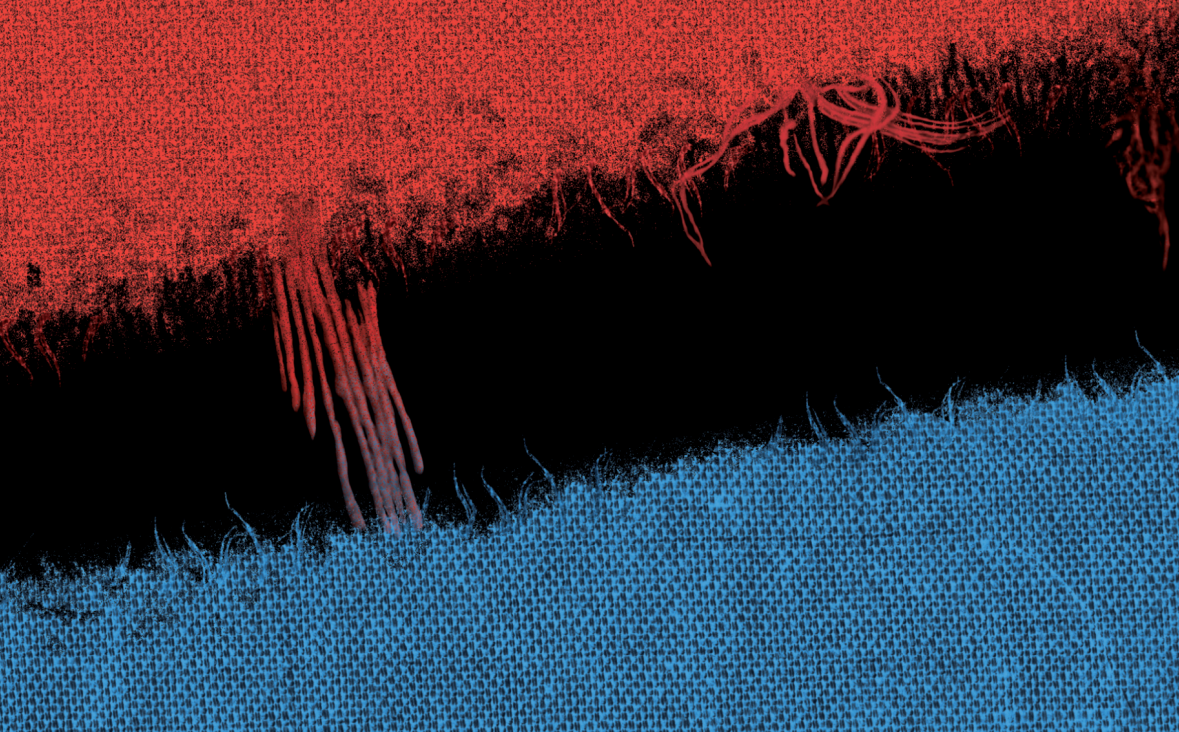


# **The British left and Zionism**

History of a  
divorce

**Paul Kelemen**



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Manchester University Press



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# Contents

Acknowledgements	page vii
Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	1
1 The Labour Party and the Zionist project	11
2 Zionism and Anglo-Jewry	44
3 British communists and Palestine	86
4 Post-war social democracy and Israel	111
5 The new left and the Palestinians	150
6 A new anti-semitism?	185
Conclusion	203
Bibliography	208
Index	219



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## Abbreviations

AAM	Anti-Apartheid Movement
AEUW	Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers
BNP	British National Party
BUF	British Union of Fascists
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
CBF	Central British Fund for German Jewry
CST	Community Security Trust
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
DPs	Displaced Persons
EETPU	Electrical, Electronic Telecommunication and Plumbing Union
EUMC	European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia
EZF	English Zionist Federation
FJYS	Federation of Jewish Youth Societies
FWZ	Federation of Women Zionists
GLC	Greater London Council
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IMG	International Marxist Group
JNF	Jewish National Fund
JPA	Joint Palestine Appeal
JPC	Jewish People's Council
JSJS	Jewish Society for Human Suffering
LFI	Labour Friends of Israel
LMEC	Labour Middle East Council
MCF	Movement for Colonial Freedom
MPS	Metropolitan Police Service
NALGO	National Association of Local Government Officers
NEC	National Executive Committee

NJC	National Jewish Committee
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
PAWS	Palestinian Arab Workers' Society
PCP	Palestine Communist Party
PDFLP	Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLL	Palestine Labour League
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PSC	Palestine Solidarity Campaign
Sogat 82	Society of Graphical and Allied Trades 1982
SWP	Socialist Workers' Party
TAC	Trades Advisory Council
TASS	Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TUFI	Trade Union Friends of Israel
TUFP	Trade Union Friends of Palestine
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
UCU	University and College Union
UDC	Union of Democratic Control
UNRRA	United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
WZO	World Zionist Organisation

## Introduction

In the immediate post-war years, the left no less than the right envisioned consolidating the new world order on the basis of ethnically homogenous nation states. Convinced that this was the most viable model for nation-building and with the belief that the colonial world was there to be reshaped, what could have been more compelling for the victorious powers than to deal with survivors of the Holocaust by acceding to the Zionist movement's demand that a nation state be set up in Palestine for the Jewish survivors of Nazism?

Israel was always destined, however, to fall short of serving as a symbolic atonement for European civilisation's responsibility for the Holocaust. Not merely was it borne through the expulsion of the Palestinians but the Zionist project's ethno-nationalism carried a strand of the ideological legacy that the state's existence was meant to refute. Arendt noted this in a brief aside in her report on the Israeli state's trial of Eichmann, in 1961. The trial of this Nazi functionary, responsible for organising the transportation of half a million Hungarian Jews to be exterminated, was intended by Ben-Gurion as 'a solemn act of historical vindication' for Israel's existence.<sup>1</sup> There was, wrote Arendt, who was reporting the trial for *The New Yorker*, 'something breathtaking in the naiveté with which the prosecution denounced the infamous Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which had prohibited intermarriage and sexual intercourse between Jews and Germans. The better informed among the correspondents were well aware of the irony, but they did not mention it in their reports.' The 'irony' Arendt referred to was that according to the rabbinical law governing the personal status of Israel's Jewish citizens 'no Jew can marry a non-Jew; marriages concluded abroad are recognised but children of mixed marriages are legally bastards ...'.<sup>2</sup> If, in 1961, this aspect of ethnic exclusiveness was accepted by what was considered to be the 'international community', as the defensive response of a persecuted people, the same indulgence would be less willingly accorded later to a Jewish state that has the strongest armed forces in the Middle East, has close ties to the US and pursues, through military and administrative means, policies aimed at denying a



national existence to another ethnic group. The disillusionment with Israel has been most pronounced on the left but, in retrospect, it is the left's previous and longstanding commitment to the Zionist project that stands out. Moreover, the left had helped to popularise the Zionist cause, which turned public support for Israel into a factor that successive British governments have had to take into account. A Foreign Office report in 1970 explained that a pro-Arab policy 'would be hard or impossible to adopt: (a) because of British public and political commitment to Israel as an ideal and the political force of the support for Israel in the country; (b) because of the pressure which the US government undoubtedly exert on HMG to keep us in line ...'.<sup>3</sup> There were several ideological strands which drew the left to Israel.

British Labour Party leaders who came to the fore in the aftermath of Second World War were generally of the view that Jewish nation-building in its Labour Zionist variant would deliver socialism in Israel and development to the Middle East. Neither of these objectives was to be realised and, by the 1980s, the Israeli Labour movement was itself in decline. Israel's military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and neo-liberal economic reforms of the state-led sector have fragmented its social base and have encouraged the rise of a messianic nationalism and a drift to the right.<sup>4</sup> Against this backdrop the British left's earlier sympathy for the Zionist project yielded to an increasingly critical attitude to Israel and a commitment to Palestinian statehood. The following chapters recount how socialists of various hues viewing developments in the Palestine conflict chose their allegiance. The left's period of alliance with the Zionist movement was accomplished mainly through the intervention of Poale Zion (Workers of Zion), a party linked to the Zionist labour organisations in Palestine. The relationship that Poale Zion established with the British Labour Party proved crucial in defining the left's pre-Second World War perception of Zionist settlement activity and state-building in Palestine. It forms the theme of [Chapter 1](#). The Zionist movement's influence in the Jewish community, which gave it a certain leverage in its relations with the Labour Party, is explored in [Chapter 2](#). [Chapter 3](#) discusses the British Communist Party's anti-Zionism and its abandonment of that position in the crucial period that led to the setting up of the state of Israel and resulted in the destruction of Palestinian society. [Chapter 4](#) traces the Labour Party's policy from the immediate aftermath of Israel's establishment until the 1970s. The subject of [Chapter 5](#) is the conjunction between the rise of the new left, a radical movement mainly of youth that strongly identified with anti-colonial struggles, and the emergence of a unified, Palestinian nationalist movement. I have not pursued the discussion into the New Labour period, which began in 1994 with Tony Blair's election to the leadership of the Labour Party, partly because it would have prolonged a research that has taken already far too long but also for the intellectually more justifiable reason that, by the late 1980s, the political basis on which the left had come to oppose Israeli policies and to support Palestinian self-determination was firmly set. There have been, of course, several important

developments in the Palestine conflict after that date, but they did not alter the perspective from which the left assessed the conflict or the possible solutions that it envisaged to bring the conflict to an end. Thus [Chapter 6](#), instead of extending the historical discussion, takes up the argument that runs directly counter to the interpretation advanced in this book. It examines the claim that much of the left's opposition to Israel since 1967 has been driven by a new form of anti-semitism. The earlier chapters will have demonstrated, I hope, that other factors provide a more compelling explanation; the purpose of the final chapter is to show how these risk being occluded by the allegation of left-wing anti-semitism.

The remainder of this introductory chapter introduces the main political actors which interpreted the Zionist project for the left. Here, as in the other chapters, that interpretation is examined in the light of current historical knowledge, though attentive to what was knowable at the time and to aspects that are still bitterly contested. With these provisos in mind, a history of the left's thinking on this issue that goes beyond its own claims, requires that histories normally confined to separate compartments, those of the left and of the Middle East, speak to each other.

In the Zionist movement's lobbying activities in Britain, after the First World War, there developed a division of labour between Chaim Weizmann and the Labour Zionists. Weizmann was the head of the 'general Zionists', who envisaged a future Jewish state on the liberal capitalist model. He appealed for support largely on the grounds that a Jewish state could render invaluable service to the Empire. The British, he wrote in 1924, 'have come to realise that they have very little to lean on for the protection of the jugular vein of the British Empire, except a Palestine peacefully developed and economically and politically stable. They begin to realise that such a Palestine can only be brought into effect if Jewish enterprise is allowed free course in that country ...'.<sup>5</sup> While Weizmann concentrated on getting a hearing from the British government, officials and journalists, the Labour or left wing of the Zionist movement, made up of trade unions, agricultural co-operatives and competing socialist parties in Palestine, and represented in Europe and the US by Poale Zion parties, addressed the international labour movement. By the beginning of the First World War, the World Union of Poale Zion had emerged as the international umbrella organisation for Poale Zion parties and was recognised by the World Zionist Organisation (WZO) as a separate federation. Its political bureau opened in London, in 1920, and many leading Labour Zionists from Palestine came to assist its propaganda work. Between 1932 and 1938 the main political work abroad was carried out by the British Poale Zion party.<sup>6</sup>

Poale Zion's ideological roots lay in the attempt to combine Marxism and Zionism which, between 1898 and 1907, inspired the formation of a number of Socialist Zionist groups among the Jewish socialist circles in the Russian Empire, Austro-Hungary, Palestine, England and the USA. The WZO's funds collected from Jewish communities around the world, but mostly from the Jewish bourgeoisie,

were directed into capital investment in Palestine while Poale Zion, along with other socialist Zionist parties, recruited and organised workers for the task of establishing a viable economy for the settlers. They formed, as Michael Shalev has expressed, 'a marriage of convenience between a settlement movement without settlers and a workers' movement without work',<sup>7</sup> enabling the Labour Zionist movement to become, by the early 1930s, the dominant political force in the Jewish community in Palestine (the *Yishuv*).

Labour Zionism's nation-building ambition was predicated on Jewish labour organisations in Palestine controlling the economy and facilitating the absorption of Jewish immigrants and it was the basis on which they appealed for the backing of labour movements abroad. Poale Zion in Britain, which affiliated to the Labour Party in 1920, focused on lobbying Labour leaders. It made representations to policy-making bodies and came to be routinely consulted by the Labour Party's advisory committee dealing with policy matters related to imperial affairs. From the 1920s, Poale Zion, found significant support in the Labour Party.

By this time London had emerged as an important focus of diplomatic and propaganda activities for Arabs as well as Zionists, though the two sides were to be very unevenly matched in terms of their support in Britain. A Palestine Information Centre was launched in 1921 by a handful of colonial old-hands for the purpose of putting across the Arab case but it was not until 1936 that, with the support of the Mufti of Jerusalem, an Arab-led propaganda centre was opened 'to carry out what was deemed to be its most important work, the efficient distribution of literature and the provision of statements to both press and public'.<sup>8</sup> After the Second World War, with Arab League funding, an office was opened in London to publicise the Arab nationalist cause. It published pamphlets and approached public figures with a special interest in the Middle East.

The Zionist movement, which it sought to rival, was able to develop a much wider support base despite representing until the Second World War a small, minority tendency in the Anglo-Jewish community. Between 1880 and 1921 Britain's Jewish population grew from 60,000 to about 317,000 as a result of immigration and the new entrants' high birth rate. Over the following three decades, the influx of refugees from fascism in the 1930s and natural growth increased the community's number to about 450,000.<sup>9</sup> The membership of the English Zionist Federation was boosted by the Balfour Declaration. With the perception in the Jewish community that Zionism had the British government's backing, the Federation's membership 'rose dramatically from about 4000 in 1917 to over 30,000 in 1921; the number of affiliated societies from 61 to 234; and the sums contributed to various funds from just over 500 pounds in 1916 to just over 120,000 pounds in 1918'.<sup>10</sup> The leader of the English Zionist Federation from 1917 to 1924 was Chaim Weizmann, the future first president of Israel, who came to Britain from Russia. He gathered around himself in Manchester, where he resided, a small group of 'insiders', recruits from the new Jewish middle class. They were successful individuals in business or in the profes-

sions who by virtue of their social status were able to develop extensive contacts in the power structure of British society. Of the three main political parties, the Labour Party gave the most wholehearted endorsement to Zionism. Although there were influential Liberals, such as C.P. Scott, the *Manchester Guardian's* editor, and David Lloyd George, who were committed Zionists, the Liberal Party, in any case a diminishing force in the interwar years, did not have a policy on Palestine prior to 1948. The Conservative Party also had strong advocates for Zionism, most notably Balfour, Churchill and Amery, but its official policy was 'quasi-neutral as between Jew and Arab'.<sup>11</sup>

Labour Zionist emissaries from Palestine gained ready access to the Labour Party's colonial experts and, at various times, prominent Labour figures, among them, Ramsay MacDonald, Josiah Wedgwood, Herbert Morrison, Arthur Creech Jones, Richard Crossman and Harold Wilson, visited the Labour Zionist movement in Palestine and took a special interest in its progress.

Of Britain's overseas territories in the 1930s and 1940s, India alone exceeded Palestine in press coverage and the time devoted to it by Parliament. Ireland's prominence in imperial affairs had receded by the late 1920s as the turmoil over partition subsided. Although Palestine did not have India's economic importance, it was valued as a strategic asset in the defence of Britain's trade routes to south Asia and the Far East and recognised as a place of special significance for three major religions of the world. British officials of the Mandatory administration dealing with the conflicting demands of the Arab and Jewish communities were conscious of the potential international reverberation of their decisions particularly in the US and in Muslim countries. They were inclined to see the Zionists as more troublesome, endlessly petitioning with new demands and calling the administration to account on the basis of the Mandate and the Balfour Declaration. If the Zionist movement's demand in Palestine was turned down at the first port of call its representatives were likely to raise the matter at a higher level, if necessary all the way up the chain of command to ministers in London. With anti-semitism endemic among colonial officials, as among all sections of British society, they often expressed their resentment at attempts to outmanoeuvre them in racist terms. Yet, if this was an overtly hostile form of racism by comparison with the apparently more benign, paternalistic version directed at the Arabs, British rule nonetheless maintained the political and economic framework that favoured Jewish nation-building at the expense of Arab interests.

In the 1930s, contemporaneously with Poale Zion's growing success in establishing close ties with the Labour Party, the India League led by Krishna Menon, campaigning for the Indian nationalist movement, was also appealing to the British labour movement for support. His efforts met with less success. The India League sought to win backing for the Congress Party's demand that India be granted self-rule. There was considerable sympathy for this in Labour Party ranks, but the leadership saw it as an objective to be attained only in the distant



future and through gradual constitutional reform. It was, on the one hand, mistrustful of the Congress Party's middle-class leadership and lack of commitment to social reform and, on the other, disapproving of its use of mass civil disobedience campaigns rather than electoral politics to capture legislative power. On behalf of the India League, Menon travelled tirelessly around the country, addressing public meetings to recruit activists and to encourage the setting up of local branches. In 1931, he reported twenty-three branches and a membership of 270, but there appears to have been little growth thereafter. In 1943 the League had thirteen branches of which only seven sent reports to head office on their work over the previous twelve months. Most branches had brief flourishes of activity and then fell dormant.<sup>12</sup> Menon therefore turned for support to the Independent Labour Parties, Labour parties and co-operative guilds and, as the decade wore on, to the Communist Party. 'Since campaigners for India lacked the authority and resources to have sufficient supporters of their own they needed to tie themselves to campaigns or parties that could ... Theosophists, socialists, communists, feminists, Christians and pacifists each served this purpose at times. Each cause had, for its own reasons, certain affinities with the Indian freedom struggle, but each had other priorities too ...'<sup>13</sup>

The Indian community in Britain was not sufficiently numerous or well resourced to sustain an effective campaign. Menon's approach to its small middle class, made up of students and professionals, yielded meagre results. An Indian working class was beginning to form, during the war, in the docks of East London and in the war-related industries in the Midlands, but it numbered only around 3,000 and was still in the early stages of developing its own community organisations.<sup>14</sup> Reflecting the League's tenuous support, securing funds for its office and publications was a constant struggle. The Special Branch, which closely monitored its activities, reported that the League's turnover, in 1941, was £722 and had increased, in 1942, as a result of contributions from 'wealthy sympathisers' to £1,092 (the equivalent of about £22,000 in 2011).<sup>15</sup>

The Poale Zion party in Britain disposed of considerably larger human and financial resources. Although it was a small organisation with only around 500 members for most of the pre-Second World War period, it had its own affiliated organisations and worked alongside, though not without tensions, the much larger, English Zionist Federation (EZF). It functioned as the communication channel between the Zionist labour movement and the Labour Party. The two labour organisations' brand of social democracy had much in common and there developed between them, through frequent contact, a sense of comradeship. In 1946, following the British army's arrest of 2,000 Jerusalem-based officials of various Zionist organisations, including the executive of the Jewish Agency, Michael Foot pleaded: 'the people who are accused by the Government of instituting violence against law and order are men we know well, men who have come to our Socialist conferences, and who are colleagues of ours.'<sup>16</sup>

On the history of the Labour Party's relationship with the Zionist movement,

Joseph Gorny's *The British Labour Movement and Zionism, 1917–1948*, published in 1983, remains the most comprehensive study. Gorny highlights the 'special and unique bond' that developed between the two organisations. This was founded he claims on 'sympathy on the part of the British and faith on the part of the Jews' and not on socialist principles. He does not, however, disavow the influence of socialism altogether and attributes the Labour Party's attitude to Zionism, to its 'socialist humanistic tradition' and a 'belief in the advantage of establishing a socialist society in Palestine'.<sup>17</sup> There are, as we shall see, good reasons to doubt that the British Labour Party's outlook on Palestine and Zionism can be explained in this way but Gorny's other premise, that Labour Zionism was building a socialist society, has been demonstrated by a substantial body of historical work to be fundamentally flawed. The social organisation of the Jewish community in Palestine was determined not by the professed socialist ideology of its leaders but by the economic obstacles that Zionist colonisation had to confront in seeking to absorb Jewish immigrant labour in the face of competition from Palestinian labour.<sup>18</sup>

In the alliance that the Zionist movement forged among different social groups it was the organisations of its labour wing, through the trade union movement and the *kibbutzim*, which became the key instruments in developing a separate Jewish economy. Labour Zionism successfully harnessed collectivist forms of organisation to nation-building by privileging ethnic over class solidarity. It was in the tradition of the 'blood and soil', biological nationalism which from the middle of the nineteenth century, argues the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell, was characteristic of ethnic movements in Eastern and Central Europe, from where most of the Labour Zionist leaders originated.<sup>19</sup> In Palestine, the Labour Zionist movement, in order to ensure that Jewish immigrant labourers were prioritised over indigenous labour, adopted the strategies of 'conquest of land' and 'conquest of labour'. The 'conquest of land' took the form of the Zionist movement purchasing land and turning it over to exclusively Jewish agriculture labour mainly through the *kibbutzim* and other forms of co-operatives. These colonies of rural settlement were often strategically placed and served the dual function of absorbing Jewish immigrants into productive work and establishing armed outposts. The *kibbutzim*'s collectivist ethos, which drew on socialist idealism while implementing the ethnic exclusion of Arabs, enhanced their military capacity, leading the number of *kibbutz* to be increased in periods when there was an upsurge in Palestinian opposition.<sup>20</sup> The 'conquest of labour' in the private sector was pursued by the Zionist trade union organisation, the Histadrut, using its organisational strength to pressure Jewish employers to hire only Jewish workers. In the public sector, controlled by the British authorities, the Zionist movement could not hope to exclude Arab labour but sought to increase the proportion of Jewish workers by the Histadrut's commercial arm, Solel Boneh, acting as a subcontractor for some of the work.<sup>21</sup> It was these efforts at Jewish economic separatism that required the WZO's financial backing, in

order to purchase land, subsidise the Histadrut and invest in infrastructure. Private capital invested more, between 70 and 84 per cent, particularly in the urban sector, but it did not have the level of political organisation and therefore influence of the Labour Zionist movement.<sup>22</sup>

The WZO leadership acted as the executive of the Zionist movement and was answerable to its Congress. The delegates to it were elected by affiliated Zionist organisations around the world, whose principal function was to raise funds from the Jewish communities they represented to finance the settlement project in Palestine. At the second Zionist Congress in 1898, the founder and first president of the WZO, Theodor Herzl, in response to opposition from Jews to the Zionist project, declared: 'I place among our future aims the conquest of communities.' He explained: 'The authorities of the communities, the means of which they dispose, and the officials must not be employed to work against the National Idea.'<sup>23</sup> This then was the third 'conquest' that was integral to Zionist politics and to its success in establishing a state.

Until the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s, the Zionist movement remained politically marginal in Jewish communities including in Eastern Europe, where the majority of world's Jewish population lived until the Second World War. In the face of economic hardship and anti-semitism which at times took the form of pogroms, most Jews when it was possible left for destinations in the West. 'In the ten years considered decisive for the creation of Zionist settlement in Palestine, for example, that is, the years 1905–1914, over one million Jews immigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States, whereas less than thirty thousand immigrated to Palestine.'<sup>24</sup> Although in this period relatively few Jews could be persuaded to make *aliya* (settle in Palestine) and only a small minority was persuaded of the Zionist case, a much larger number responded to WZO appeals to help fund those who wanted to make their home in Palestine. Keren Hayesod (the Foundation Fund), which was established by the Zionist Congress in 1920, to finance the economic infrastructure of the Yishuv collected during its first ten years of existence £3.8 million. Over the same period, the Jewish National Fund which purchased land in Palestine exclusively for Jewish settlement collected an additional £170,000.<sup>25</sup> In the period 1920–1945, a total of £14.5 million (the equivalent in 2011 would be roughly twenty-five times this sum) was collected by the Foundation Fund, of which just over half came from US Jewry and 6.3 per cent from Anglo-Jewry.<sup>26</sup>

Philanthropic activity in the Jewish community, which vastly expanded in response to the flight of Jews from Nazi persecution, played an important role in the 'conquest' of Jewish communities that Herzl hoped for. But later, the socio-logical transformation of the Anglo-Jewish community, its embourgeoisement, also facilitated this process. Zionism's post-war ascendancy among Anglo-Jewry which accompanied the Jewish population's post-war migration to suburbia did not however weaken British Labour's resolve to gain Jewish voters' support. Although by the 1950s Poale Zion played a minor role in mobilising Jewish

voters, it acted as the main intermediary between the British and Israeli Labour parties. Their close connection did not determine the British Labour Party's Middle East policy, whether in or out of power, but it gave that connection an ideological legitimacy and emotional charge among the party membership. The policy itself accorded with Britain's strategic interests in the Middle East, which after the Second World War and still more after the 1956 Suez War were seen by Whitehall to require an alliance with the United States and with conservative Arab states. Israel's defence concerns were convergent and it became a key regional ally to counter the Soviet influence and nationalist movements. The Labour Party was therefore supportive of Israel both in the name of Britain's imperial policy and for its social democratic values. On these grounds it could command the sympathy of both wings of the party and act as the principal vector for popularising more widely an image of Israel as the beacon of progress in the Middle East.

## Notes

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- 17 J. Gorny, *The British Labour Movement and Zionism, 1917–1948* (London: Frank Cass, 1983), p. xii and p. 233.
- 18 G. Shafir, *Land, Labour and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Michael Shalev, *Labour and the Political Economy of Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Z. Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
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- 23 *Jewish Chronicle* (2 September 1898).
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- 25 Levenberg Papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science, S.Levenberg, 'Trends in British Zionism, An Historical Survey', n.d. circa 1960, Box 'Zionism, Levenberg Papers. The Levenberg Papers are archived in 41 boxes of which only the contents of first three are filed and listed. The other boxes contain material grouped into very broad categories such as 'Articles', 'Correspondence', etc.
- 26 *Zionist Year Book* 1960, pp. 321–322.

# 1 The Labour Party and the Zionist project

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, it was common among socialists, anarchists and radicals of all sorts to give voice to anti-semitic sentiments by identifying the harshest forms of capitalist exploitation at home and abroad with Jewish financiers and industrialists. In Britain, there was a surge of anti-semitism in 1899–1900 during the Boer War, anti-semitic attacks against ‘rich Jews’ persisted for some years in sections of the socialist press<sup>1</sup> and isolated outbursts of such prejudices also continued to occur in the labour movement, but anti-capitalism and anti-semitism were increasingly viewed by socialists as incompatible. The Russian pogroms and the Dreyfus affair had underlined the association of anti-semitism with autocracy and reactionary politics and most Labour leaders distanced themselves from the anti-alien agitation, which led to the passing of the 1905 Aliens Act. Labour politicians had opposed it with humanitarian arguments but the influence of Marxism among socialists also ran counter to anti-semitism by attributing the comportment of capitalists to their position in the dynamics of class relations instead of their ethnic origins.

Left-wing and radical groups associated with working-class politics whatever their attitude to anti-semitism showed little interest in the early Zionist movement yet, in August 1917, two and half months before the Balfour Declaration committed Britain to support the setting up of a ‘Jewish home’ in Palestine, the Labour Party took the first step to adopting a near identical policy in its *War Aims Memorandum*. The document drafted by a subcommittee of the party’s executive included the proposal that Palestine should be set free from Turkish rule ‘in order that this country may form a Free State under international guarantee, to which such of the Jewish people as desire to do so may return and work out their own salvation’.<sup>2</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* reported that once the draft was completed ‘the Executive had no time to go into it at all’.<sup>3</sup> For the Zionist movement, which represented at this time the aspiration of a small minority of Jews, the document’s commitment to a ‘Jewish home’ in Palestine would prove a useful asset. The Labour Party was still in its formative period but it had already

become the major force in British left-wing politics and from the 1922 general election came to eclipse the Liberal Party as the main electoral rival to the Conservatives. Its membership was formed mainly by its affiliated organisations: the majority from trade unions and some from socialist groups of which the most influential, until its disaffiliation in 1932, was the Independent Labour Party (ILP). From 1918, local Labour parties were also open to individual membership. Combining the individual membership with those of the affiliated organisations, the Labour Party had about 3 million members in 1918, 5 million in 1947 and 6.5 million for most of the 1960s and 1970s. But the individual membership of local parties is a more accurate gauge of the number of party activists and this was about 215,000 in 1928, the first year that figures were separately compiled for this category, which doubled by 1937 and peaked at just over a million in 1952. Thereafter, with minor fluctuations, membership declined to 348,000 in 1980 and to 311,000 in 1990.<sup>4</sup>

The *War Aims Memorandum* embraced the dominant view among Labour leaders that the war should be pursued till victory but drew on the ideas of groups that had been critical though not outrightly opposed to the war. Thus some of the points derived from the League of Nations Society and the Fabians, which campaigned for the war to be settled on terms that would secure a 'permanent peace' and the setting up of a supranational authority and international laws to regulate the future conduct of state to state relations. From the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), a group highly critical of the war, the document took the more radical demands that there be no annexation of territory without taking into account the wishes of the people affected by it and for the future conduct of relations between states to be subject to the control of popularly elected legislatures.

The *Memorandum*, as A.J.P. Taylor has remarked, proved to be remarkably successful.<sup>5</sup> It was adopted in December 1917 by the Labour Party at a specially convened conference and, the following year, with only minor modifications by the labour and socialist parties of the Allied states. It also put pressure on the Lloyd George led coalition government to define the Allies' war aims. Yet, on one of its central principles, on the right of nations to self-determination, the *Memorandum* appeared to equivocate. A writer in a UDC publication complained that Labour politicians upheld the principle of self-determination only where it concerned Christians. 'Self determination for Poland? Yes; for Palestine? No.'<sup>6</sup>

The Balfour Declaration was also given a mixed reception on the left. *Labour Leader* and *Forward* publications linked to the ILP made no reference to it. The Labour Party's *The Herald* expressed support, briefly commenting that 'it is hard for any people to retain its individuality and develop itself to the full without a local and visible home somewhere in the world' and the *New Statesman*, which had close links with the Fabians, welcomed 'a Zionist restoration' as a way of making Palestine 'once more prosperous and populous, with a population attached to the British Empire'.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the British Socialist Party, which would be one of

the groups to form the Communist Party in 1920, condemned the Zionist plan as 'a veiled attempt at the annexation of Palestine, and also a means to enlist the assistance of the Jews the world over for the Imperial ends of Great Britain and its Allies'.<sup>8</sup>

The immediate impetus behind the Labour Party's statement on Palestine in the Memorandum was the wave of enthusiasm in left-wing circles for the American president, Woodrow Wilson's adoption of national self-determination as a guiding principle for the post-war world order. In March 1917, Beatrice Webb had commented on Wilson's declaration: 'Self-government for each self-conscious community combined with International Law for the world, based not on relative power but on public right, becomes the watchword of the Allies – whether they like it or not?'<sup>9</sup> Wilson, who was soon to launch the US into the war, sought morally to rearm the Allies and counter the Bolshevik's call for the belligerent countries' war-weary working classes to bring an immediate end to the war and topple their governments. But whereas Lenin saw in national self-determination a way to undermine imperialism and therefore insisted on its applicability to the colonial world, Wilson understood it in a much more restricted sense. Although he did not 'exclude non-European peoples from the right to self-determination as a matter of principle ... he envisioned them achieving it through an evolutionary process under the benevolent tutelage of a "civilized" power that would prepare them for self-government'.<sup>10</sup> Opinion in Labour circles wavered, uncertainly, between the Bolshevik and Wilsonian positions.

The February revolution in Russia and the subsequent propaganda by the Bolsheviks on the basis of no annexation, no indemnities and the right of peoples to self-determination not only stimulated left-wing activity in Britain in favour of peace but also 'helped to bring the trade unionists over to views hitherto monopolized by the socialist societies'.<sup>11</sup> Mayer points to 'Petrograd's indelible imprint'<sup>12</sup> on Arthur Henderson's draft of Labour's peace terms which had stated: 'We accept the principle of self-determination ... for all people and believe that this can be secured for Egypt and India by a rapid extension of self-governing institutions on Dominion lines'.<sup>13</sup> This did not imply dismantling the Empire but it accepted the Egyptian and Indian nationalist movements' demand of the time. The *War Aims Memorandum* was less specific on these two countries but for the African colonies and for the peoples of the Turkish Empire, it looked forward to an end of the imperial system by declaring that since their peoples were not ready to settle their own destinies, the present colonies of the European powers should be handed over to a supranational authority or League of Nations. However, the proposal on a 'Jewish return' was at odds with the Turkish Empire's Arab population determining its own destiny and had a different rationale. Brailsford, who was among the end of war defectors from the Liberals to the ILP and from 1922 became its most prolific writer on international matters in radical and socialist newspapers, gave an early indication of at least one of the