

The left's problem with Jews has a long and miserable history

Simon Schama

Anti-Israel demonstrations are in danger of morphing into anti-Semitism, writes Simon Schama



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uch of the student left has “some kind of problem with Jews”, said the bravely decent Alex Chalmers last week in his resignation statement as co-chair of the Oxford University Labour Club following a vote in favour of Israeli Apartheid Week.

Labour’s national student organisation is launching an inquiry but the “the problem with Jews” on the left is not going away. In January a meeting of the Kings College London Israel Society, gathered to hear from Ami Ayalon, a former head of Shin Bet, the Israeli domestic intelligence service, who now champions a [two-state solution](#), was violently interrupted by a chair-hurling, window-smashing crowd.

Last summer the Guardian columnist Owen Jones made [a courageous plea](#) for the left to confront this demon head on. Since then, however, criticism of Israeli government policies has mutated into a rejection of Israel’s right to exist; the Fatah position replaced by Hamas and Hizbollah eliminationism. More darkly, support in the diaspora for Israel’s right to survive is seen by the likes of Labour’s Gerald Kaufman, who accused the government of being influenced in its Middle Eastern policy by “[Jewish money](#)”, as some sort of Jewish conspiracy.

The charge that anti-Zionism is morphing into anti-Semitism is met with the retort that the former is being disingenuously conflated with the latter. But when George Galloway (in August 2014 during the last Gaza war) declared Bradford “an Israel-free zone”; when [French Jews](#) are unable to wear a yarmulke in public lest that

invite assault, when Holocaust Memorial day posters are defaced, it is evident that what we are dealing with is, in Professor Alan Johnson's accurate coinage, "[anti-semitic anti-Zionism](#)".

The fact is that the terrorists who slaughtered customers at the kosher supermarket in Paris did not ask their victims whether they were Israelis, much less supporters of Israeli government policies. They were murdered as Jews because in the attackers' poisoned minds all Jews are indivisibly incriminated as persecutors of the Palestinians and thus fair game for murder.

When the international [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement](#) singles out Israel as the perpetrator of the world's worst iniquities, notwithstanding its right of self defence, it is legitimate to ask why the left's wrath does not extend, for example, to Russia which rains down destruction on civilian populations in Syria?

"With the retreat of Marxist socialism, militant energies have needed somewhere to go"

Why is it somehow proper to boycott Israeli academics and cultural institutions, many of which are critical of government policy, but to remain passive in the face of Saudi Arabia's brutal punishment of anyone whose exercise of freedom of conscience can be judged sacrilegious? Why is the rage so conspicuously selective? Or, to put it another way, why is it so much easier to hate the Jews?

Growing up in London in the shadow of world war two my pals and I talked about who might be the bad guys, should evil come our way. We agreed the Jew-haters would not wear brown shirts and jackboots but would probably be like people on the bus. It is not the golf club nose-holders we have to worry about now; it is those who, in their indignation at the sufferings visited on the Palestinians, and their indifference to almost-daily stabbings in the streets of Israel, have discovered the excitement of saying the unspeakable, making hay with history, so Israel is the new reich, and a military attack on Gaza indistinguishable from the industrially processed incineration of millions.

Enter the historian. And history says this: anti-Semitism has not been caused by Zionism; it is precisely the other way round. Israel was caused by the centuries-long dehumanisation of the Jews. The blood libel which accused Jews of murdering Christian children in order to drain their blood for the baking of Passover matzo began in medieval England but never went away, reviving in 16th century Italy, 18th century Poland, 19th century Syria and Bohemia, and 20th century Russia.

In 1980s Syria, Mustafa Tlass, Hafez al-Assad's minister of defence, made [his contribution](#) with The Matzo of Zion, and last year the Israeli-Palestinian Islamist [Raed Salah](#), once invited to parliament by Jeremy Corbyn as an "honoured citizen", declared that Jews used blood for the dough of their "bread".

In the 19th century virtual vampirism was added to the antisemitic canon. And the left made its contribution to this refreshment of old poison. Demonstrating that you do not have to be gentile to be an anti-Semite, Karl Marx characterised Judaism as nothing more than the cult of Mammon, and declared that the world needed emancipating from the Jews. Others on the left — the social philosophers Bruno Bauer, Charles Fourier and Pierre Prudhon and the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin — echoed the message: blood sucking, whether the physical or the economic kind, was what Jews did.

For the Jews, the modern world turned out to be a lose-lose proposition. Once reviled for obstinate traditionalism; their insistence on keeping walled off from the rest (notwithstanding that it had been Christians who had done the walling) they were now attacked for integrating too well, speaking, dressing and working no differently but always with the aim of global domination.

What was a Jew to do? The communist Moses Hess, who had been Marx's editor and friend, became

persuaded, all too presciently, that the socialist revolution would do nothing to normalise Jewish existence, not least because so many socialists declared that emancipating the Jews had been a terrible mistake. Hess concluded that only self-determination could protect the Jews from the phobias of right and left alike. He became the first socialist Zionist.

But that was to inflict an entirely colonial and alien enterprise upon a Palestinian population, so the hostile narrative goes, who were penalised for the sins of Europe. That the Palestinians did become tragic casualties of a Judeo-Arab civil war over the country is indisputable, just as the 700,000 Jews who were violently uprooted from their homes in the Islamic world is equally undeniable. But to characterise the country in which the language, the religion and the cultural identity of the Jews was formed as purely a colonial anomaly is the product of the kind of historical innocence which is oblivious of, say, Jewish kabbalistic communities in Galilee in the 16th century or the substantial native Jewish majority in Jerusalem in the late 19th century.

None of this unbroken history of Jews and Judaism in Palestine is likely to do much to cool the heat of the anti-colonial narrative of the alien intruder, especially on the left. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the retreat of Marxist socialism around the world, militant energies have needed somewhere to go.

The battle against inequalities under liberal capitalism has mobilised some of that passion, but postcolonial guilt has fired up the war against its prize whipping boy, Zionism, like no other cause. Every such crusade needs a villain along with its banners and I wonder who that could possibly be?

The writer is an FT contributing editor. He will be taking part in a debate on February 27 during [Jewish Book Week](#).

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