

1. Anti-Semitism and Zionism

This is the first part of our series, "A Short History of Israel". If you have not read our introduction, it is [here](#). See also, the [Table of Contents](#).

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In the second century CE the Romans expelled and scattered the Jews from their homeland, which was roughly today's Israel [[MAP](#)] [[MAP](#)] plus the West Bank, Gaza, and part of Jordan. The Romans then re-named the region Palestine (after the Philistines, ancient enemies of the Jews who had passed into history long before then). As a result of that expulsion and previous expulsions, Jews settled in almost every country of the Old (and later the New) World, forming communities in which they continued to evolve their distinctive culture. The Jews of today are descendants of those Jews and of local people who occasionally adopted the culture through conversion to Judaism (the Jews' traditional religion, which permitted, but seldom sought, converts).

Most countries in Europe and the Middle East have persecuted Jews for most of their history. Most have expelled and/or slaughtered their Jewish populations at some time or other. They have justified this through a complex of ideas called *anti-Semitism*, which include

- the idea that Jews have collectively failed some crucial test (e.g. they rejected Jesus, or Mohammed, or do not have the Aryans' capacity for 'culture', or do not satisfy Stalin's criteria for being a 'nation', or lack a mystical 'connection to the land', etc);
- the idea that Jews cause pollution – for instance that they are poisoning the water supply, or that they desecrate holy sites and artefacts – which is often extended, semi-metaphorically, to the idea that Jews *are* pollution/vermin/rotten/cancer etc.;
- blood libels, the classic one being that Jews kidnap and murder non-Jewish children and consume their blood in religious rituals;
- the incorporation of an entity called 'The Jews' deeply into the fabric of many cultures as the eternal enemy bent on destroying whatever that culture values; and
- conspiracy theories, especially theories that 'The Jews' are secretly 'behind' the events of history and current affairs.

Before the twentieth century, Jews had responded to anti-Semitism

in various ways, of which the most important were: *endurance*, *conversion* and *assimilation*. But large-scale conversions occurred only under direct duress, and assimilated Jews were sometimes targeted as much as traditional Jews. During the Enlightenment, Jews were given equal rights in Western countries, though in all but the Anglo-Saxon ones this was little more than a facade. During the nineteenth century, there were sporadic mass murders of Jews in Eastern Europe. In the Arab countries, mass murders and expulsions (albeit on a smaller scale than in Eastern Europe), ubiquitous blood libels and day-to-day persecution, continued much as they always had. In Western Europe, virulently anti-Semitic ideologies arose. This seemed ominous to many assimilated Jews: if anti-Semitism was on the rise even there, at the hub of modernity where assimilation was almost total, then assimilation was not the solution to anti-Semitism and Jews everywhere were in danger. Some of them became socialists, identifying themselves with the struggle for a worldwide workers' paradise in which everyone, even Jews, would be truly emancipated. Some became Zionists.

Zionism is the idea that Jews should form a state, where they could live normal lives and defend themselves like the people of other nations, and provide a haven for Jews who might be persecuted elsewhere.

Zionism had been proposed by various writers during the nineteenth century. The Zionist movement, as a political organisation, was founded by an Austrian journalist, Theodor Herzl, who in 1894 had decided that his own assimilationist views were untenable. He was in Paris covering the trial of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French Army who was falsely convicted of espionage in an atmosphere of national anti-Semitic hysteria. Through writing, lecturing and individual persuasion, Herzl rapidly gathered support for his new movement. The First Zionist Congress was held in Basle, Switzerland in 1897.

Zionism was opposed by religious Jews because it had a secular objective. Some opposed it because it usurped the role of the Messiah, a mythical person who they believed would one day lead them back to their historical homeland. They considered any Jewish political movement not led by the Messiah futile, even sacrilegious.

Initially, Zionism was also opposed, or ignored, by most assimilationists, because it sought separation, which they believed to be the cause of anti-Semitism.

As the persecution of Jews continued to increase all over Eastern Europe during the early twentieth century, a significant minority of secular Jews, and a small minority of religious ones, became Zionists.

There had been a small Jewish community in Palestine for many centuries, perhaps since Roman times. In 1850, the total Jewish population was about 10,000, most of them in the city of Jerusalem where they had just become the majority (and have remained so ever since). During the second half of the nineteenth century,

Jewish philanthropists had been buying land in Palestine for the

purpose of resettling Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. Palestine was very under-populated, in the sense that it could, even with nineteenth century technology, support many times its population at that time, which was less than half a million and declining. It was a run-down backwater of the Ottoman Empire [MAP] where people of many different races and cultures lived, mainly Arabs. There was no administrative region of the Empire called Palestine, and the inhabitants of the region did not think of themselves as a distinct political entity.

Western countries introduced immigration controls towards the end of the nineteenth century, and made them ever more stringent as the twentieth century progressed. This was in response to the waves of immigrants, including Jewish refugees, who kept arriving from Russia and Europe.

The British offered part of Uganda as a refuge for one million Jews. The Sixth Zionist Congress accepted this as an interim measure in 1903, but the British soon cooled to the idea and took no steps to implement it. Herzl, who had been its most prominent supporter, suddenly died, and the Seventh Zionist Congress finally rejected it in 1905. Also in 1905 there was a vast outbreak of murder of Jews in Russia, resulting in the arrival of thousands of Jewish refugees in Palestine – a total of over 40,000 by 1914.

The Ottoman Empire was an ally of Germany in the First World War. The British captured Palestine in 1917 and issued the *Balfour Declaration*, which said:

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.

This was incorporated into the terms of the League of Nations Mandate under which, after the war, the British administered a territory that they called Palestine [MAP], consisting of the area that we shall call Palestine (Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights), plus today's Jordan. The Mandate required Britain to make arrangements to allow Jews to settle in Palestine and create their National Home. The Jews themselves would finance this, assisted by a charity which was later called the Jewish Agency. They would purchase land for farms and new towns, drain the swamps that spawned endemic malaria, build new infrastructure, and generally develop the country. The British would assist by donating some of the government-owned land which they had 'inherited' from the Ottoman Empire, and by maintaining human rights and the rule of law.

Between then and the Second World War, about 600,000 Jews came to Palestine. A few of them came because they wanted to be part of the new type of Jewish society that was being created in the Jewish National Home, but most had nowhere else to go and many

of them would otherwise have died in the Holocaust or the other mass murders that preceded it.

In 1920 there were Arab riots in Jerusalem and elsewhere, in which Jews were murdered. The Jewish community were alarmed that the British authorities seemed reluctant to intervene. After the riots, the British arrested many Arabs and Jews and dealt out harsh prison sentences for illegal possession of weapons. It seemed unfair to Jews that those who had been defending themselves from murder should be treated equally with their would-be murderers. A few months later, the British proclaimed an amnesty and released all those who had been sentenced.

One of the Jews imprisoned and then amnestied was Vladimir Jabotinsky, a Zionist leader and former British soldier who had led the defence of Jerusalem in 1920. He became disillusioned both with the British and with the Zionist movement whose policy of peaceful cooperation with the British, he believed, would lead to the destruction of the Jewish National Home. He founded a new movement called 'Revised Zionism' or 'Revisionism', which aimed for a fully independent Jewish state (not just a 'National Home'), in the whole of the Palestine Mandate, and also rejected the mainstream Zionist movement's socialistic ideology in favour of a free-market philosophy.

Also in those riots, the handful of Jews living on the Golan Heights were expelled. They had been farming there on land that had been purchased in the 1880s. Another tract of 18,000 acres further east, in what is today Syria, had been purchased by Baron Rothschild in 1891. The Jews who settled there had been expelled by the Ottoman provincial ruler soon afterwards. (But Rothschild had retained title to the land; his family donated it to the State of Israel in 1957.)

In 1921, the Jewish area of Jerusalem was attacked again, Jews all over Palestine were murdered, and many Jewish farms and settlements were destroyed. The British responded by temporarily suspending Jewish immigration.

They also removed the Mayor of Jerusalem for inciting anti-Semitic riots, but as a conciliatory gesture replaced him by his nephew Haj Amin al-Husseini, a leader of those riots who had been granted amnesty, and who now did everything in his power to incite anti-Semitic hatred and organise anti-Semitic violence. He added a new libel to the standard repertoire, namely that The Jews were plotting to demolish the Al-Aqsa mosque and replace it by a synagogue. Within a year, he was also appointed Grand Mufti of Jerusalem (i.e. the senior Muslim cleric in Palestine) and became the dominant Arab political figure in the region for the next two decades.

Part 2: The Gathering Storm

Mon, 05/05/2003 - 19:11 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

Conversion?

Before the twentieth century, Jews had responded to

anti-Semitism in various ways, of which the most important were: endurance, conversion and assimilation. But large-scale conversions occurred only under direct duress, and assimilated Jews were sometimes targeted as much as traditional Jews.

Conversion of whom? By whom? To what?

by a reader on Tue, 05/06/2003 - 00:03 | [reply](#)

Conversion

Mostly to Christianity, by christians.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Tue, 05/06/2003 - 00:21 | [reply](#)

Conversions of Jews to Christ...

Conversions of Jews to Christianity and Islam of course.

by a reader on Tue, 05/06/2003 - 01:24 | [reply](#)

Other European happenings...

Would it be possible to mention some specifics of the treatment of Jews in particular European countries prior to 1900, and their roles in various societies? I imagine that to some extent that situation is relevant in understanding how various states' attitudes have crystallized today.

by a reader on Tue, 05/06/2003 - 23:01 | [reply](#)

Anti-Semitism and Zionism, part I

An excellent beginning. You've read your sources well. I'd suggest that you provide more documentation, though, if you can; some of your readers (especially those who disagree with you) will demand it.

For example, you might provide links in your text to a page of footnotes in your printed sources... so that anyone who doubts the forced conversions of Jews to Christianity during the Inquisitions, for example, would know where to look (and in which book) for your sources.

It also occurs to me that you haven't mentioned the Inquisitions (of Spain, Portugal, etc.). I think that might be pertinent; in the Inquisitions we saw the largest wholesale persecutions of Jews that would be known until the rise of Hitler.

As I said, though, a very good beginning! I look forward to future installments -- the partitioning of Palestine (east and west of the Jordan), the Haganah and its rivals, the wall-and-watchtower era, and so forth.
best wishes,

Daniel Schwartz
Medford, MA

by a reader on Wed, 05/07/2003 - 22:38 | [reply](#)

Zionism good or bad?

It's fair for Jews to have their own land as long as the human rights of the surrounding nations are not violated. Is it true that this nation has 110 different nuclear weapons- I know it is. In the event of war, the whole middle east will go under water.

Zionism is o.k to be concerned with the existence of Israel. What about if it is concerned with its expansion however, on the detriment of surrounding nations, violation of human rights etc. Do you know that the island of Cyprus is within the concept of the "GREAT ISRAEL?" The Armenians suffered a genocide of the Turks; Why U.S and other countries with the exception of France and Greece do not recognize such genocide? I think we should be fair to the Jews as much as we should be fair to other people that went through genocides. By adopting double standards is not the way to justice or truth.

by Reader on Fri, 03/18/2005 - 10:14 | [reply](#)

Zionism

Read the remaining instalments of this series.

Reader is mistaken: Israel's existence does not violate the 'rights' of other countries; there have been several Middle-East wars involving Israel after it developed nuclear weapons (all of them caused by murderous attacks on Israel) but they did not cause the Middle East to 'go under', because Israel is a civilised country. As for the proposal that 'we' should de-legitimise Israel out of fairness unless the Armenian genocide and every other wrong in the world is first 'recognised', or the absurd theories of Israeli expansionism, or the whole line of argument in that comment, this just demonstrates how the only way to reach the conclusion that Zionism is 'bad', is to ignore facts and base one's policies on conspiracy theories and antisemitism.

by **Editor** on Fri, 03/18/2005 - 15:38 | [reply](#)

That reader didn't stay on th

That reader didn't stay on the subject, so typically of that of an Arabists propagandists' menu:
'Attack the Zionists with ANY aslander, and then run...'

I have seen this before they insert some drama slogan, like: "human rights", as if Israeli Arabs are less well off than minorities in the US (The opposite is true!).

What "human rights" is he talking about?

The (surrounding) Arab Muslims' human rights squashed under their leaders' brutality (all of them as of today still on Nov-2005) and divert their attention to the "zionist-enemy"?

Is he maybe talking about the Syrian phony claim to Baron Rothchild's Golan heights where the Druze live better there than under the Syrian boot?

Not even going into the "judenrein" (areas where they plan to establish, a never before in history, a country by the name of:) "Palestine" where no Jew is allowed to live.

But even him mentioning Cyprus, which I don't see any Zionist leader having a "plan" there, shows the reader was brainwashed by an Arab Muslim that convinced him that the "Zionists are out to get him in Cyprus".

From this point on, there's no much sense in elaborating any further.

Only reaffirming again, who the victim is...

Lies!

by a reader on Mon, 11/07/2005 - 02:55 | [reply](#)

the true victims are the milli

the true victims are the millions slain for their leaders' thoughts and views, Jewish and non-Jewish. Remember we're all human and live on the same rock. No culture has the right to put their needs first. Just think if you were born and raised a Muslim, would your views be the same? I doubt it.

by derrick on Tue, 08/22/2006 - 03:31 | [reply](#)

"No culture has the right to

"No culture has the right to put their needs first." Yes they do. That's the whole point of having different nations. What matters is whether the culture is giving individuals different rights based on cultural differences. To my knowledge, proof of Israel having done this or anything like it can only be found in the fevered imaginations of liberals and anti-Semites.

by EJS on Wed, 04/11/2007 - 21:19 | [reply](#)