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From Ambivalence to Betrayal

The Left, the Jews, and Israel

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Robert S. Wistrich

Published by the University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, for the
Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism (SICSA)
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my former history teacher at
Kilburn Grammar School in London,
Dr. Walter Isaacson
a refugee from Nazi Germany
who first taught me how to think independently.

"If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not. . . ."

Macbeth, I, iii

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Preface

The main title of this book may raise a few eyebrows. To what "betrayal" is the author referring? Surely neither antisemitism nor hostility to Israel can be seen as prerogatives of leftism; and if they do exist in some quarters of the Left, is that not an example of "legitimate criticism" of Israel—a country regularly pilloried in international forums as one of the last remaining bastions of Western colonialism?

I have been hearing such arguments for over forty years, ever since (as a young radical) I myself participated in the student revolts of 1968, in both America and France. True, for most of my contemporaries (born like me after the end of World War II) the "Jewish Question" still seemed marginal at that time.

However, in my case, it was something more than mere background noise. Perhaps, because I had been born in the Muslim Republic of Kazakhstan, in Stalin's Soviet Union at the height of the Great Dictator's prestige, following the victory over Hitler's hordes; perhaps because my father's experience as a wartime prisoner of the NKVD (secret police) meant that from the outset there was great ambivalence in my own mind concerning the "fatherland of socialism." My father, who in pre-1939 Kraków had been a fellow-traveler of the illegal Polish Communist Party, nourished some bitter memories of Soviet mendacity after the war and the cruelty of a totalitarian system that ruthlessly crushed all individuality. My mother was slightly more inclined to socialist ideas. Her negative experiences of bourgeois Catholic antisemitism in interwar Poland had been much worse than anything she encountered in Stalin's USSR, though she, too, had no illusions about the "Communist paradise."

I grew up in 1950s England, seemingly far removed from these totalitarian nightmares. Nevertheless, during my adolescence I was becoming radicalized at grammar school, at the very time that Great Britain was beginning to definitively shed its colonial Empire. In 1961 I first visited Israel, spending a month on a far left kibbutz—fascinated but also slightly repelled by its intense collectivist ethos. It was also the time of the Eichmann trial which made me even more intensely aware (at the age of 15) of the Holocaust—in which so many of my own relatives had been killed. I would return to Israel in 1969 after two years of study and radical protest (mainly in Stanford,

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California) against the "capitalist alienation," racism, and militarism of the West. I had already read the Marxist classics while still a pupil at Kilburn Grammar School in London and then at Cambridge University where I found most of my fellow-students to be far more conservative than I was. My own "ideology" at that time was somewhat eclectic—a mixture of the Frankfurt Freudo-Marxist School of Sociology (especially Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse), Sartrian existentialism, the French "situationist" school, and a dose of Guevarist Third World mythology thrown in for good measure.

My first *adult* encounter with the Jewish State in 1969 was by no means easy or painless. The intellectual baggage I came with did not predispose me to any special sympathy with a country that struck me then as being dangerously intoxicated with its stunning military victory of June 1967. The result had been to greatly expand Israel's borders from the frighteningly narrow dimensions of the ceasefire lines after the 1948 war, to something that seemingly offered secure and defensible boundaries. The other side of that coin was a certain degree of hubris which seemed to me frankly alarming. As the literary editor of the peace-oriented left-wing magazine *New Outlook* (in Tel Aviv) I found myself at the age of twenty-four suddenly and unexpectedly thrust into the internal political debates of the Israeli Left. I did not get on with the principal editor of the journal, Simha Flapan, who came from the left wing of the Mapam movement—a Marxist-Zionist party whose power base was in the *kibbutzim*. He was a strange kind of debunking "post-Zionist" before the term even existed. Though no Communist fellow-traveler, his view of the Cold War and the Soviet Union struck me as naïve. Even at the height of my own anti-American feelings in the late 1960s as a result of the Vietnam War, I had never seen the United States as being morally equivalent to the U.S.S.R. Having been trapped in Prague for two weeks as a tourist during the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, it was obvious to me, even then, that "real socialism" as practiced in the Communist bloc was the complete negation of anything resembling humanist ideals. Moreover, during visits to Poland and Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s, I had not failed to notice the cynical use by the Communist regimes of anti-semitism—under the guise of anti-Zionism—to repress any trace of intellectual or personal dissent.

By the time I left the Middle East during the month of "Black September" 1970 (when King Hussein summarily crushed the PLO challenge to his rule) I had begun to crystallize the theme of my future doctoral research on Socialism and the "Jewish Question" in Central Europe. The idea had arisen in conversations that I had in Jerusalem, earlier in 1970, with Israeli historian

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Jacob Talmon and Professor George Mosse (then a visiting professor from Wisconsin at the Hebrew University) whose courses I had been taking. They both felt that it would be better for me to do my dissertation at University College, London, where I would enjoy easier access to the relevant sources, especially those in France, Germany, and East-Central Europe. During the next three years I traveled widely, learned a number of new languages, and focused on my research. I also became aware of the Soviet Jewish self-awakening—the first real crack in the Iron Curtain. At that time, the cause of Soviet Jewry—including the demand for "repatriation" to Israel—even enjoyed some support on the non-Communist Left, which condemned the growing manifestations of Soviet antisemitism.

Forty years on, I have to say that the *classical* Marxist Left whose ideology and politics I studied during the early 1970s seems to me to belong to a very different political universe from the pro-Palestinian leftism of our own time. True, there are a number of theoretical continuities between today and the anti-Zionism of prewar European Social Democrats like Karl Kautsky or Otto Bauer. There is even a connection between the hostility to the "separatist" Jewish labor movement exhibited by Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin, and the ideological negation of Israel on the contemporary Marxist Left. Outwardly at least, there is also a common language of socialist "internationalism" that still animates the radical anti-Zionist discourse.

Yet even in the mid-1970s when I became more directly involved in debates on British campuses with pro-Palestinian leftists, there was a sharp edge to anti-Israel sentiment which went beyond theory. Though I well understood Palestinian resentment towards Israel, it was more difficult to comprehend why so many on the new Left had turned against the Jewish State with such vehemence. After all, British leftists were physically far removed from the Middle East conflict, and many seemed to have not even the faintest grasp of either Arab or Jewish culture. The "progressive" take on the Middle East stuck me as extraordinarily simplistic—dividing the conflict into "good" and "bad" guys—the "oppressive" Israelis against the "oppressed" Palestinians.

At one level, this is less surprising when one recalls that much of the Western Left (especially the Communists) had for decades applauded "revolutionary" dictators like Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Colonel Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein, and Castro. Today, it still remains either supportive, indifferent, or silent about populist dictators like Ahmadinejad, Mugabe, or Chávez while rallying its militants on behalf of Hezbollah and Hamas. At the same time, the anti-Zionist Left systematically demonizes Israel—which in terms of its

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civil society, democratic norms, freedom of criticism and rule of law is light-years ahead of the Arab world. One might well ask if this is not an "anti-colonialism" of frauds and fools.

Can we seriously imagine Marx, Engels, Kautsky, or Rosa Luxemburg remaining silent about the advocacy of sharia law, censorship, female genital mutilation, honor killings, suicide bombings, or making the world safe for Allah's rule? Can we conceive of any circumstances in which they would have envisaged an alliance with Sheikh al-Qaradawi and the Muslim Brotherhood—along the lines of British leftists like Ken Livingstone or George Galloway? The question almost answers itself. But neo-Stalinists or neo-Trotskyists—not to mention post-modern leftists—have no such difficulty. A key element in this emerging Red-Green axis is the rampant anti-Israel and anti-Jewish mythology, especially in the Muslim-Arab world and among anti-American leftist leaders like Daniel Ortega or Hugo Chávez. The type of conspiratorial thinking currently dominant on the pro-Islamic Left is, I would argue, a complete betrayal of the Enlightenment legacy and a caricature of socialist internationalism masquerading under the banner of "anti-globalism."

In this book, I have tried to explain what went wrong while suggesting that the degeneration was already prefigured in the 19th-century seedbed of antisemitic socialism. A poisonous anti-Jewish legacy can be found in Marx, Fourier, and Proudhon, extending through the orthodox Communists and "non-conformist" Trotskyists to the Islamo-Leftist hybrids of today who systematically vilify the so-called racist essence of the Jewish State. Twentieth-century Marxism had no trouble in rationalizing the crimes of the Soviet gulag with the help of convoluted Hegelian dialectics. Similarly, the propagandists of the radical Left have in many cases proved adept at justifying the elimination of Israel in favor of the Palestinian "revolution"—whose most authentic representatives today are the Islamist antisemites of the Hamas.

From Karl Marx to Sheikh al-Qaradawi, via Ken Livingstone (former leftist Mayor of London), it would appear that the Jews (whoops, sorry, the "Zionists") are always "guilty" of something bad. It is also worth noting that this is a language that neither the radical Right nor the Nazis and the Islamo-fascists have any pangs of conscience in warmly embracing. European fascists, no less than leftists, regularly identified the Jews with capitalism and western imperialism. Today, rather than denouncing the "Jewish-Bolshevik" alliance (as Hitler and the prewar fascists continually did), the extreme Right focuses on attacking the "American-Zionist axis." This is the consensual

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point where it meets with the "anti-Zionist" Left and the Islamists; where neo-Marxists or liberal "progressives" find common cause with Islamic revolutionists from Haj Amin al-Husseini to Arafat, or from Hassan al-Banna to Khomeini, Ghadaffi, and al-Qaradawi. This is the place where "Islamo-fascism" merges with "Islamo-Marxism" in an empty "progressivism" without progress, driven by a convulsive hatred of Western modernity, of Jews, and bourgeois liberalism.

But why are Jews still the scapegoats at the heart of this jihad? Why does a whole section of the Left—which has almost abandoned Marx (except for his "Jewish" antisemitism)—flirt with a counter-Enlightenment so fundamentally alien to its self-proclaimed core value of human emancipation? I can still remember young French students chanting "We are all German Jews" in the streets of Paris in May 1968—their way of protesting against the Gaullists, the Communists, and police brutality. Today, such a march in the streets of Europe would be more likely to echo to calls of "Death to Israel," "End the Holocaust in Gaza," or "Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the Gas!" In such demonstrations, radical leftists frequently join hands with pro-Palestinian jihadists in their relentless campaign to defame, delegitimize and ultimately to destroy the Jewish State of Israel.

It is as if the Holocaust had never happened for much of the Left except as a cynically manipulated metaphor enabling it to brand Israel with the mark of Cain as *the* ultimate symbol of evil; as the "little Satan" carrying out the imperialist will of the "Great Satan" (America) or else as the conspiratorial mafia that determines U.S. foreign policy. For the European Left, still unhinged by the fall of Communism after 1989, anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism appear as the last two ideological pillars still standing in the debris of the collapsed Soviet Empire. When Leftists evoke America, nowadays they often mean "Jewish power"—"domination" of Hollywood, the media, high finance, the Congress, the Pentagon, and the White House by American Jewry. They are talking antisemitism, only now it is wrapped in the more politically correct euphemism of the "Zionist lobby." Even a "progressivist," more or less pro-Palestinian American President like Barack Obama, has not been able to escape the potency of such myths by which he, too, is judged. Anti-Americanism, like antisemitism, has truly become the "anti-imperialism" of fools.

This book is (among other things) an attempt to get to grips with the paranoid conspiracy-mongering on the Left, which invariably parades as a *humanitarian* endeavor and a compassionate defense of the "oppressed" or powerless against the might of the "Zionist-Crusader" axis. Already in

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September 2001, there was a foregleam of the new century in Durban, South Africa. In the streets and in various forums one could hear chants of "One Jew, one bullet," voiced by leftist, Third Worldist, and Islamist advocates of the Palestinian cause at a UN-sponsored conference of NGOs. The UN event, ostensibly organized to condemn slavery, racism, hunger, and war, soon degenerated into an ugly hate-fest of the "new antisemitism." The "anti-racists" of the contemporary Left had found their *chosen* target by proclaiming what they have never ceased to do ever since—that there is only one "criminal" state in the whole world—and its name is Israel.

Thirty-five years ago it had been the Soviet Union (together with the Arab states) which initiated the UN Big Lie that Zionism-is-racism. Today there is no longer any need for a totalitarian Stalinist apparatus to perpetuate such a major moral and intellectual fraud. For it is "freedom-loving" intellectuals in the West (some of them Jews) who *voluntarily* lend their hands to the "anti-racist" masquerade which declares Israel to be an "apartheid State"—whose disappearance is *the* precondition for peace in the Middle East. On campuses throughout Britain and North America "Israel Anti-Apartheid Week"—often led by publicity-conscious Israeli and Jewish leftists—has now become an increasingly institutionalized fixture for spreading the "anti-Zionist" poison. So, too, have the continual leftist and Palestinian calls for the boycott of Israel in the scientific, technological, commercial, and academic spheres. All of this radical agitation is no longer directed at the "Christ-killers," the "Jewish usurers" of the Middle Ages, the Bourse Jews, or an inferior race of *Untermenschen*," but against the so-called perpetrators of a (fictional) "genocide" against the Palestinians. Never mind that this grotesque libel is contradicted by all available empirical evidence, never mind that Israel is increasingly threatened by the genocidal antisemitism promoted by Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the global jihad. Such minor details do not for one moment disturb the sleep of left-wing activists (including the Jews among them) whose "humanist" posture evidently does not extend to the idea that Israelis might also be victims. In truth, the Left today is a mere shadow of its former self— not least because it is so deeply mired in the muck of antisemitic lies and anti-Zionist delusions, many of them focused on the "monstrosity" of Israel as the most racist, fascist, and criminal state on earth. This book goes to the heart of what has become a serious mental derangement in the hope that it may help the Left (and others afflicted by the same malady) to regain their sanity.

This is no doubt an uphill struggle and the prospects of a cure may seem remote. On the other hand, the Arab world is currently in the midst of a

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historic revolutionary upheaval, which has exposed the emptiness of the claim (so often heard in the West) that Palestine is the eternal source of all unrest in the Middle East—for which Israel is predictably to blame. But the rising of the Arab citizenry against their corrupt and often tyrannical rulers—who have always used antisemitism as the "opium of the masses," proves exactly the opposite. Israel is *not* the real issue except for those driven by malice, bigotry, cynical self-interest, power-seeking, or an irrevocably distorted world-view. It is still far too early to say how the Arab revolutions of 2011 will finally play themselves out. Israel, as well as the West, certainly has serious grounds for concern at the possible negative fallout for its own security. Yet a ray of light has already pierced the thick propaganda barrage of anti-Israelism and antisemitism—whether it be Muslim, leftist, liberal, or neo-fascist in origin. Much will depend on whether this small window of hope can be extended or not.

The Islamist war against Israel (spearheaded by Iran) which is itself a war for expanding the global jihad would, if successful, ultimately endanger not only the existence of Israel but of civilization itself. It would also destroy any prospect of enhanced freedom or democracy for Palestine and the Arab world. At the same time, the defense of Israel's right to exist in peace and security is rapidly becoming a litmus-test of the boundaries between jihadists and democrats, extremists and moderates. By focusing attention so obsessively on the "sins" of Israel and its so-called crimes, most of the Left has completely missed the wider picture and will continue to condemn itself to irrelevance until or unless it awakens from its self-induced stupor.

Robert Solomon Wistrich
Jerusalem
11 March 2011

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Acknowledgments

This book represents the closing of a circle after four decades of reflection about the complex interaction between Socialism and the Jews, the Jewish involvement in radical movements, and the phenomenon of antisemitism as well as anti-Zionism on the Left. It began exactly forty years ago, in 1971, when I started work on my doctoral dissertation at University College, London (UCL) under the supervision of Professor Chimen Abramsky. My doctorate dealt at some length with the "Jewish Question" in Central Europe before 1914 as seen through the prism of the German, Austrian, and Polish labor movements. It was completed in 1974 with the aid of a German Academic Exchange Scholarship (DAAD) and a stipendium from the Austrian Ministry for Science and Research. These grants enabled me to spend time at the Archives of the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung in Bonn—Bad Godesberg, at the Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, as well as examining many relevant sources in Vienna. Two years later I received an award from the British Academy which permitted an extensive stay in Paris to research the response of the French Left to the Dreyfus Affair. In the early 1980s, soon after my arrival in Israel, I extended my work to the examination of a wide range of Soviet materials relating to Israel and Zionism. Fortunately, I was able to benefit from the rich holdings of the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem and the Soviet and East European Research Centre at the Hebrew University as well as the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. This was supplemented by several visits to New York (to the Yivo Institute and the Bund Archives), to the Leo Baeck Archives, and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. While holding the Jewish Chronicle Chair for Modern Jewish History at UCL in the 1990s, my forays continued at the IISH in Amsterdam, the Austrian National Library, the British Library in London, and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

After 2001, as Director of the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism (SICSA) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, I became more oriented towards studying left-wing attitudes in the present towards Zionism and Israel. The last third of this book reflects that updated contemporary focus. Thanks to the assistance of the late Simon Wiesenthal, to Felix Posen, and also the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture in New York, I was able to pursue these researches to their completion. In that

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context it is a pleasure to thank the indefatigable Esther Rosenfeld and my much esteemed colleague Alifa Saadya for their typing and editorial skills. Without their help this huge labor might never have seen the light of day in its present form. My colleagues at SICSA, in particular Sara Grosvald, also deserve my thanks for tracking down some of the more elusive contemporary sources on the internet. I also want to acknowledge the following distinguished individuals with whom over the past forty years I discussed certain aspects of this subject. Some of them have since departed to another (hopefully better) world. In alphabetical order they include Hannah Arendt (New York), Pierre Birnbaum (Paris), Gerhard Botz (Linz), Julius Braunthal (London), Francis Carsten (London), Shmuel Ettinger (Jerusalem), Alain Finkielkraut (Paris), Bill Fishman (London), Jonathan Frankel (Jerusalem), Manfred Gerstenfeld (Jerusalem), Georges Haupt (Paris), Jeffrey Herf (Washington DC), Helmut Hirsch (Düsseldorf), Jack Jacobs (New York), James Joll (London), Annie Kriegel (Paris), Peter Loewenberg (Los Angeles), Susanne Miller (Bonn), George Mosse (Wisconsin), Fiamma Nirenstein (Rome), Arnold Paucker (London), Peter Pulzer (Oxford), Alvin Rosenfeld (Bloomington, Indiana), Boris Sapir (Amsterdam), Zeev Sternhell (Jerusalem), Pierre-André Taguieff (Paris), Jacob Talmon (Jerusalem), Jacques Tarnero (Paris), Shmuel Trigano (Paris), Feliks Tych (Warsaw), and Stephen J. Whitfield (Brandeis).

In the course of my research I have read sources in twelve different languages—English, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Hebrew, Yiddish, Czech, Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian. That has been no easy task and took years of diligent study and endurance. I do not believe that such a *comprehensive* study of this historical phenomenon has been previously attempted in a global perspective. I present it to the scholarly and general public in the belief that it will illuminate the fascinating, though often painful encounter between Jews, Zionism, and the radical Left.

Robert Solomon Wistrich
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
6 March 2011

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