

On the Impasse of Political Violence. The History of Zionist Settlers in Palestine. “Deployment of Overwhelming Force to Frighten Palestinians into Submission”

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On the night of the October 7, 2023 attack in Southern Israel, I was staying overnight at my nephew’s place in Saint Petersburg, in the apartment I had grown up in, prior to emigrating from the Soviet Union over fifty years ago.

The following morning, as I walked in the neighbourhood located in the very centre of the former imperial capital, I recalled the names of the streets around me. I realized that most had honoured theoreticians and practitioners of political terrorism of the late 19th century [Russian Empire]: Pyotr Lavrov, Ivan Kalyaev, Stepan Khalturin, Andrei Zhelyabov, and Sofia Perovskaya.

They were proud to call themselves terrorists and were involved in several acts of violence.

It dawned on me that these streets are within a few minutes’ walk from the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood. The multicoloured onion-domed church, so unusual in the austere cityscape of Petersburg, was erected to commemorate Emperor Alexander II near the place of his assassination in 1881 by some of the revolutionaries whose names these streets bore during the Soviet period.

For these terrorists, assassinations were a means of bringing about social and political change.

They aimed at terrifying the ruling circles in the absence of elections or almost any form of

public participation in the country's administration.

These revolutionaries triumphed in October 1905 when Tsar Nicholas II was forced to bestow limited political rights on the population. His concessions proved unsatisfactory to many convinced revolutionaries, and they continued their campaign of assassinations.

Such terrorist groups attracted disproportionate numbers of minorities: Poles, Jews, Latvians etc.

In the Russian Empire, they experienced double oppression: political and ethno-religious. Jews were particularly targeted after the assassination of Alexander II, which triggered a wave of pogroms, populist anti-Jewish riots and massacres.

Waves of pogroms continued to descend on the Jews in the first years of the 20th century, particularly in what today is known as the Ukraine and Moldova, where anti-Jewish violence was virulent and widespread. A few Jewish self-defence groups were organized to ward off pogroms, but insecurity was endemic. Nearly two million Jews emigrated, mostly to the Americas.

It is in this context that a number of mostly young Jews embraced the novel ideology of Zionism and grafted it on top of their socialist convictions.

A few thousands of these aggrieved revolutionaries arrived in Ottoman Palestine with the intention of edifying a new socialist society and educating new Hebrew Men and Women, physically strong and spiritually freed from religious beliefs.

They were ready to do physical work, started socialist agricultural communes (kibbutz in Hebrew) and acquired arms to defend them. Unlike most Jewish émigrés from Russia heading for America who yearned to fit in the new country, Zionist settlers in Palestine sought to establish their own independent society.

These young Socialist Zionists arrived in Palestine with enthusiasm and a strong desire to break with the past, including the powerlessness they had experienced in the Russian Empire.

They abandoned their native Yiddish and strove to speak the new Zionist tongue of Modern Hebrew.

They cast away religion, building up a new identity as secular Hebrews.

While many had been prohibited from toiling the land in Russia's Pale of Settlement, the only part of the Russian Empire where Jews had been allowed to reside till 1917, in Palestine they became agriculturists.

They brought along two formative experiences from the old country: political uses of terrorism and the trauma of suffering random violence from non-Jews.

Most of the settlers had lived in Jewish towns and villages and had neither studied nor worked with non-Jews. Few had known the mixed, cosmopolitan society of Saint-Petersburg or Odessa. Their mistrust of non-Jews was later reinforced with the advent of Nazism and by the Nazi genocide of Jews in Europe.

Nor were they familiar with the Russian pattern of integrating conquered territories into the Empire.

Tatar princes, Georgian aristocrats and Central Asian potentates were adopted in the Russian official order, came to enjoy privileges appropriate to their rank and often intermarried with descendants of the old Russian gentry. One of the best-known cases is that of the Russian diplomat, author and composer Alexander Griboyedov who married a Georgian princess in the first third of the 19th century.

Despite their socialist rhetoric, Zionist settlers in Palestine kept apart from the local population whom they often mistrusted and disdained. Their patterns of settlement in Palestine reproduced the discrimination they had experienced in Russia's Pale of Settlement.

The official Zionist policy promoting segregation was expressed in various edifying slogans: "avoda 'ivrit" (Hebrew Labour), "livnot u-lehibanot" (To Build and to Be Built), "hafrada" (Separation), etc.

It meant eliminating Arabs from employment in Zionist enterprises, building the exclusive new Hebrew town of Tel Aviv next to the Old Jaffa and establishing Arab-free institutional infrastructures. In the 1920s and 30s, Zionists consistently rejected the idea of a representative assembly that would reflect the ethnic and religious diversity and expose the obvious fact that Zionist settlers constituted a minority in the Holy Land. All this naturally bred resentment of, and hostility against the Zionists.

Imbued with orientalism (*avant la lettre*), they possessed a sense of European colonial superiority with respect to Palestine's inhabitants, both Jews and Arabs. This attitude was reinforced when, in the wake of the First World War, Britain took over control of Palestine with the mandate, among other objectives, to enhance the Zionist enterprise in the country.

The British resorted to the usual violence under the guise of "pacification of the locals", similar to its actions in India and elsewhere while confronting Arab resistance with significantly more lethal force than that deployed against the Zionist paramilitary formations. The British also supported a "divide and conquer" approach, furthering separation and conflict between Jews and Arabs.

Thus, the Russian heritage of political terrorism, the memory of antisemitic hordes descending on Jewish communities in the Russian Empire and the naturally racist British colonial practices merged in shaping up the Zionist political culture in Palestine.

It combined preference for the use of force in dealing with the local population, on top of which existed a sense of entitlement, stemming from references by both the settlers and the British to the Hebrew Bible.

Except for the Communists and some members of the socialist Poale Tzion, the socialist ideal of internationalism succumbed under the weight of Hebrew nationalism.

Russian-born Zionists constituted over 60% of the Israeli parliament in 1952 even though emigration from Russia had ceased three decades earlier. To date, with the exception of Naphtali Bennett, all Israeli prime ministers or their parents were born in the Russian Empire.

Zionist settlers relied on force to subdue Palestinian Arabs and resorted to political assassination to prevent compromise with them.

Thus, the energetic spokesman for the anti-Zionist rabbis, Dutch-born Jacob De Haan, was killed in 1924 on the orders of the Hagana, a militia founded a few years earlier by Zionist settlers from Russia.

Other terrorist groups sprang up in the 1930s, most of them not only organized but also staffed by Russian-born Zionists. These groups initially engaged in violence against the local Arabs but later expanded their range to British military and civilian personnel both in Palestine and neighbouring countries, and even, eventually, to a high-profile UN mediator from Sweden. The Museum of Underground Prisoners in Jerusalem proudly displays this history, including homemade bombs and other terrorist implements.

The unilateral proclamation of the state of Israel in May 1948 was made despite determined opposition of most of the inhabitants of Palestine, including many Jews, and all the bordering countries.

Predictably, this provoked attacks from several Arab states. In the meantime, Zionist militias of different political hues committed acts of terror to terrify Palestinian Arabs and to make them abandon their homes. As part of a now well documented policy of ethnic cleansing, they forcefully expelled most of those committed to stay put.

The new state of Israel placed Palestinian Arabs under military rule, which lasted nearly two decades. Refugees and exiles who tried to return to their homes were killed, expelled, or arrested. More Palestinians became refugees after Israel's victory in the 1967 war. Military and police measures have been deployed since to pacify the Palestinians surviving in the West Bank and Gaza. In the meantime, Israel's armed forces earned the reputation of a formidable high-tech war machine.

The murderous attack of October 7, 2023 obviously enraged most Israelis. But instead of taking pause, military and political leaders immediately subjected Gaza to massive bombardment followed by a ground invasion by hundreds of thousands of soldiers.

This caused colossal casualties and a humanitarian crisis. This response to an essentially political problem - finding an arrangement with the Palestinians - is typical of Israel's approach: to deploy overwhelming force to frighten Palestinians into submission. At the same time, settler vigilantes on the West Bank have, over the years, been harassing and murdering Palestinians, burning their homes in a remake of pogroms of yesteryear while Israeli police has added hundreds of Palestinians to the thousands held in administrative detention.

Vengeful demonization of the Palestinians has become common. Even the soft-spoken president of Israel Itzhak Herzog, who had voiced concerns about the rise of fascism in Israel, now claimed that there were "no innocent civilians" in Gaza.

Meirav Ben-Ari, a parliamentarian from Yesh Atid, which in Israel passes for a liberal centrist party, said, in reference to thousands of Palestinian children killed by Israeli bombardment "the children in Gaza have brought this upon themselves! We are a peace-seeking nation, a life-loving nation".

The current burst of violence was not unforeseen. In 1948, in the midst of Israel's War of

Independence (the Palestinians remember it as the Nakba, catastrophe), Hannah Arendt, Jewish refugee from Germany who would become a prominent American political philosopher, warned:

And even if the Jews were to win the war...

[t]he “victorious” Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population, secluded inside ever-threatened borders, absorbed with physical self-defense.... And all this would be the fate of a nation that—no matter how many immigrants it could still absorb and how far it extended its boundaries (the whole of Palestine and Transjordan is the insane Revisionist demand)—would still remain a very small people greatly outnumbered by hostile neighbors.

The Israeli war on Gaza is another case supporting her diagnosis. Israel may win this war. But to win peace its leaders need to free themselves from the political culture developed by the intrepid Zionist pioneers fleeing ghettos over a century ago.

According to the Israeli philosopher Joseph Agassi, Israeli governments have behaved like community functionaries still living in a ghetto, sweeping aside the interests of Israel’s non-Jews, and thus stoking the fires of perpetual war. A ghetto equipped with a powerful army constitutes a danger, and not only to the region immediately bordering Israel.

The Biden administration has heightened the danger by embracing Israel’s messianic rhetoric and casting the war on Gaza as part of the Manichean worldwide struggle against Evil. This perpetuates reliance on violence inherited from the Russian revolutionaries eager to effect political change and from the European powers desperate to keep their colonies. Will Israel succeed once again to terrify and “pacify” the Palestinians? Or will it seek a more revolutionary solution to its “Palestinian problem”?

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