

The Holocaust, the BBC and Antisemitism Smears

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Senior BBC news reporter Orla Guerin has found herself in hot water of an increasingly familiar kind. During a report on preparations for the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, she made a brief reference to Israel and an even briefer reference to the Palestinians. Her reporting coincided with Israel hosting world leaders last week at Yad Vashem, its Holocaust remembrance centre in Jerusalem.

Here is what Guerin [said](#) over footage of Yad Vashem:

“In Yad Vashem’s Hall of Names, images of the dead. Young [Israeli] soldiers troop in to share in the binding tragedy of the Jewish people. The state of Israel is now a regional power. For decades, it has occupied Palestinian territories. But some here will always see their nation through the prism of persecution and survival.”

British Jewish community leaders and former BBC executives leapt on her “offensive” remarks, even accusing her of antisemitism. Guerin had dared, unlike any of her colleagues in the western media, to allude to the terrible price inflicted on the Palestinian people by the west’s decision to help the Zionist movement create a Jewish state shortly after the Holocaust. The Palestinians were dispossessed of their homeland as apparent compensation – at least for those Jews who became citizens of Israel – for Europe’s genocidal crimes.

Guerin’s was a very meek – bland even – reference to the predicament of the Palestinians after Europe’s sponsorship, from the 1917 Balfour Declaration onwards, of a Jewish state on their homeland. There was no mention of the Palestinians’ undoubted suffering over many decades or of Israel’s documented war crimes against the Palestinians. All that Guerin referred to was an indisputable occupation that followed, and one could argue was a legacy of, Israel’s creation.

Holocaust weaponised

In fact, as we shall see in a moment, Israel’s establishment is today invariably and necessarily justified by antisemitism and its ultimate, horrifying expression in the Holocaust. The two are now inextricably intertwined. So Guerin’s linking of these two events is not only legitimate, it is required in any proper analysis of the consequences of the Holocaust and of European racism.

In fact, the furore among Jewish groups in Britain seems all the more perverse given that the Israeli media have extensively reported on Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s explicit efforts to weaponise the current Holocaust commemorations to harm the

Palestinians.

He hopes to leverage sympathy over the Holocaust to win assistance from western capitals in bullying the International Criminal Court in the Hague into denying that it has any jurisdiction over the Palestinian territories Israel is occupying. That would prevent the court from enforcing international law by investigating war crimes perpetrated by Israel against the Palestinians. (In fact, aware of the diplomatic stakes, the ICC's prosecutors have so far shown zero appetite for pursuing those investigations.)

This [extract](#) from a commentary by noted Israeli human rights activist Hagai El-Ad, published in the liberal Israeli newspaper Haaretz (Israel's version of the New York Times), gives a proper sense of how inadequate was Guerin's solitary reference to the Palestinians – and how her colleagues are actually complicit through their silence in allowing Israel to weaponise antisemitism and the Holocaust to oppress Palestinians:

“How dehumanizing [of Netanyahu and the Israeli government], to insist on denying a people's last recourse to even an uncertain, belated, modicum of justice [at the ICC]. How degrading to do so while standing on the shoulders of Holocaust survivors, insisting that this is somehow being carried out in their name. ...

“It remains in our hands to decide if the past's painful lessons will be allowed to be turned on their head in order to further oppression – or remain loyal to a vision of freedom and dignity, justice and rights, for all.”

History in the shadows

By not echoing the rest of the western media in entirely airbrushing the Palestinians out of Europe's post-Holocaust history, Guerin stood isolated and exposed. None of her colleagues – supposedly fearless, muckraking journalists – appear willing to come to her aid. She has been made a scapegoat, a sacrificial victim – one that will serve as a future reminder to her colleagues of what they are permitted to mention, which parts of Europe's history they may examine and which parts must remain forever in the shadows.

Guerin's comment was denounced as “offensive” by her former boss, Danny Cohen, who was previously the director of BBC television. No one, of course, cares that the Palestinians' experience of being wiped out of recent European history and its legacy in the Middle East is deeply offensive. The Palestinians are what historian Mark Curtis refers to as “[Unpeople](#)”.

What he and others meant by “offensive” was made explicit by the Campaign Against Antisemitism (CAA), which argued that Guerin's statement was antisemitic.

The CAA is one of the groups that, using similarly twisted logic, led the attacks on the British Labour party over claims of antisemitism in its ranks under leader **Jeremy Corbyn**. It helped to foist a highly problematic new definition of antisemitism on the party that downgrades concerns about racism directed at Jews to prioritise a supposedly bigger crime: criticism of Israel. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition offers 11 examples of antisemitism, seven of which refer to Israel rather than Jews.

Preposterously, the CAA alleged that Guerin had violated one of these examples. It said her report had included “drawing comparisons between Israeli policy and the Nazis”. Very clearly, she had done no such thing.

Erasing the record

The most that could be inferred from Guerin's extremely vague, overly cautious remark was two things. First, that Israel justifies the need for a Jewish state on the threat to Jews posed by antisemitism (as evidenced by the Holocaust). And second, that the resulting state of Israel has inflicted a very high price on the Palestinians, who had to be displaced from their homeland to make that state achievable. At no point did Guerin make a comparison between the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust and the suffering of Palestinians.

She simply, and rightly, hinted at a chain of related events: European racism towards Jews culminated in the Holocaust; the Holocaust was used by the Zionist movement to justify European sponsorship of a Jewish state on the ruins of Palestine; Palestinians and their supporters feel aggrieved that the Holocaust has become a pretext for ignoring their plight and suppressing criticism of Israel. Each of those links is irrefutably true. And unless the truth is now antisemitic - and there is mounting evidence that it is being made so by Israel, its lobbyists and western governments - what Guerin said was not conceivably antisemitic.

It may seem obvious why Israel and its lobbyists would want to silence criticism, or even a basic historical understanding, of the context and consequences of Israel's founding. But why are western officials evidently so keen to aid Israel in this project of erasing the historical record?

Israel could never have been established without the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland and the destruction of hundreds of their villages to prevent any return. That is why a growing number of historians have risked the wrath of the Israel lobby to declare these events ethnic cleansing - in other words, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Western hypocrisy

Let us note that the circumstances in which Israel was created were not exceptional - at least, from the point of view of recent western history. In fact, Israel is an example of a typical settler colonial state. In other words, its creation depended on the replacement of the native population by a group of settlers, just as occurred when Europeans founded colonies in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere.

The difficulty for Israel and its western allies has been that Israel's crimes are being committed in the modern era, at a time when the west has claimed to have learnt the lessons both of its colonial past and of the Second World War. In the post-war period the west promised to change its ways, with a new commitment to international law and the recognition of human rights.

The shameful irony about the west's complicity in Israel's creation is that Israel could only have been established through the dispossession and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. Those outrages occurred in the very same year that, via the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, western states pledged to create a different, better world.

In other words, Israel was launched as an old-style western colonial project at the very moment when the western powers promised to decolonise, giving their colonies independence. Israel was embarrassing proof of the west's hypocrisy in promising to break with its colonial past. It was evidence of bad faith from the outset. The west used Israel to outsource its colonialism, to bypass the new limitations it claimed to have imposed on itself.

A colonial spin-off

So committed were the western powers to Israel's success that France and Britain helped it from the late 1950s to build a nuclear arsenal – the only one in the Middle East – in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Predictably, that further destabilised an already highly volatile region as other states, especially Iraq and Iran, considered trying to level the playing field by developing their own nuclear weapons.

In another sign of the west's commitment to this colonial spin-off was its determination to turn a blind eye in 1967 to Israel's greedy expansion of its borders in conquering the rest of historic Palestine. For more than half a century Israel has been given free rein to entrench its occupation and to build settlements in violation of international law. All these decades later the International Criminal Court is still dragging its heels – indefinitely, it seems – rather than prosecute Israel for settlements that are irrefutably a war crime. And more than 50 years on, Europe continues to subsidise the settlements through trade agreements and a refusal even to label settlement products.

Rather than account for these outrageous violations of an international order the west founded, Israel's allies have helped to obscure or pervert this real history. Israel has developed a whole industry, hasbara, to try to prevent outsiders from grasping what has happened since 1948.

It is therefore important for Israel and its western allies to promote justifications for Israel's creation that appeal to emotion, not reason, as a way to dissuade observers from delving too seriously into the past. In fact, there are only three possible justifications / explanations for the transformation of what was once Palestine into Israel, a state created by and for European Jews on the ruins of Palestine. Two of these rationales play extremely poorly in the modern west.

That leaves only the third justification, as Guerin intimated in her report, and one that resonates well in an age saturated with identity politics.

A Biblical promise

The first justification says that the Zionist movement was entitled to rid Palestine of the overwhelming majority of its Palestinian natives because God promised Jews the land of Palestine thousands of years ago. This argument tells Palestinians: Your family may have lived for centuries or even millennia in Nazareth, Nablus, Bethlehem, Beersaba, Jerusalem, Jaffa, Hebron, Haifa but that counts for nought because God told Abraham the land belonged to the Jews.

Let us not discount the continuing power of this argument. It was what inspired the 19th century, apocalyptic movement of Christian Zionism – a longing for the “restoration” of Jews to the Promised Land to bring about an end-times in which only true Christians would be saved.

Later, Christian Zionism was repurposed and adopted by small numbers of influential Jews like Theodor Herzl who realised they needed the support of Christian Zionist elites if they were ever to build a Jewish state. They finally found a sponsor in colonial Britain. In part, it was an appetite for Biblical prophecy that guided the British cabinet in approving the Balfour Declaration.

Today, much teaching in Israel depends on unspoken, unexamined claims in the Bible that Jews have a superior right to the land than Palestinians. Nonetheless, Israeli officials know that nowadays Biblical arguments hold little sway in much of the west. Outside Israel such claims play well only with evangelicals, mostly in the US, and have therefore been deployed selectively, targeted chiefly at US President Donald Trump's base. For the rest of us, the Biblical rationale is quietly set aside.

White man's burden

The second justification, frequently resorted to in the early years of the Zionist project, was a fully fledged colonial one, and closely tied to ideas about a superior Judeo-Christian civilisation.

Colonialism assumed that white westerners were a biologically separate race that had to assume responsibility for taming and civilising the savage nature of inferior peoples around the planet. These inferior beings were treated like children - seen as impulsive, backward, even self-destructive. They needed a role model in the white man whose job was to discipline them, re-educate them and impose order. The white man was compensated for the heavy burden he had to shoulder by awarding himself the right to plunder the savage people's resources. In any case, it was assumed, these barbarians were incapable of managing their affairs or putting their own resources to any good use.

If all this sounds improbably racist, remember that Trump right now is proposing a variation of the same idea: Mexicans must pay for the wall that keeps them out of a white America, even as US corporations continue to exploit cheap Mexican labour; and ungrateful Iraqis are [threatened](#) with being made to pay for the soldiers that invaded their country and the US military bases that oversee their occupation.

Liberals are no less averse to colonial ideas. The white man's burden underpins the "humanitarian intervention" project and the related, endless "war on terror". It has been easy to paint other states and their peoples negatively as they continue to reel from centuries of colonial interference - the theft of resources, the imposition of artificial borders that stoke internal, tribal conflict, and western support for local dictators and strongmen.

Developing states have also struggled to prosper in a world dominated by western colonial institutions, whether NATO, the World Bank, the IMF or the UN Security Council. Doomed to failure by the very rules rigged to ensure the western powers alone prosper, developing states find their dysfunctional or authoritarian politics turned against them, used to justify continuing invasion, plunder and control of their resources by the west.

'Death to the Arabs'

Whatever Zionism claims, Israel was not an antidote to this "white man's burden" ideology. It was an extension of it. Much of Europe may have been deeply racist towards Jews, but Europe's Jews were usually viewed as higher in the racial hierarchy than black, brown or yellow people. Typically Jews were despised or feared by antisemites not because they were seen as backward or primitive but because they were presented as too clever, or as manipulative, secretive and untrustworthy.

The Zionist movement sought to exploit this racism. Its founders, white European Jews, impressed on potential sponsors their ability to help colonise the Middle East on behalf of

the European powers. After the Balfour Declaration was issued, the British government put the Colonial Office in charge of shaping a Jewish “home” in Palestine.

An indication of the degree to which European ideas of racial categories polluted the thinking of the early Zionist movement can be gauged by the treatment of the Mizrahim – Jews from neighbouring Arab states who arrived in the wake of Israel’s creation.

The Ashkenazi (European) Jews who founded Israel had no interest in these Jews until the destruction of large parts of European Jewry in the Nazi death camps. Then the Mizrahim were needed to bolster Jewish demographic numbers against the Palestinians. Founding father David Ben Gurion was [disparaging](#) of the Mizrahim, terming them “human dust”. There were vigorous [debates](#) inside the Israeli army about whether the supposedly inferior, backward Arab Jews could ever have their savage natures tamed sufficiently to serve usefully as soldiers.

Israel launched an aggressive campaign to de-Arabise the children of these Jews – so successfully that today, even though Mizrahim constitute half of Israel’s Jewish population, less than 1% of Israeli Jews can read a book in Arabic. So complete has their re-education been that Mizrahi supporters of the Beitar Jerusalem football club lead [chants](#) of “Death to the Arabs” at the ground, apparently unaware that their grandparents were Arab in every sense of the word.

Virus of hatred?

Again, Israel and its western allies understand that few observers will accept overtly colonial-style justifications for Israel’s creation, except of the vague, war-on-terror kind. Such arguments run counter to the spirit of the times. Nowadays western elites prefer to pay lip service to identity politics, intersectionality, native rights – at least if they can be used to provide cover for white privilege and to disrupt class solidarity.

Israel has proven particularly adept at inverting and weaponising this form of identity politics. Now deprived of traditional Biblical and colonial rationales, Israel has been left with only one palatable argument to justify its crimes against Palestinians. A Jewish state is supposedly needed as inoculation against a global plague of antisemitism. Israel, it claims, is a vital sanctuary to protect Jews from inevitable future Holocausts.

Palestinians are not just collateral damage of the European project to create a Jewish “home”. They are also presented as a new breed of antisemite – their anger supposedly driven by irrational, inexplicable hatred – that Jews need protecting from. In Israel, roles of oppressor and victim have been reversed.

Israel is only too keen to extend the accusation of antisemitism to any western critic who champions the Palestinian cause. In fact, it has gone much further. It argues that, whether consciously or not, all non-Jews [harbour](#) the virus of antisemitism. Other Holocausts have been averted only because nuclear-armed Israel behaves like “a mad dog, too dangerous to bother”, as Israel’s most famous military chief of staff, Moshe Dayan, once declared. Israel is designed as a garrison state for its Jews, and an impregnable bolt-hole in time of trouble for any Jews who foolishly – Israeli leaders [imply](#) – have not understood that they face another Holocaust outside Israel.

White European racism

This is the self-rationalising appeal of antisemitism for Israel. But it has proved the perfect weapon too for western elites who wish to besmirch their opponents' arguments, as Corbyn, Labour's outgoing leader, found to his cost. Just as the Zionist movement and its Jewish state project were once the favoured vehicle for spreading British colonial influence in the Middle East, today Israel is the favoured vehicle for impugning the motives of those who criticise western imperialism or advocate for political alternatives to capitalism, such as socialism.

Few outside Israel understand the implications of the mischievous, self-serving antisemitism rationale crafted long ago by Israel and now embraced by western officials. It assumes that antisemitism is a virus present in all non-Jews, even if often lies dormant. Non-Jews must remain vigilant to prevent it reviving and infecting their thinking.

This was at the heart of the claims against the British Labour party. So-called "extreme leftists" like Corbyn and his supporters, so the argument goes, were so sure of their anti-racism credentials that they dropped their guard. Largely free of a fear of immigrants and non-white populations, they mixed with British Muslims and Arabs whose attitudes and ideas were easily passed on. Arab and Muslim resentment towards Israel – again, presented as inexplicable – supposedly provided fertile soil for the growth of antisemitism on the left and in Corbyn's Labour party.

Guerin's mistake was to hint, even if briefly and vaguely, in her report at a deeper, even more discomfiting recent history of European white racism that not only fuelled the Holocaust but also sponsored the dispossession of the Palestinians of their homeland to make room for a Jewish state.

The connecting thread of that story is not antisemitism. It is white European racism. And the fact that Israel and its supporters have signed up as cheerleaders for that kind of racism makes it no less white and no less racist.

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Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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