

Habitual Bedfellows Antisemitism and Zionism in the Age of Trump

There has been an outpouring of surprise at how quickly major U.S. Zionist organizations have jumped to embrace Donald Trump's white supremacist advisors and announced appointees. The Zionist Organization of America has been the most vocal in their support, but the supposedly 'moderate' American Jewish Committee, the umbrella lobbying group AIPAC, and the Congress of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (which exclusively includes Zionist organizations) have actively refused to critique even Steven Bannon.

It may seem unusual for Jewish organizations to rush to align themselves with men who have built careers and election campaigns on reviving Protocols-style antisemitism - and indeed, that's been the tack that most coverage has taken. The history of the Zionist movement, however, makes it clear that this was to be expected. And some in the mainstream press have begun to acknowledge this, printing pieces like Omri Boehm's New York Times op-ed essay on the incompatibility of Zionism and liberal pluralism.

These alliances make it clear that this is the moment for Jews in the U.S. to make a crucial political choice: between joining the fight against white supremacy (including its specifically antisemitic face), or to cling to Zionism as a political project and source of identity.

This is not the moment, as some progressive Jews have been claiming, to put aside the political divisions between Zionists and those who pursue justice. This is the moment to name that division as clearly as we can, as if our lives and the lives of our comrades depend on it. Because they do.

We've been here before.

In March 1933, as soon as Hitler had been handed the Chancellorship by the 'national unity' presidential pick of the Social Democrats and Center Party and used his office to bring the Nazi party to power in the German Republic, an international boycott, divestment, and sanctions effort was launched. It began with local initiatives in Vilna, in New York, and elsewhere, and spread rapidly, with no central coordination. Within a month, it was effective enough to cut export-dependent Germany's trade surplus for the entire first quarter of the year in half. The overall volume of exports collapsed, dropping nearly 9% from May

to June alone. By August, the New York Times reported that its correspondent in Germany was hearing the same rhyme everywhere in the country: "If Hitler doesn't give us bread / We'll see to it he'll soon be dead."

Boycott efforts were led by Jewish organizations in most places, but gained massive support everywhere they spread. The boycott of Nazi Germany was seen as a part of the struggle against fascism in Europe, but also as part of the worldwide struggle against colonialism and white supremacy. This is particularly visible in the speed and thoroughness with which groups across North Africa (then split between British, French, Spanish, and Italian colonial occupation) joined the boycott - multi-ethnic Egypt, in particular, was quickly almost entirely closed to German imports.

In the first months of the boycott, it was quickly clear that the answers to two questions would determine its success: whether it would remain more or less spontaneous or become solidly coordinated, and whether it would take hold strongly in the U.S. Jewish communities and prominent individuals in the U.S. were key to both questions, as significant players in the international Jewish organizational world and as the obvious channel through which the boycott could be spread in this country. The signs pointed to swift success: within days of a formal boycott call by the Jewish War Veterans in mid-March, they had documented over \$2 million in lost German import orders in the U.S., and a push towards international coordination gained strength with a June call for a meeting in London to establish an overall boycott council.

At this critical moment, with the Nazi government on the verge of collapse, the Zionist movement, then united under the auspices of the Zionist Organization (now the World Zionist Organization), stepped in. Zionism, like Hitler's government, was facing defeat. Less than half a century after Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau launched the modern political movement, its growth was stalled. The European Jews they intended to re-forged into a new Hebrew nation in British-ruled Palestine were staying away in droves, preferring to struggle for justice (or at least equality) in the vibrant Jewish communities of Poland, Romania, Hungary, or the Soviet Union (where until Stalin's purges of the 1930s, Jewish cultures were strongly supported), or to emigrate to France, England, Argentina, or the U.S. Even in Germany, the Zionists' point of origin, they themselves estimated their numbers at below 2% of the (rather small) Jewish population.

In Palestine, the situation was no better. The British colonial government persisted in treating Zionist settlers on terms of equality with Palestinians; the local Jewish communities refused to see the advantages of European Jewish rule, preferring to make common cause with their Muslim and Christian neighbors; and the farms the Zionists had established were far from successful. Exports

were shaky; profits were thin at best. Hiring Palestinian workers was barred by the movement's racial-purity policies, European Jews would not work for poverty wages on failing farms, and the Arab Jews they imported from Yemen as cheap labor had proved disruptive, seeking equality with their white co-religionists.

In the Hitler government's crisis, the Zionist movement saw an opportunity. Representatives of the Zionist Organization approached the Nazi party in the spring of 1933 with an offer. They could, they said, destroy the boycott movement - prevent it from becoming internationally coordinated, and stop it from taking hold in the U.S. All they asked in return was that the Nazis allow them to use money confiscated from German Jews to buy bulldozers and other heavy equipment from German companies (owned, of course, by Nazi supporters); that the Nazis agree to barter more heavy equipment for a certain quota of oranges from the deeply unprofitable orchards they'd planted on land taken from Palestinian farmers; and that they be allowed to use more confiscated German Jewish money to meet the British colonial authorities' wealth requirements for emigrants they considered desirable to bring to their settlements in Palestine.

Needless to say, the Nazis jumped at this unsolicited offer. Both sides were thrilled with the deal, based as it was on their most central interests: for the Nazis, staying in power; for the Zionists, building up their presence in Palestine. The Zionists worked quickly, and succeeded in undermining the boycott before its impact could feed discontent during the cold German winter.

First, they played on rivalries between Jewish boycott leaders to prevent the coordination in June of the existing efforts, and to create lasting splits between key U.S. leaders. Then, through a series of late-night procedural maneuvers at the 18th Zionist Congress, David Ben-Gurion's Mapai (the Labor Zionist main faction in the Zionist Organization) first muzzled boycott advocates within the Zionist movement, then forced out the only faction that insisted on disputing the ethics of the deal with the Nazis (Vladimir Jabotinsky's Revisionists). Finally, using similar tactics, they changed the wording of the boycott resolution proposed at the Second World Jewish Conference to eliminate the creation of a coordinating body for the boycott, and pushed through a special decision to hand over "political affairs" - including the boycott - to the Zionist-sponsored Committee of Jewish Delegations. With the boycott's international coordination in the hands of the people committed to undermining it, and deep hostility among the main U.S. boycott supporters blocking its spread here, the Zionists' work was done by September 1933.

For their part, the Nazis honored the deal until 1938. Long enough to use money stolen from German Jews to pay their own supporters to export the equipment

the Zionists needed to make stolen Palestinian farmland bloom under new ownership. Long enough to subsidize the failing Zionist citrus industry until Franco's fascist invasion of Spain disrupted its main competition. Long enough to let a hand-picked 20,000 or so Jews who were considered assets to the Zionist project be allowed to enter Palestine.

This story, with all the details I've mentioned and many more, is told in Edwin Black's *The Transfer Agreement* - a book of history endorsed by the Anti-Defamation League's Abraham H. Foxman himself. The book, of course, is committed to the argument that all of this was a great idea - that saving the Nazi government of Germany from near-certain collapse was worth it because without it the Zionist movement would never have achieved its aim of a Jewish state in Palestine. As Black puts it, they had "to choose between fighting Hitler and building Palestine". The price goes uncounted: 15 to 20 million murdered in Nazi death camps (6 million Jews, the rest leftists, Roma & Sinti, disabled folks, queer and trans folks, Poles and other Slavs, and others); over 60 million killed in World War II; and over 15 million Palestinians killed, exiled, or living under military occupation by Zionist paramilitaries and armies since 1948.

We've been here again and again.

The deal that saved Nazi rule in Germany was not exceptional - neither a departure from the Zionist movement's ideological roots nor a departure from its general practice. Part of the ease with which the Zionists and Nazis dealt with each other has to do with their shared political roots. As the Israeli historian (and self-described "super-Zionist") Ze'ev Sternhell meticulously documents in his authoritative, if rather dry, *The Founding Myths of Israel*, modern political Zionism comes directly out of European "integral nationalist" thought, the strain of far-right politics which also gave rise to Italian Fascism, German Nazism, Spanish Falangism, and the other ideologies we group together as 'fascism'. White supremacy - with the particular nation being exalted standing as the example of the most perfect whiteness - is central to the entire family of integral nationalisms.

Zionism's affinity with the specifically German versions of this ideology, the one which most explicitly places whiteness at its center, goes back to its founders. Theodor Herzl repeatedly described his nationalist vision as one that would allow Jews to become true Germans: militaristic, racially conscious, hyper-masculine. He described the movement's goal in explicitly colonial and racial terms in his 1896 essay, "Zionism": creating "a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism." Max Nordau, Herzl's closest colleague, embraced the rhetoric and analysis of eugenics - the joint German/U.S. contribution to white supremacist ideology - applying its theory of

racial degeneration to Jews in very much the same terms as his Nazi counterparts. In his view, Jews had "degenerated in intellectual and physical misery" and could only be revived through a nationalist project modeled on the movement for German national unification.

These views are visible in one form or another in practically every document in the standard collection, Arthur Herzberg's *The Zionist Idea* (my source for these quotations). Even Zionist linguistic projects reflected this orientation. The re-engineering of Biblical Hebrew into the contemporary Israeli language both abandoned traditional Ashkenazi pronunciations as too "soft, weak" for their Germanic masculine ideals and jettisoned Sefardi and Mizrahi pronunciations as too close to Arabic and so not white enough to be allowable. Even the one wing of the Zionist movement that rejected the pact with the Nazis was firmly in line with this basic politics. Jabotinsky repeatedly cited Mussolini's Fascists as the inspiration for his Revisionist faction, and in 1934 established a Betar Naval Academy near Rome, under the auspices of the Italian Fascist military.

The Zionist movement's practice has reflected this ideology from the beginning to today, consistently siding with white supremacist movements and governments around the world whenever the opportunity arises, even when Jews were among their main targets. In the years when South Africa's Apartheid government, established by supporters of Nazi Germany, was under the strongest pressure from resistance movements and international anti-racist solidarity organizing, the Israeli government was its staunchest ally, selling arms to the white supremacist government and working to defeat the international boycott/divestment/sanctions campaign. This was directly counter to the desires of both the liberal 'mainstream' among South African Jews (who hoped for a gradual easing of Apartheid policies but would not risk their status as white by actively opposing them) and the minority of Jews who composed a large percentage of white militants involved in the liberation struggle. In the U.S., the same pattern held true: not one Zionist organization was willing to participate in the welcome celebrations that greeted Nelson Mandela on his visit to New York City - the largest Jewish city in the world - on his release from prison in 1990. Similarly, throughout the dictatorship of the 1970s and 80s in Argentina, the Israeli government armed the junta, even as it specifically targeted Argentinian Jews for disappearance and murder.

In the U.S., Zionists withdrew even their lukewarm support from the black-led Southern Freedom Movement when the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee condemned Israel's 1967 military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem alongside other efforts to avoid decolonization. Many thousands of Jews participated in the struggle against white supremacy in the U.S. during that period: overwhelmingly, they were non- or anti-Zionists. The reason Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is so often

mentioned as being among them is that he was nearly the only prominent 'mainstream' (meaning Zionist) Jewish figure to do so.

Throughout the 1980s, 90s, and 00s, U.S. Zionist organizations cozied up to some of the most overtly white supremacist, antisemitic, and misogynist figures of the Christian right: Ralph Reed, Jerry Falwell, Tom DeLay, and others. And most recently, of course, the Vision for Black Lives platform has been attacked by Zionists of all kinds, from supposed liberals at T'ruah to the 'moderate' Anti-Defamation League to the Zionist Organization of America, for insisting that the fight against white supremacy cannot be confined to the borders of one country - that justice looks the same in Gaza as it does in Ferguson. These are just the examples that come most quickly to mind; others abound.

And here we are again.

It's reassuring to see so many self-identified Zionists pushing back against their leaders' embrace of white supremacist, antisemitic politicians. It is partly a reflection of the slowdown of the U.S. Jewish turn to the right that the Zionist movement has created, and partly a sign of the very real threat resurgent white supremacy poses to U.S. Jews. But there is a very real question facing these would-be resisters: do you want freedom, or do you want Zionism?

There is no way to separate antisemitism from other forms of white supremacy. In the U.S., anti-black racism, islamophobia, antisemitism, xenophobic attacks on Latinxs and Asians, anti-tziganism, and the ongoing genocide of indigenous peoples are all integrally interwoven. And that unbroken fabric crosses borders. In Bulgaria, to give an example from my own experience, young fascists targeting their Turkish neighbors or Syrian refugees are as likely to wear an English-language "White Power" t-shirt as a Nazi swastika or the local cross-and-circle nationalist emblem, showing their clear understanding that their xenophobia and hatred of Muslims are tied to anti-blackness, antisemitism, and anti-tziganism. White supremacy is global. If we want to defeat it, we cannot choose to ignore one or another part, one or another place.

And Zionism has shown where it stands very clearly, through its practice over the last 119 years as well as its theory. U.S. Jews are faced with a great opportunity to abandon the Zionist fantasy that safety for Jews can come through an alliance with white supremacy, and to choose the path that leads to freedom for ourselves and for all those in the gunsights of the white supremacists soon to take power in this country.

For those ready to take the step of actually opposing white supremacy: Remember that you are new to this path. Your Zionist past will make people

suspicious - and that suspicion is justified by all the history mentioned above, and more. Don't deny your past, outgrow it. Listen and learn; demonstrate your commitment to justice with actions, not words, with day-to-day practical support, not heroics.

For those of us already in the fight: Remember that we don't have all the answers. Judge new comrades by their actions, not their command of jargon. Attend to their histories and transformations. Welcome them with day to day practical support, not dismissive rhetoric or condescension.

And for all of us: Remember that justice is indivisible. That for some hours on some days, the low bar of "not down with actual Nazis" is all we need - but that being opposed to white supremacy "except for..." is ultimately no opposition at all. Work with anyone you can, on some things, but do not mistake momentary alignments for actual solidarity or lasting comradeship. And in Assata Shakur's words: Love each other and protect each other.