

Contemporary Antisemitism¹

Introduction²

Far right, Nazi style antisemitism never died, but in democratic states it was pushed to the margins of society and became widely discredited as absurd and disgraceful. In the post-communist states of Russia and Eastern Europe the taboo was not so strong and far right antisemitic movements after the fall of communism appealed to some as plausible and vibrant.

The re-emergence of *populism* in the mature democracies in the twenty-first century has offered hope to far right antisemitic thinking of a route back into the mainstream. *Populism* splits us into ‘the people’ and the ‘enemy of the people’. ‘The people’ is an *idea*, in contrast to the *materiality* of diverse, flesh and blood actual human beings. The liberal democratic state develops ways in which those actual people, with different interests, can live together. But *populism* says that the unity and purity of ‘the people’ is corrupted by the dishonest and self-serving claims of a hidden liberal ‘elite’, which secretly controls all the institutions of democratic society. Founded on conspiracy fantasy, populist movements are potentially vulnerable to antisemitic takeover. So far, mainstream *populism* has generally resisted the temptation of antisemitism. It is sometimes more seduced by a certain type of *philosemitism* that imagines Israel as a white, Islamophobic, civilized, colonial enclave in the Middle East, and so as a model to follow. That imaginary Israel is similar to the Israel that is imagined by the antizionist left; what they disagree about is whether Israel should be regarded as symbolic of all evil or a virtuous model to follow.

Within a few months of the defeat of German Nazism in 1945, the newly formed Arab League Council declared the Arab boycott of the nascent Jewish state in Palestine: all Arab ‘institutions, organizations, merchants, commission agents and individuals’ were called upon ‘to refuse to deal in, distribute, or consume Zionist products or manufactured goods’.³ Intertwined with Arab nationalist and Ba’athist hostility to the Jewish ‘liferaft state’⁴, but also

¹ This piece is dedicated to Pete Newbon, a friend, a colleague, and a fighter against antisemitism who died, tragically and suddenly, during the time I was writing it - DH.

² This piece draws upon research that I have previously published, including David Hirsh and Hilary Miller, “Durban antizionism: its sources, its impacts and its relation to older anti-Jewish ideologies,” *Journal of Contemporary antisemitism* 5.1 [forthcoming, 2022]; David Hirsh and Hilary Miller. “The UN Durban Antiracist Process: Projecting Racism onto Israel,” *Jewish Journal*, September 19, 2021, as at <https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/340699/the-un-durban-antiracist-process-projecting-racism-onto-israel>, last accessed 22 February 2022; and David Hirsh, “How raising the issue of antisemitism puts you outside the community of the progressive: The Livingstone Formulation” in Eunice G. Pollack, ed., *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism: Past & Present* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), also available online at <https://engageonline.wordpress.com/2016/04/29/the-livingstone-formulation-david-hirsh-2/>, last accessed 18 September 2021.

³ Bard, M. ‘The Arab boycott’. 2007. Jewish Virtual Library. Available: <http://dev.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/cgi-bin/itemPrintMode.pl?Id=11241> (accessed 17 October 2016).

⁴ Deutscher, I. *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, London: Oxford University Press. 1968.

in deadly competition with Arab secular nationalism, were the *Islamist* political movements. These movements, both secular and religious, were in conflict with Jewish armed forces, but that fact by itself is not enough to explain the formidable quantity of antisemitism or the ideologically sharp quality of it. *Arab nationalism* and *Islamism* had been ideologically fueled by the twentieth century totalitarian movements of Stalinism and Nazism. A key and powerful leader of the Arabs in Palestine, the Mufti of Jerusalem had spent the War in Berlin broadcasting Nazi propaganda to the Middle East in Arabic, which the evidence shows was influential in many parts of the Arabic-speaking world.⁵ Beginning in the mid-1950s, the *Arab League* boycott of Israel received support from the Soviet Union. Soviet material support for and political influence on the Arab states increased throughout the 1960s, becoming a Soviet priority after 1967.

The focus of this chapter is on the variant of twenty-first century antisemitism that has become widely, although not universally, accepted among people who think of themselves as egalitarian, liberal and left wing. Antizionism claims to be a respectable worldview. It thinks of itself as being hostile to antisemitism, but when it treats the Jewish state as central to all that is bad in the world, or as symbolic of it, then it positions itself firmly in an antisemitic tradition.

Antisemitism after the Holocaust

The experience of the Holocaust did not put an end to antisemitism. Indeed, there were widespread outbreaks of antisemitic violence in Europe in the years immediately following the defeat of Nazism. In July 1946 perhaps the most serious and best-known incident happened in Kielce in Poland, when at least 42 Jews were murdered by a mob of soldiers, police and civilians. A nine-year-old boy had run away from home and when he returned, afraid to admit it, said he had been kidnapped by *the Jews*. A standard blood libel pogrom was the response.

The Communist rulers in Eastern Europe and Russia made much use of rhetoric about the evils of Nazism but they were careful to avoid talking about antisemitism or about the Holocaust. For example the Nazis murdered more than 33,000 Jews on 29 and 30 September 1941 at a ravine called Babyn Yar in Kyiv, in Ukraine. Tens of thousands more people were murdered there during the Nazi occupation, mainly the Jews of Kiyv. No monument was erected there by the Soviet authorities until 1976. Finally, under pressure, a monument to the memory of “Soviet civilians and Red Army soldiers and officers - prisoners of war - who were shot at Babi Yar by the German occupiers”⁶ was erected there. There was no specific

⁵ Herf, J. *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) and Küntzel, M. *National socialism and anti-semitism in the Arab world*. (Halle Saale: Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt, 2005)

⁶ “Commemoration of the Victims of Babi Yar.” *Yadvashem.org*, 2022. <https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/learning-environment/babi-yar/historical-background4.html>. [accessed 24 March 2022].

public memory of the Holocaust or of the Jewish communities in the USSR that were wiped out.

Sometimes there is an expectation that people should have learned lessons from the Holocaust and sometimes Jews in particular are criticized for having failed to be improved by the memory and experience of the Holocaust. When Desmond Tutu, a Christian veteran of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa considered injustices suffered by Palestinians at the hands of Israel, he asked his “Jewish sisters and brothers” whether they had “forgotten their humiliation” at the hands of the Nazis.⁷ This was surely rhetorical, since Tutu actually thought that the problem with Israel was that it could *not* forget, or crucially forgive, the Nazis.

But the Holocaust was not a classroom, nor were the lessons that people did learn from it always those that observers like Tutu might have wanted them to learn. Many Jews, for example, learned that they might have been better off relying on their own collective capacity for self-defense than on the guarantees offered to them by the universalist principles of human equality or the Christian principles of universal love.

After the Holocaust, antisemitic thinking had to find ways of positioning itself anew in relation to memories and understandings of the Holocaust. *Holocaust denial* is conspiracy fantasy that accuses Jews collectively of having fabricated the Holocaust in order to benefit from sympathy and to increase their own power.⁸ *Holocaust distortion* minimizes or normalizes the Holocaust by treating it as just one incidence of humanity’s routine cruelty. Jews who talk about the Holocaust frequently run the risk of being made to appear selfishly unconcerned about other injustice.⁹ *Holocaust inversion* transforms Jews, who were victims of Nazism, into Nazi-style victimizers of Palestinians. This either trivializes the Nazi crimes or it unjustly accuses Israelis of being no different from those who herded many of their families into gas chambers.¹⁰ *Secondary antisemitism*, in German speaking contexts particularly, is caused by feelings of guilt for the Holocaust. It positions Jews as having been, in the end, empowered by it and non-Jews as forever being forced to apologize for it.¹¹ It is encapsulated in the dry observation that “[t]he Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz.”¹² *Holocaust universalization* reduces the material crime committed specifically by antisemites against Jews to an effect of inhuman and abstract social structures. It delegitimizes concern about the particularities of antisemitism and the specific impacts of the *Shoah* on Jews, presenting Jews as being, due to their narcissism and selfishness,

⁷ Tutu, Desmond. “Apartheid in the Holy Land.” *The Guardian*. *The Guardian*, April 29, 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/29/comment>. [accessed 06/11/2021]

⁸ Lipstadt, Deborah E., and Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, *Denying the Holocaust: the Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (London: Penguin/Plume, 1994)

⁹ IHRA. (2020). What is Holocaust Distortion and why is it a problem? [online] Available at: <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/news-archive/what-holocaust-distortion-and-why-it-problem> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2021].

¹⁰ Klaff, Lesley (2019). Word crimes: reclaiming the language of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Holocaust inversion. *Israel studies*, 24 (2), 73-90.

¹¹ Stogner, Karin (2018), *Critical Sociology*. Vol. 44(4-5) 719–732

¹² Broder, H. *Der Ewige Antisemit*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag 1986.

unconcerned by the universal aspects of their suffering. It draws upon an antisemitic understanding of the notion of Jews as the “chosen people”, making them appear to be overly concerned about themselves.¹³

It is true that there is a broad consensus against Nazi antisemitism. Many countries and institutions formally remember the crimes of the Nazis, and their victims, by means of museums, memorials and annual rituals such as Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD). There is a commitment to educating people about the dangers of that kind of antisemitism. Much HMD commemoration is thought-provoking and informative. It makes appropriate connections and analogies between the *Shoah* and other instances of genocide and crimes against humanity. But sometimes the official rituals of remembrance are undermined by an empty universalism that is reluctant to remember the specifics of antisemitism and its Jewish victims, but focuses almost entirely on the Holocaust as an abstract lesson in the evils of unjust discrimination in general.

Holocaust Memorial Day can also be misused by some people as an opportunity to mobilize the memory of the Holocaust against the Jews. For example when an activist in London shouted at a rabbi to include Gaza in the list of genocides for which he was lighting a candle, even though there has never been genocide in Gaza;¹⁴ when the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign hosted a reading of Jim Allen’s play *Perdition*, which tried to blame Zionist collaboration with the Nazis for the efficiency of the genocide against the Jews;¹⁵ when a city in Sweden cancelled its planned torchlight procession due to an intensification of conflict in Gaza;¹⁶ when the Muslim Council of Britain boycotted HMD ‘in protest at the Israeli offensive in Gaza’.¹⁷ Or when an MP wrote that he was ‘saddened that the Jews ... could within a few years of liberation from the death camps be inflicting atrocities on Palestinians’.¹⁸

Zionism

There is much debate about the borders between antizionism and antisemitism. When does antizionism or hostility to Israel become antisemitic? But increasingly, scholars are questioning the premise of that debate. It is not the case that innocent or constructive

¹³ Seymour, David (2019) Ch 1 ‘Holocaust Memory: Between Universal and Particular’, in David Seymour and Mercedes Camino (eds) *The Holocaust in the Twenty-First Century: Contesting/Contested Memories*. London: Routledge

¹⁴ Harris, M. (2011) ‘Holocaust memorial day in Lewisham’, BobFromBrockley. Available: <http://brockley.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/holocaust-memoralday-in-lewisham.html> (accessed 8 October 2016).

¹⁵ Rich, Dave. “The Left and the Holocaust – David Rich – Engage Journal Issue 4 – February 2007.” Engage. Engage, November 4, 2015. <https://engageonline.wordpress.com/2015/11/04/the-left-and-the-holocaust-david-rich-engage-journal-issue-4-february-2007/>.

¹⁶ Geras, Norman. “Forgetting the Holocaust.” normblog, 2013. <https://normblog.typepad.com/normblog/2009/01/forgetting-the-holocaust.html>.

¹⁷ Mulholland, Hélène. “Muslim Council of Britain Boycotts Holocaust Memorial Day.” *the Guardian*. The Guardian, January 26, 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/jan/26/5>.

¹⁸ Quinn, Ben. “Lib Dem MP David Ward Defends Remarks about Israel.” *the Guardian*. The Guardian, January 25, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jan/25/lib-dem-david-ward-israel>.

‘criticism of Israel’ becomes antisemitic when it goes too far or becomes too strong. Antisemitism is qualitatively a different kind of thing to criticism of this or that aspect of Israeli policy or culture. And antizionism, a whole ‘-ism’, a worldview, is similarly different from a critical engagement with Israel; it is not just criticism gone too far or expressed too harshly.

It has become standard to write the word ‘antisemitism’ without the hyphen because there is no ‘Semitism’ that the antisemite opposes. The notion of ‘the Jews,’ against which antisemitism defines its worldview, is not found in the world but in the shared imaginations of antisemites. Some scholars are dropping the hyphen in ‘anti-Zionism’ too, for the same reason. The ‘Zionism’ against which antizionism defines its ideology is also something conjured from the anti-Jewish imagination. The ‘Zionism’ imagined into existence by antizionism is colonialism, apartheid, racism, like Nazism, the surveillance state, and everything else that good people oppose.

So the ‘Zionism’ that Jews are accused by antizionists of embracing is profoundly different to the Zionism that Jews themselves actually embrace. Jews define their own Zionism, or their own relationship to Israel, in many different ways but essentially none of them define their own Zionism as racism. That is not how Zionists, even in their huge diversity, define, or have ever defined, Zionism.

For some, Zionism was a radical political response to antisemitism in the Middle East and in Europe; a movement inspired by other 19th century national and 20th century anti-colonial movements, a movement for Jewish self-determination, a movement to build a Jewish capacity for self-defence against antisemitism. For them, Zionism was a national liberation movement.

For some, Zionism describes a profound connection to the state of Israel as it exists today; not particularly to what it says or does, but to what it is; to its reality as a Jewish project of survival and rebirth; to its existence and its intention to exist into the future.

Most Jews today do not live where their families lived a hundred years ago; most families did not choose to move but were driven out. Most of them did not choose where to go, they went where they could. Jews outside Israel are connected to Jews inside Israel. Their families might have ended up there, and some of their family generally did.

For some, Zionism is in part a religious and a mystical yearning. The Torah, the Jewish story that is read weekly and repeated annually in synagogues is set in and around the land of Israel. The places where those stories happened exist. The stories of slavery and liberation, exile and homecoming, the stories of who Jews were, and who they were becoming, relate to Israel.

For many Israelis, their Zionism is simply the citizenship of the country in which they were born and in which they live. Israel is a nation state, not an idea and not a movement. It just

exists. It is not right or wrong. It does good things and it does bad things. Their great grandparents were Zionists, they sat around camp fires learning Hebrew and planning to go to Israel, but their descendants are just citizens of a state.

Some Zionists are highly critical of recent governments of Israel; some have opposed the settlement projects in the West Bank with passion; some understand the Jewish settlements as unjust and unwise and as disruptive of the possibility of Israel living at peace with its neighbours; and some feel that the settlements constitute a betrayal of the core democratic values of their Zionism.

Others feel differently. For example some, descended from Jewish families who lived for many centuries in Hebron before they were driven out by murder and terror, believe they have a right to live there again. Some believe that they should act on that right. Some are supportive of the government's fierce and uncompromising defense of the Jewish minority in the Middle East, which has survived three wars of annihilation and which keeps an eye on the armed antisemitic movements in neighboring territories.

Many Jews warm to some or all of these Zionisms.

Some feel that Zionism is really a self-liberation movement for Jews, like feminism is a self-liberation movement for women. Others feel that non Jewish people can be Zionist, like men can be feminist. Some kinds of non-Jewish Zionism are motivated by an impulse to ally with Jewish survival and self-defense; others are founded on conceptions of Jews and of Israel that some Jews will find quite hostile.

There is racist Zionism and there is racism in Israel. Antizionism takes one extreme thread of Zionism and treats it as the whole. The existence of racist Zionism is not what makes Zionism unique, it is what makes it like every other nationalist movement on earth.

Antizionism

Hannah Arendt could see why Jews often experience antisemitism in the present as little more than a continuation of antisemitism from the past, as just another episode of a single timeless hatred. But she worried that if we do not think seriously about what is specific to each anti-Jewish movement and ideology then something important for our understanding may be lost. The assumption that antisemitism is an ever-present fact of human history makes it more difficult for us to think about human agency. Anti-Jewish ideas and movements reflect, in grotesquely distorted ways, the social and political relations of their times. Antisemitism is functional for each generation of antisemites, in particular ways and in specific contexts. They embrace it and espouse it because it helps them to further their own interests. They have needs that they want antisemitism to fulfil. Actual human beings, in specific times and places, reach for the old fragments and tropes of previous anti-Jewish movements, which have accumulated great emotional resonance, and they build new ideologies out of them, for their own purposes in their own times.

David Seymour argues that “antizionism must be understood, like the antisemitism that came before it, as an ideology”.¹⁹ He draws on Robert Fine and Philip Spencer’s argument about the so-called ‘Jewish Question’.²⁰ They show how it was never a question about what Jews do, or do not do, that makes it difficult for them to be emancipated as ordinary citizens. For them, the Jewish Question was always in fact a question about antisemites. Classically, it was an antisemitic reaction to Jewish emancipation, holding Jews responsible, in one way or another, for their own exclusion. So, by analogy, David Seymour argues that antizionism is a response to Jewish national self-determination, but posed as a new ‘Jewish Question’ that asks: ‘what is it that Israel does that sets it apart, that makes it unique, that makes it incapable of ‘assimilating’ in the community of nations?’ The answer is that Israel does not do anything to cause its own exclusion, or to make it intelligible.

If there is not one antisemitism, but many distinct anti-Jewish movements, then antizionism, argues Seymour is an ideology that really matured in the twenty-first century. It was nurtured deliberately by twenty-first century people to fulfill twenty-first century functions that related to twenty-first century society. Based on elements of truth, exaggeration and invention, and made plausible by half visible fragments of older antisemitisms, antizionism was attractive because it offered an emotionally potent way of imagining and communicating all that which ‘good people’ oppose and which they have difficulty facing rationally. As twentieth century totalitarian antisemitism portrayed the ‘enemy of the people’ as having a Jewish face, so too does antizionism portray racism, and in the end oppression itself, universally, as having an Israeli face.²¹

Not all criticism of or hostility to Israel or Zionism is antisemitic (or antizionist), but some of it is. It may be antisemitic if it draws upon or mirrors familiar antisemitic tropes, images or stereotypes; it may be antisemitic if it is disproportionately focused on Israel, in its volume or intensity; it may be antisemitic if it treats Israel as a unique evil in the world, or if it teaches people to think of Israel as demonic. It may be antisemitic if it is constructed in such a way as to bait Jews. It may be antisemitic if it portrays Jews as being like Nazis. It may be antisemitic if it teaches people to embrace an antisemitic view of the world. It may be antisemitic if it treats Israel as central to all that is bad in the world, or if it treats Israeli evil as symbolic of evil universally. It may be antisemitic if it constructs antizionism as an ideology or a worldview that makes Israel into what Hannah Arendt called the ‘key to history, the thing that needs to be understood to make sense of everything else.

¹⁹ David Seymour, ‘Continuity and Discontinuity: From Antisemitism to Antizionism and the Reconfiguration of the Jewish Question,’ *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism* 2, no. 2, : 11-24, 2019, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.26613/jca/2.2.30/html?fbclid=IwAR3_hRZpON8dozf8yUvoZdTVYdylPDiKfH-ah8CXH-9cznSpIoEFNp5eTi8 [accessed 17 October 2021]

²⁰ Robert Fine and Philip Spencer, *Antisemitism and the Left: On the Return of the Jewish Question* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017)

²¹ Hirsh, David and Hilary Miller. 2022. Durban antizionism: its sources, its impacts and its relation to older anti-Jewish ideologies. *Journal of Contemporary antisemitism* 5.1[forthcoming]

While explicit Nazi antisemitism has been marginal since the Holocaust, a kind of antisemitism that is articulated in language about the evils of Israel or Zionism, an antisemitism which is often not explicitly or obviously anti-Jewish, has been spreading. We are familiar with indirect, institutional, cultural or discursive racism in other contexts. Racism is not always expressed as an open hatred but often as institutional racism, in which every day norms, practices, cultures and common-sense notions tend to lead to racist outcomes or exclusions, even when nobody is consciously motivated by racist feelings. Discursive racism is where the stories and meanings that people share and by which they understand the world, carry with them unacknowledged racist assumptions, emotions and stereotypes that are not necessarily easy for everybody to identify and so avoid.

Antisemitism is similarly a family of objective social phenomena that are external to the subjective thoughts and feelings of any one person. It is a series of social structures of exclusion, which alienate Jews from spaces where they previously felt they had the right to be at home. Antisemitism is about what people say and what they do, it is not a moral judgment on their inner essence. It is not enough for a person to say or do something antisemitic and then to protest that it could not possibly be considered antisemitic because it was not the result of a personal and internal antisemitic motivation or disposition.

Antizionism is based on what Marxists used to call an 'idealist' foundation. Marxists generally find it important to emphasize that external and material reality shapes the ideas inside people's heads and the cultural phenomena that exist as shared ideas and feelings. You would expect, therefore, that Marxists would understand the idea of Zionism to be significantly determined by the material reality that gave rise to it. One might think, for example, that antisemitism in Europe, in Russia and across the Middle East might be a reason that some Jews came to aspire to self-determination and the capacity to defend themselves. One might think that Zionism was a social movement, not just an idea. One might think that the State of Israel as it exists today is the result of the global material factors that revolutionized Jewish life in the twentieth century; such as the Holocaust; such as the events that drove Jews out of the newly formed 'Arab' states.

But antizionism tends to do the opposite. It tends to explain what happens in Israel as the result of ideas inside the heads of Zionists. And since Zionism is, they say, an inherently racist idea, then the Israel that was constructed by this idea is an inherently racist reality. Antizionism understands Israel as the earthly manifestation of Herzl's putatively racist idea, rather than as the historical product of the material convulsions of history since the late 19th century, especially as they have related to Jewish life. Antizionism is *essentialist*; it understands everything that happens in Israel as though it was caused by Israel's putative inner *essence*.

Antizionism adds a methodological double standard to the more usually noticed double standards by which it judges Israel. Antizionism imposes its own 'idealist' conception of Zionism, constructed as essentially racist, onto the actually-existing and diverse political

identities of Jewish women and men. This imposition is crudely intrusive and it does not accurately reflect the complex material realities of lived Jewish political cultures.

The Durban World Conference against Racism (WCAR), 2001

The Durban conference was held six years after the fall of apartheid, which was the racist system in South Africa that designated every person's 'race' in a pseudo-legal way. It should have been a celebration of the victory in that battle, and a global deliberation on progressing the war against racism. But at Durban there was a formidable campaign to replace apartheid with Zionism as the next symbolic target of the anti-racist movement. At Durban, antisemitism surged back into the universe of the possible for a cohort of young human rights activists and intellectuals who would go on to shape the thinking of a generation. The centering of Israel as the universal symbol of racism threatened a principle that had seemed obvious since Nazism: that opposition to antisemitism and opposition to racism were aspects of the same struggle.

At Durban, there was an official UN intergovernmental conference, a civil society forum that filled a cricket stadium, and a youth summit. And there were thousands of protesters against Zionism around the venues and dominating the Indian Ocean sea front. Joëlle Fiss wrote in her 'Durban Diary':

Wherever you turn, Israel is compared to Nazi Germany. Posters associate Israel with the former South African regime and its apartheid policies. Everywhere, there are images of suffering Palestinian children. Arab women display photos of their "martyred" husbands, killed during the *Second Intifada*. The stand of the *Arab Lawyers Union* is selling *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Caricatures are hung up. One of them depicts a rabbi with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* under his arm and an Israeli army cap on his head. Another poster describes how the Jews make their bread: with the blood of Muslims.²²

With hindsight, the Durban Conference, at the beginning of September 2001, might be seen as one element of a highly symbolic moment, which heralded new thinking about antisemitism at the birth of the new century.

During the late 1980s and the 90s there was a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, based on mutual recognition and on sovereign independence for both. The view that this could, and probably would, succeed dominated democratic opinion around the world, but the process was under pressure from a minority of Israeli and Palestinian opponents. Hamas organized opposition to the PLO bid for peace. Its key strategy was to murder Israelis in the hope of disrupting the consensus for peace by pushing opinion within each nation back to more belligerent national consensuses. An assassin from the Israeli far-

²² Fiss, Joëlle. "The Durban Diaries." AJC, September 17, 2021. <https://www.ajc.org/news/the-durban-diaries-with-an-introduction-by-ajcs-simone-rodan-benzaquen> [accessed 18 October 2021]

right murdered Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister in 1994, calling him a traitor. The *Camp David* peace summit collapsed in July 2000, the *Second Intifada* erupted in September and the *Taba Summit* failed in January 2001.

Durban took place in the first week of September 2001. The 9/11 attacks in the USA happened the following week. The campaign for an academic boycott of Israel emerged the following year in Britain and it was accepted as legitimate within the academic trade unions there. The campaign to boycott Israel and to designate it as ‘apartheid’, an analogy which also dated back to the Soviet propaganda of the 1970s, grew in strength and legitimacy in left and liberal circles around the world over the following years.²³

During the peace process in the late 1980s and 1990s, the intensifying focus on Israel as a key symbol of all that was bad in the world had been in remission, but at Durban the 1970s “Zionism=Racism” culture returned. The proposal to agree that Zionism was the key symbolic form of racism in the world after the fall of apartheid offered unity across different movements and milieus: post-colonialism, human rights and humanitarian law; the women’s movement, anti-racism, much of the global left and NGOs; even oppressive governments if they positioned themselves as anti-imperialist or ‘Islamic’. Activists, diplomats, and UN personnel at Durban were not passively infected by this antizionist ideology, they chose actively to embrace it or to tolerate it. Delegates brought this worldview home to where they lived and to the spheres in which they operated intellectually and politically. They worked to make Durban antizionism into the radical common sense of the twenty-first century. There were people at the conference and in anti-hegemonic spaces around the world who understood the dangers of a unity built around opposition to a universal Jewish threat, but they found themselves on the defensive against a self-confident, formidable and ostensibly coherent ideology or worldview.

In truth, Israel’s policies do not resemble apartheid. The existence of Israel is not a desperate attempt to prolong colonial rule but a nation-state built in their ancestral homeland by Jews who could not rely on the international community to guarantee their rights. Israel had always been ready to make peace, it was ready to negotiate over land, but it never considered negotiating itself out of existence. Israel was not a racist elite clinging to privilege like the one in South Africa, but rather an instrument of Jewish renewal and a survivor of three attempts by the Arab League states to eradicate it. After it had lost its dismal Cold War function, apartheid in South Africa had turned out to be surprisingly fragile. This is not to say that it had not been violent, unjust, and cruel during the five decades of its rule in South Africa. Rather, it had been an obsolete vestige of a bygone age and those who benefited from it were forced by circumstance to consent to its downfall.

Israel is not fragile in that way, it did not collapse after the Cold War and Israelis will not consent to the dismantling of their state. The conflict between Israel and its neighbors is

²³ Tabarovsky, Izabella. “Demonization Blueprints: Soviet Conspiracist Antizionism in Contemporary Leftwing Discourse.” *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism (JCA)* 5(1), 2022.

about national self-determination, not racism. The *Palestinian Authority* wants a state and Hamas wants to drive out the Jews; neither, like the ANC, actually treats the Palestinian struggle as one for democracy and equal citizenship.

One of the founding ideals of a significant tradition of left-wing Zionism was that it would rely on Jewish labor, not on exploiting the labor of others. As things actually developed, the twenty per cent Arab minority in Israel does in fact participate in the economy. There is racism against this minority, but it is fundamentally the kind of racism that exists in every democratic state, it is not some kind of unique essence of the Israel, or some kind of apartheid. There are Arab judges, police, doctors, academics, lawyers and politicians, as well as Arab farmers, craftsmen, laborers, taxi drivers and factory workers.

Yet the apartheid analogy, conceived as an element of antisemitic Soviet propaganda, and revitalized at Durban, became a kind of left wing common sense in the twenty-first century. The political strategies of boycott and of the eradication of Israel flow naturally from the Orwellian apartheid designation.

By the time of the Israel-Hamas conflict of May 2021, academics and student activists across the world were signing declarations affirming the idea that Israel was an apartheid state that must be boycotted and destroyed, as being foundational both to their scholarship and to their morality. These statements have begun to function as loyalty tests for Jews in communities that make membership conditional on their endorsement. Demonstrating one's legitimacy by contrasting oneself to a particular Jewish evil is an antisemitic practice that has been re-animated by self-defined 'antiracists' in the twenty-first century.

Jews, Race color and intersectionality

Durban antizionism situated Palestinians as part of the global non-white majority that was oppressed by racism and colonialism, and it designated Israelis as white and as part of a rational global system of domination. This set up an assumption that Jews, at least those who refuse to identify as 'antizionist', are also imbued with 'whiteness' and they are on the side of the oppressors.

In general, this binary framework of understanding tends to replace old over-simplified essentialisms with what sometimes turns out to be new over-simplified essentialism. In particular it does not relate sensitively to histories of ambivalence about Jews. One of the key antisemitic charges that has been made against Jews in different forms over many centuries, is that they are inordinately powerful and that they oppress ordinary people. They achieve this, according to antisemitic traditions, with their financial muscle and their conspiratorial control of states, and of human minds via publishing, Hollywood and "the media," etc.

In the context of Durban's reanimation of "Zionism=Racism," and also in the American context of "race" being thought of in terms of "color," the designation of Jews as white, and therefore "privileged," is open to a slippage that can borrow from the idea that Jews are

powerful. From there, the designation of “Zionist Jews” as “white supremacist” can sometimes flow easily.

“Race” is not skin color, or nose shape, or hair curliness. “Race” is a social process that constructs differences between human beings and endows them with significance. Race creates a commonsense understanding that those differences are founded on physical difference, but they are not. In the case of Jews, the Nazis had to work hard to construct a Jewish “race” onto such a diverse collectivity. “Race” is a tacit agreement to think of people as being inferior, as threatening, as an infestation or an infection, on that basis. It is a structure of power created and sustained by social processes.

One particular contemporary understanding of race is more specific. It focuses on the notion of race that emerged with European colonialism. Colonialism defined an idea of European whiteness as a standard for humanity and everybody who was “less white” as being inferior. This was more a justification of colonization and slavery than a cause. The argument made by many contemporary theorists of race is that this particular racism was at the heart of a global power structure that overwhelmed every other in significance. This also underlies the whole machine of domination that exists today, whether it is called “capitalism,” “modernity,” or “imperialism.”

According to this kind of “critical race theory,” the Rwandan genocide, for example, in which one group that would be defined as “black” murdered 800,000 members of another that would be defined as “black,” would not be understood as a result of racism. Indeed, within that framework, the idea that colonialism was responsible for the Tutsi-Hutu divide in the first place may even come to weigh more heavily than the actual agency of those who embraced the notion that Tutsi were ‘cockroaches’ and who carried out the mass killing.

Within this framework, some Jews are designated as “black” and other Jews as “white.” Some Jews can pass as white when a racist is not aware of who they are, doesn’t know their name and doesn’t see their kippa. Of course, Nazism defined Jews not only as not-white, but as the most dangerous kind not-white.

For sure there is “color” racism amongst Jewish communities, but there is also some resentment at the splitting of Jews, who are collectively subjected to antisemitism, into different “races.” The kind of anti-racism that was hegemonic at Durban defines Jews as “white” and it tends to exclude Jews from coalitions of people who are subjected to racism and who join together to oppose it.

Whereas rightwing antisemitism wants to warn white people that Jews intend to ‘replace’ them with non-white people, left wing antisemitism wants to warn non-white people that Jews intend to replace them with white colonists.

Sometimes the specificities of antisemitism are downplayed by universalizing it into a more global notion of racism. Karin Stögner argues that antisemitism puts Jews outside of all of the

ordinary categories of social life, not only race but also class, nation and gender. And she argues that racism does not ‘run along the color line’ but also that an antiracism that does, is itself inadequate.²⁴

The IHRA definition of antisemitism

Following the antisemitism that Jewish delegates had witnessed and experienced at Durban, there was a renewed effort by a number of Jewish NGOs to have their understanding of antisemitism, which was different to that which dominated at Durban, properly articulated and heard. The European Union sought to develop a working definition of antisemitism in 2003 and a text was put together for it in consultation with those Jewish NGOs. This was known as the EUMC working definition of antisemitism. (The EUMC was the The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia). The EUMC definition remained highly contested even within the EU and the EUMC, and within the EUMC’s successor body, the Fundamental Rights Agency.

In 2016, *The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance* (IHRA) modified the EUMC text and adopted it as the IHRA working definition of antisemitism. The IHRA definition has now been adopted by many institutions across the world, including national governments, local, regional and city governments, sports clubs and associations and universities. The IHRA definition is championed by most Jewish communal institutions.

The controversial aspect of the IHRA definition is that although it does not say so explicitly, it functions to affirm that antizionist antisemitism exists, and is significant. The definition offers examples of the ways in which it typically appears and it insists that any judgment about what is antisemitic should be made according to context. It also explicitly protects critics of Israeli policies, culture and society, saying: ‘criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic’.

Antizionists who say that antizionism is completely distinct from antisemitism, or that antizionist antisemitism is not significant, or that it is exaggerated or weaponized by Zionists for political reasons, often militantly oppose the IHRA working definition.

The Livingstone Formulation

It is a widely accepted principle that if somebody says that they have experienced racism then they should be taken seriously. Anybody, but especially an institution that wants to maintain a culture that is vigilant about racism, should begin by listening to what the person says, try

²⁴ Stögner, Karin. “Intersectionality and Antisemitism – a New Approach.” Fathom, 2020. <https://fathomjournal.org/intersectionality-and-antisemitism-a-new-approach/>.

to understand it properly, and assume that the person is honestly describing their experience. In Britain, this principle is called the Macpherson Principle.²⁵

This principle is completely accepted within left wing and liberal spaces, but it is often forgotten when it comes to Jews and antisemitism. When Jews in those spaces report having experienced antisemitism, people often view them with suspicion. A standard response to a Jewish person who says that they have experienced antisemitism on the left is to say that Jews seek to silence or de-legitimize criticism of Israel by saying that it is antisemitic. They have not really experienced antisemitism, it is alleged, but they say they have in order to protect Israel.

The *Livingstone Formulation* was named in 2006 after the socialist Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. When he was accused of antisemitism after a specific incident that was nothing to do with Israel, he responded: “For far too long the accusation of antisemitism has been used against anyone who is critical of the policies of the Israeli government, as I have been.”²⁶

Livingstone did not say that sometimes Jews get it wrong. He did not say that sometimes there is disagreement over what kinds of criticism of Israel may be antisemitic.

He said that the accusation of antisemitism ‘is used against anyone’ who is critical of Israel. The word ‘used’ here cements the allegation of bad faith; this allegation is used, presumably by somebody, and for some reason, it does not just appear by accident. And it is used all the time, against ‘anyone’ who raises the issue of antisemitism. The word ‘indiscriminate’ underlines this. The ‘accusation of antisemitism’ is not only ‘used’ in cases that could be difficult to interpret, but in every case, indiscriminately.

The Livingstone Formulation is the key form of bullying experienced by Jews in left and liberal spaces. Whereas Macpherson warned that people who say they have experienced racism should be listened to in good faith, Livingstone warns people to be suspicious of Jews who say they have experienced antisemitism because they may be *using* the accusation dishonestly. He sets up an assumption that they might be lying when they say they have experienced antisemitism and that what they are really trying to achieve is the smearing of somebody who is “critical of the policies of the Israeli government.” According to the *Livingstone Formulation*, it is done to frighten “critics of Israel” into silence and to de-legitimize “criticism of Israel” as though it was a kind of racism.

²⁵ After Judge William Macpherson, who Chaired the Public Inquiry in 1999 into the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence and into the police investigation of it. Stephen’s friend told the police that it had been a racist attack but they did not believe him, and they treated his friend, who was black, as a suspect. Macpherson reported that the police inquiry had been marred by ‘institutional racism’. This was the first time that an official body had made such a determination about UK police.

²⁶

In Britain in October 2020, the *Equalities and Human Rights Commission* (EHRC) published an official report on antisemitism in the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. The EHRC was concerned that in the party at that time, the *Livingstone Formulation* had become a standard response to allegations of antisemitism. It had seen evidence that Jews who complained about antisemitism were often contemptuously dismissed as fakers, or accused of ‘weaponizing’. They were accused of lying about antisemitism in an effort to help Israel. That is why the EHRC felt the need to re-state the Macpherson Principle specifically with respect to antisemitism:

Suggesting that complaints of antisemitism are fake or smears: Labour Party agents denied antisemitism in the Party and made comments dismissing complaints as ‘smears’ and ‘fake’. This conduct may target Jewish members as deliberately making up antisemitism complaints to undermine the Labour Party, and ignores legitimate and genuine complaints of antisemitism in the Party.²⁷

The EHRC’s report translated the threat of the *Livingstone Formulation* into the language of British Equality law.

The *Livingstone Formulation* is a refusal to regard antisemitism as an objective social phenomenon and it is a refusal to enter into reasoned discussion about what constitutes antisemitism. It is a counter-accusation of bad faith. While concern about racism in general is regarded with a presumption of seriousness, concern about antisemitism has to clear the hurdle of a presumption of Zionist bad faith.

The *Livingstone Formulation* is a discursively coercive response, which bundles the person who raises the issue of antisemitism over the boundary of legitimate discourse and outside of the community of the progressive or the community of the good. It is coercive in the sense that it refuses reasoned examination, it refuses to debate the claim, it refuses to try to persuade. Instead it constructs and enforces the boundaries of the community of the good by other means: the *ad hominem* attack, the conflation of everything into ‘criticism’ and the refusal even to consider the possibility of antisemitism within the community of the progressive. By its accusation of silencing it silences; by its accusation of bad faith it refuses a hearing.

A few conclusions

This chapter has focused on antizionist antisemitism. It is a form of antisemitism that has significant immunity to democratic society’s ordinary defenses against racism. Indeed, the widespread acceptance of the taboo against racism is the very spot where this kind of antisemitism is specifically evolved to take hold. This is a form of antisemitism that is well

²⁷ “Investigation into Antisemitism in the Labour Party - Report,” 2020. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/investigation-into-antisemitism-in-the-labour-party.pdf>. P. 28.

adapted to flourish even in an ecosystem where the Holocaust seems to have taught us all about the evils of antisemitism.

This chapter looked at the relationship between antizionism and antisemitism. It is not the case that when criticism of Israel goes past a certain quantitative threshold, when it becomes too strong, then it becomes antisemitism. It is the quality of antizionism rather than the quantity that relates it to older anti-Jewish ideologies. Antizionism who 'Zionists' are and it defines the meaning of their Zionism; antizionism treats Israel as the key to history, as the one thing that needs to be understood before anything else can be understood; antizionism is open to conspiracy fantasies, for example the ones that hold Israel responsible for the US invasion of Iraq, or ones that hold Israel to have huge influence over the media, or ones that say that accusations of antisemitism are orchestrated by the Israeli state to de-legitimize criticism of Israel; antizionism is open to blood libel, the accusation that Israel is a particular murderer of children.

It is not criticism of Israel that is antisemitic, it is the function that antizionism finds for Israel, as a keystone of the global system of oppression and injustice, or as the symbol of everything bad in the world, that makes Jews into villains. Of course Jews do not need to take responsibility for everything Israel does. But it is antizionism that mobilizes stories about Israel and Zionism against Jews. Jews do not need to defend Israel, they need to defend themselves against an anti-Jewish ideology that puts Israel at the center of the world.

Antisemitism has always inverted reality. If you want to understand what antisemites are doing, or fantasize about doing, listen carefully to the accusations they make about what Jews do, or intend.

Antisemites always present themselves as victims of the Jews. Antisemitism is of course a weapon forged by antisemites to hurt Jews, but antisemites characterize it as a weapon wielded by Jews to bolster their own power.

It is in these ways that a chapter about antizionism fits into a book about antisemitism.