and Nazi Germany, condemning the Jewish state for committing “a crime against humanity” against Arabs whom it confined in “an open air prison.” The DSA

demanded that “all elected officials . . . support the Palestinian call to defund ethnic cleansing and fully boycott apartheid” (Democratic Socialists of America, 2021).⁶

The Boycott, Divestment, & Sanctions Movement

The Boycott, Divestment, & Sanctions (BDS) movement, which calls for boycotting Israeli products; terminating investments in companies trading with or operating in Israel; and ending ties with Israeli universities and cultural institutions, has strong support from nearly all far left organizations, from DSA, and from many liberal academics. BDS demonizes the Jewish state as the new Nazi Germany or apartheid South Africa by employing measures anti-fascists used to isolate them. The National Women’s Studies Association is the largest scholarly organization to endorse BDS (Redden, 2015), even though Israel’s commitment to women’s rights far surpasses that of any other Middle Eastern country. In addition, the American Studies Association membership voted to boycott Israeli universities (Redden, 2013). Left-wing contingents regularly introduce pro-BDS resolutions at the annual conventions of other scholarly associations, which sometimes receive substantial support (Redden, 2016).

BDS has also received backing from one traditionally left-wing labor union, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which the Congress of Industrial Organizations expelled as Communist-dominated in 1950. During the Gaza wars in 2014 and in 2021, ILWU longshoremen in Oakland, California refused to cross a picket line set up by the leftist-backed Arab Resource and Organizing Center to unload cargo from Israeli merchant ships. The pickets, many carrying Palestinian flags, announced that they would not permit “Israeli apartheid money to come into our city” (Fishkoff, 2021; Israel, 2021).

Today few on the American left, whether militant or moderate, consider antisemitism a serious problem, and many defame Jews, or act as apologists for Islamists and black nationalists who do. The revelations about Soviet-bloc antisemitism that led to mass resignations from the American CP in 1956 and 1957 meant little to those who became active in the late 1960s New Left, or in leftist organizations in subsequent decades. Today the American left’s dismissive

⁶ In 2020, the New York City DSA chapter asked city council candidates not to visit Israel either as private citizens or as city council members. Fifty members of the New York State Assembly condemned the DSA request as “blatantly anti-Semitic” and as “dangerous, particularly at a time when anti-Semitism is on the rise in the United States and in the New York City area.” They declared that “no political organization that embeds antisemitism into its platform should be welcome in the halls of our legislature” (Gronich, 2020; Slattery, 2020).

attitude about Islamic antisemitism resembles American Communists' denial of the existence of antisemitism in the Soviet Union. Support for Israel within the Democratic Party's progressive wing, strong in the late 1960s, has dropped dramatically in the last several decades. Some of its members openly voice antisemitic sentiments, as when US Representative Ilhan Omar charged that lobbyists bought support for Israel by making financial contributions to political office-holders: "It's all about the Benjamins, baby"—a reference to \$100 bills (Hirsi Ali, 2019).⁷

The New Antisemitic Vitriol on University Campuses

In recent years American universities have become a principal arena for the propagation of antisemitism, intertwined with a virulent anti-Zionism. On many campuses, leftist groups have forged a "Red-Green" alliance with Muslim students—many of them reactionaries—to demonize Israel, often using antisemitic imagery and invective. The alliance aggressively propagandizes on campus, usually with the support of Middle East Studies programs. These programs often resemble German departments at American universities in the 1930s, which were committed to imposing a favorable image of Nazi Germany on students (Norwood, 2011). Leftist and Muslim students often disrupt or force the cancellation of lectures by pro-Israel speakers, who require heavy armed security on many campuses. Every year, left-wing and Muslim students ally to stage "Israel Apartheid Week" featuring virulently anti-Israel speeches and displays, often tinged with antisemitism.

The inflammatory antisemitic rhetoric espoused by the Red-Green alliance has precipitated violent attacks on Jewish students and threats against speakers they invite to address the issue of antisemitism. This climate of antisemitic menace has increasingly spread outside the campus as well, where street beatings and stabbings of Jews have taken place in several American cities.

Prominent political scientist Benjamin Ginsberg has pointed out how administrators now "respond with alacrity to the slightest indication of racist, sexist, or homophobic activity on their campuses" but "refuse to take action against antisemitic activists" (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 4). Administrators have been willing to make major concessions to leftist, Muslim, and African American militant students to avoid the disruptions that plagued many campuses in the 1960s and forced the resignation of high-level university officials. Ginsberg also noted that an administrator who came into conflict with the aforementioned

⁷ Ayaan Hirsi Ali noted that "the resources available to propagate Islamic ideologies, with their attendant anti-Semitism, vastly exceed what pro-Israel groups spend in the US."

groups would “likely . . . be labeled ‘controversial,’ and shunned by the search firms that hold the keys to new positions and promotions in the administrative world” (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 7). American universities are assuring the transmission of antisemitism to the next generation.

Demonizing Israel Goes Mainstream

In the decades after the Vietnam War, many New Left ideas took root among mainstream liberals. Antisemitism became inextricably intertwined with anti-Zionism. The two-millennia-old deicide accusation was secularized, with the Jewish state now charged with genocide against innocent Palestinian Arabs (Pollack, 2017). It has become fashionable on the left, and increasingly in the liberal mainstream, to demonize democratic Israel while ignoring or downplaying persecution and atrocities routinely committed by authoritarian regimes.

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