



# ISRAEL:

## *Colonial-Settler State*

by PHIL GASPER

**Z**ionism is a political movement that originally emerged in the late nineteenth century as a response to anti-Semitism, particularly in Eastern Europe. Capitalist development undermined the traditional commercial roles that many Jews had played in the old feudal economy. As the economic system moved into periodic crises, ruling groups in many countries would deflect mass anger at economic hardship and political repression by scapegoating Jews.

Zionists drew the pessimistic conclusion that anti-Semitism could not be eliminated, and that to escape persecution Jews had to emigrate to a region where they could set up an exclusively Jewish state. At the time of the Dreyfus Affair in France, in which a Jewish army officer was falsely accused of espionage, Theodor Herzl—who is generally regarded as the father of Zionism—wrote:

I achieved a freer attitude toward anti-Semitism, which I now began to understand historically and to pardon. Above all, I recognized the emptiness and futility of trying to “combat” anti-Semitism.<sup>1</sup>

The Russian Zionist Leo Pinsker similarly argued that “Judeophobia is a psychic aberration” that is “hereditary” and “incurable.”<sup>2</sup>

Herzl set out the Zionist program in 1896 in a pamphlet called *The State of the Jews*. He called for a Jewish state to be set up in an undeveloped country outside Europe. Herzl was explicit that the program could be carried out only with the backing of one of the major imperialist powers, who were at that time carving up the world between them. Once such support had been won, the Zionist movement would conduct itself like other colonizing ventures.

Various sites for the new state were considered, including

Argentina and Madagascar, but the influence of religious Jews led the Zionists to decide on Palestine, the Biblical “promised land.”

Herzl declared that, if it were created, this Jewish state would form “a portion of the rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the new state would be part of the system of colonial domination of the rest of the world.



**Herzl (center) and Zionist leaders en route to Palestine, 1898**

Having chosen Palestine, the Zionist movement attempted to persuade one of the imperialist powers to give them support in colonizing it. Initially, Turkey and Germany were approached. According to one Zionist spokesperson,

Turkey can be convinced that it will be important for her to have in Palestine and Syria a strong and well-organized group which...will resist any attack on the authority of the Sultan and defend his authority with all its might.<sup>4</sup>

Similar advances were made to Germany.

*Phil Gasper, a member of the International Socialist Organization in the San Francisco Bay Area, teaches philosophy at Notre Dame college.*

---

The founders of Zionism were even prepared to ally themselves with the most vicious anti-Semites. Herzl approached Count Von Plehve, the sponsor of the worst anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia: “Help me to reach the land sooner and the revolt [against Tsarist rule] will end.” Herzl and other Zionist leaders offered to help guarantee Tsarist interests in Palestine and to rid Eastern Europe and Russia of those “noxious and subversive Anarcho-Bolshevik Jews”—in other words, to get rid of the people who wanted to fight anti-Semitism rather than capitulate to it. Von Plehve agreed to finance the Zionist movement as a way of countering socialist opposition to the Tsar:

The Jews have been joining the revolutionary parties. We were sympathetic to your Zionist movement as long as it worked toward emigration. You don't have to justify the movement to me. You are preaching to a convert.<sup>5</sup>

When Britain took control of Palestine at the end of the First World War, Zionists turned their attention to lobbying the British government. The Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann argued, “A Jewish Palestine would be a safeguard to England, in particular in respect to the Suez Canal.”<sup>6</sup> This argument became increasingly attractive to the British ruling class. The war had underlined the importance of the Middle East, which guarded the sea routes to the Far East and contained the immensely profitable and strategically vital Persian oil fields.

Britain was eager to find ways to consolidate its power in the region, in opposition to both the other imperial powers and the emerging anticolonial nationalist movements in countries like Egypt. On November 2, 1917, the British foreign minister Lord Balfour, a notorious anti-Semite, issued the following declaration:

His Majesty's Government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object....<sup>7</sup>

One person who played an important role in arguing for the declaration was the South African delegate to the British war cabinet, General Jan Smuts, a close friend of Weizmann's and a future South African prime minister. In fact, Zionist leaders like Herzl and Weizmann frequently compared their aims with the South African conception of a racially distinct colonizing population, and built close ties with South Africa. In his diaries, Herzl had explicitly drawn parallels between himself and the most prominent representative of British imperialism in South Africa, Cecil Rhodes:

Naturally there are big differences between Cecil Rhodes and my humble self, the personal ones very much in my disfavor, but the objective ones greatly in favor of our [Zionist] movement.<sup>8</sup>

The Balfour declaration did not create a Jewish state, but it did encourage mass emigration to Palestine and the construction of an extensive settler community that was to become the basis of the state of Israel. But there was one problem. Contrary to Zionist propaganda that Palestine was “a land without people for a people without a land,” the area was in fact the most densely populated region of the Eastern Mediterranean, with an Arab population that had lived there for about 1,000 years and had developed an extensive economy.<sup>9</sup>

Small Jewish settlements had existed in Palestine from the

late nineteenth century, but after 1917 the colonization process accelerated considerably. Jewish organizations bought up large areas of land from absentee landlords, displacing large numbers of Palestinian peasants. The Zionists also began building an exclusively Jewish “enclave” economy, organized around the Histadrut—the general confederation of Hebrew workers in Palestine. The settlers refused to employ Arab labor and boycotted Arab goods.

In the 1930s, the rise of fascism in Europe gave a further boost to Jewish immigration, even though most Jews had no interest in moving to Palestine. Zionism was still very much a fringe movement among Jews, and only 8.5 percent of Jewish migrants went to Palestine during this period. The number would have been even smaller if countries such as the U.S. and Britain had not had racist immigration policies that excluded most Jews. The refugees who did arrive in Palestine, however, strengthened the settler community.

The founding of a Zionist state is often justified as a response to the rise of fascism and to the horrors of the Nazi holocaust that exterminated six million Jews. But far from fighting against fascism, Zionists frequently collaborated with the fascists. In 1933, the Zionist Federation of Germany sent a memorandum of support to the Nazis:

On the foundation of the new [Nazi] state which has established the principle of race, we wish to fit our community into the total structure so that for us, too, in the sphere assigned to us, fruitful activity for the Fatherland is possible.<sup>10</sup>

Later that year, the World Zionist Organization congress defeated a resolution for action against Hitler by a vote of 240 to 43.

Leading Nazis like Joseph Goebbels wrote articles praising Zionism, and some Zionists received Nazi funds. A member of the *Haganah*, a Zionist militia in Palestine, delivered the following message to the German SS in 1937:

Jewish nationalist circles...were very pleased with the radical German policy, since the strength of the Jewish population in Palestine would be so far increased thereby that in the foreseeable future the Jews could reckon upon numerical superiority over the Arabs.<sup>11</sup>

The Zionist movement went so far as to oppose changes in the immigration laws of the U.S. and Western Europe, which would have permitted more Jews to find refuge in these countries. In 1938, David Ben-Gurion, who was to become the first prime minister of Israel, wrote:

If I knew that it would be possible to save all the children in Germany by bringing them over to England and only half of them by transporting them to Eretz Yisrael [greater Israel], then I would opt for the second alternative.<sup>12</sup>

This philosophy was put into practice. As the author Ralph Schoenman notes in *The Hidden History of Zionism*:

Throughout the late thirties and forties, Jewish spokespersons in Europe cried out for help, for public campaigns, for organized resistance, for demonstrations to force the hand of allied governments—only to be met not merely by Zionist silence but by active Zionist sabotage of the meager efforts which were proposed or prepared in Great Britain and the United States.

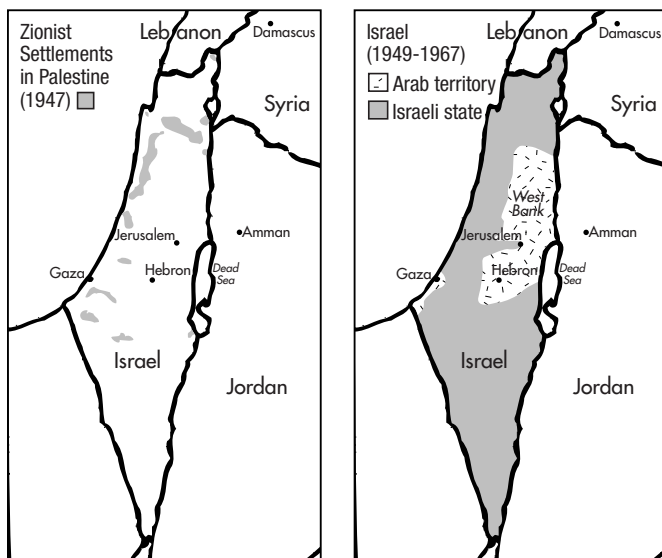
The dirty secret of Zionist history is that Zionism was threatened by the Jews themselves. Defending the Jewish peo-

ple from persecution meant organizing resistance to the regimes which menaced them. But these regimes embodied the imperial order which comprised the only social force willing or able to impose a settler colony on the Palestinian people. Hence, the Zionists needed the persecution of the Jews to persuade Jews to become colonizers afar, and they needed the persecutors to sponsor the enterprise.

Meanwhile, Jews in Palestine were given privileged status by the British colonial regime. The British helped to establish and train a Zionist militia, granted Jewish capital 90 percent of economic concessions, and paid Jews higher wages than Arabs for equal work. From the 1920s onward, the British government used the Jewish settlers to help suppress mass Arab demonstrations against landlessness and unemployment and for independence. The most sustained uprising by the Palestinians took place from 1936 to 1939, and included a general strike of several months, the withholding of taxes, civil disobedience and armed insurrection. The British responded by declaring martial law and instituting mass repression, relying heavily on Zionist forces. Hundreds of Palestinians were executed or assassinated, thousands were imprisoned, and thousands of homes were demolished.<sup>13</sup>

### The foundation of Israel

But Britain, greatly weakened by the Second World War, was forced to withdraw from Palestine. In 1947, the leading imperialist powers, including the U.S. and the USSR, decided to partition the country into separate Jewish and Palestinian states. Even though at this time Jews comprised only 31 percent of the population, the Zionists were given 54 percent of the fertile land.



**Jewish settlements in Palestine in 1947 (left) were tiny. By means of terrorist violence, the Zionists drove the Palestinians away and, in 1948, seized territory beyond what they had been granted by the 1947 UN partition plan.**

Even this was not satisfactory for the Zionists, however. In 1938, Ben-Gurion had declared:

The boundaries of Zionist aspiration include southern Lebanon, southern Syria, today's Jordan, all of Cis-Jordan [the

West Bank] and the Sinai.... After we become a strong force as the result of the creation of the state, we shall abolish partition and expand to the whole of Palestine. The state will only be a stage in the realization of Zionism and its task is to prepare the ground for our expansion. The state will have to preserve order...with machine guns.<sup>14</sup>

The Zionist project could only be completed if the local Arab population was expelled. As Joseph Weitz, head of the Jewish Agency's Colonization Department, had put it in 1940:

There is no room for both peoples together in this country.... We shall not achieve our goal of being an independent people with the Arabs in this small country.... And there is no other way than to transfer the Arabs from here to the neighboring countries. To transfer all of them; not one village, not one tribe should be left.<sup>15</sup>

Another Zionist document, the "Koenig Report," was even more blunt:

We must use terror, assassination, intimidation, land confiscation and the cutting of all social services to rid the Galilee of its Arab population.<sup>16</sup>

In 1948, this policy was put into effect. Zionist forces seized three-quarters of the land and expelled close to one million Palestinians. Military groups, whose leaders included the future Israeli prime ministers Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, carried out massacres at Deir Yassin and other villages designed to terrorize the rest of the Palestinian population into fleeing for their lives. At Deir Yassin, 254 men, women, and children were murdered. In Begin's own words:

All in the Jewish forces proceeded to advance through Haifa like a knife through butter. The Arabs began fleeing in panic, shouting "Deir Yassin."<sup>17</sup>

Other massacres were carried out by the official Israeli Defense Forces. At the village of Dueima, according to the eyewitness account of one soldier,

They killed between eighty to one hundred Arab men, women and children. To kill the children they fractured their heads with sticks. There was not one home without corpses.... Educated and well-mannered commanders who were considered "good guys"...became base murderers, and this not in the storm of battle, but as a method of expulsion and extermination.<sup>18</sup>

Nearly 500 Palestinian villages existed in the territory that came under Israeli occupation after partition in 1947. During 1948 and 1949, nearly 400 of these were razed to the ground. More were destroyed in the 1950s. In 1969, Moshe Dayan, former chief of staff and minister of defense, summarized the nature of the Zionist colonization:

We came here to a country that was populated by Arabs, and we are building here a Hebrew, Jewish state. Instead of Arab villages, Jewish villages were established.... There is not a single [Jewish] settlement that was not established in the place of a former Arab village.<sup>19</sup>

Zionist apologists have defended Israel's expansion on the grounds that the survival of the Jewish state was threatened by hostile Arab neighbors. On the pretext of defending the Palestinians, Arab countries did launch a military offensive in 1948, but as John Rose notes, "It was a totally unreal exercise.

There were military clashes—but key Arab governments were already in negotiations with the Israelis.<sup>20</sup> Israelis forces vastly outmatched their Arab counterparts, and they used the opportunity to seize as much territory as possible.

In his diary, Moshe Sharett, Israeli prime minister in the 1950s, admits that the security argument has always been a fraud. According to Sharett, the Israeli political and military leadership never believed in any Arab danger to Israel. Rather, Israel has sought to maneuver and force the Arab states into military confrontations that the Zionist leadership was certain of winning so that Israel could destabilize Arab regimes and occupy more territory. Israel's aim has been to "dismember the Arab world, defeat the Arab national movement and create puppet regimes under regional Israeli power" and "to modify the balance of power in the region radically, transforming Israel into the major power in the Middle East."<sup>21</sup>

Before 1947, Jews owned about 6 percent of the land in Palestine. In the process of establishing the state of Israel, the Zionists expropriated 90 percent of the land, the vast majority of which formerly belonged to Arabs. Entire cities were emptied of Palestinians, and Palestinian orchards, industry, rolling stock, factories, houses, and possessions were seized. Close to one million Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from their homeland.

The Arabs who remained in Israel became second-class citizens, while Palestinians who were driven out of the country were forced to live in poverty in refugee camps throughout the Middle East. Israel passed "The Law of Return," which allows every person of Jewish descent to emigrate to Israel, but the Palestinians were not allowed to return to their own homeland.

Following the Six Day War in 1967, Israel occupied further territory including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, 55 percent of the land and 70 percent of the water were seized for the benefit of Jewish settlers who constituted only a tiny fraction of the population. In Gaza, 2,200 settlers were given more than 40 percent of the land while 500,000 Palestinians were confined to crowded camps and slums.

Israel's actions have been repeatedly condemned by the United Nations (UN), but the U.S. government has ensured that nothing has been done to enforce a series of UN resolutions. Since its creation, Israel has been a defender of Washington's interests in the oil-rich region of the Middle East. The US wanted a client state in the region that could help prevent popular resistance to its control of oil. As the influential Jewish paper *Ha'aretz* put it in 1951:

Israel is to become the watchdog. There is no fear that Israel will undertake any aggressive policy towards the Arab states when this would explicitly contradict the wishes of the U.S. and Britain. But, if for any reasons the western powers should sometimes prefer to close their eyes, Israel could be relied upon to punish one or several neighboring states whose discourtesy to the west went beyond the bounds of the permissible.<sup>22</sup>

As a consequence, Israel has received billions of dollars of U.S. aid every year, which has made it one of the most heavily armed states in the world.

Theodor Herzl, *The Diaries of Theodor Herzl* (New York: Dial Press, 1956), p. 6.

Quoted in Nathan Weinstock, *Zionism: False Messiah* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), p. 44.

Quoted in Maxime Rodinson, *Israel and the Arabs* (Hardmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 14.

Quoted in Ralph Schoenman, *The Hidden History of Zionism*, (San Francisco: Socialist Action, 1988).

See Andre Chouraqui, *The Life of Theodor Herzl* (Jerusalem: Keter Books, 1970), p. 230, for an account of Herzl's meeting with Plehve.

Quoted in Weinstock, p. 96.

Quoted in Weinstock, p. 97.

Quoted in Uri Davis, *Israel: An Apartheid State* (London: Zed Books, 1987), pp. 3–4.

See, for example, Rashid Khalidi, "Palestinian peasant resistance to Zionism before World War I," in Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens, eds., *Blaming the Victims* (New York: Verso, 1988).

Quoted in Lenni Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators* (Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1983), pp. 48–49.

Quoted in Brenner, p. 99.

Quoted in Brenner, p. 149.

Phil Marshall, *Intifada: Zionism, Imperialism and Palestinian Resistance* (London: Bookmarks, 1989), pp. 35–43.

Quoted in Schoenman.

Quoted in Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), p.16. As Weinstock observes, "These words, it should be borne in mind, express the mentality of moderate 'Labour' Zionists" (Weinstock, p.154).

Quoted in Schoenman.

Quoted in Weinstock, p. 242. For a description by an Israeli historian of the massacre, see Simha Flaphan, *The Birth of Israel* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 94.

Quoted in Schoenman. The massacres continued after the state of Israel was established, for example at Qibya in 1953 and at Kafr Kassem in 1956. Both of these attacks were commanded by Ariel Sharon, later the Israeli defense minister and today leader of the Likud Party. See Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), pp. 158–59 and 383–85.

Quoted in Schoenman.

John Rose, *Israel: The Hijack State* (Chicago: ISO, 1986), p. 42.

Quoted in Schoenman.

Quoted in Rose, p. 15.