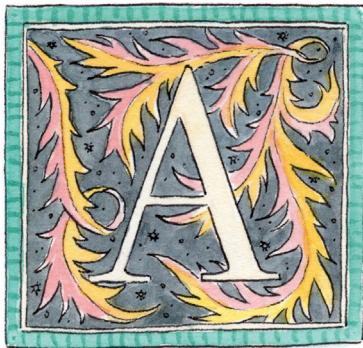


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Where the Soviets Won

*Anti-Zionism has succeeded in the West
more than it ever could in the East*



STRANGE THING occurred on September 25, 1991. After decades of developing and promoting it, Soviet Foreign Minister Boris Pankin stood at the United Nations and declared that his country was ready to bury one of its most durable exports: anti-Zionism. “Our organization has been renewed,” he announced, “and it is imperative that once and for all it rejects the legacy of the Ice Age in which Zionism was compared with racism.” The same week, *Izvestia*, the state-sponsored newspaper that had for many years churned out anti-Zionist talking points, described Israel as a “democratic” state and Iraq as “despotic.” Just three weeks later, the Russian airline Aeroflot signed an agreement with Israel’s El Al to establish direct immigrant flights from Moscow and St. Petersburg to Tel Aviv.

For three decades, the USSR had been busy crafting a titanic campaign that blamed Israel and Zionism for crimes against humanity. How, then, can one account for such a dramatic shift in state policy vis-à-vis anti-Zionism? And how did a manufactured ideology so vacuous come to flourish, decades later, in Western cities such as London, Berlin, and New York?



The answer to the first question contains the answer to the second, and together they reveal a paradox with urgent implications for the present. The difference between anti-Zionism in the East and anti-Zionism in the West is that in the former it was part of the coercive structure of the state, whereas in the West it is an anti-state strategy.

In the East, the educated class—the poets, the physicists, the dissidents—saw through anti-Zionist propaganda precisely because the state was its author. But in the West, where no state imposed it, anti-Zionism found what the Soviet Union could never manufacture: eager consumers. It arrived not as an order but as an invitation, slipped inside the American moral framework of antiracism, and was voluntarily embraced by the very class of people—professors, writers, artists, human rights activists—who resisted its equivalent in the East. Anti-Zionism has succeeded in the democratic West more than it ever could in the totalitarian East. To understand why, one must first understand why it failed at home.

For the USSR, Zionism was a useful symbol of all the evil isms: imperialism, colonialism, racism, fascism. It stood in for the global conspiracy of American capital. The Soviet focus on Zionism was therefore totalizing and relentless. But who actually believed it? Citizens of the Soviet Union lived inside a system of mandatory lying. The newspapers lied. The party congresses lied. The school textbooks lied. Many

knew this and, crucially, some knew that everybody else knew it. The regime's insistence that Zionism was evil was evidence that it was not. Its propagandistic nature was so apparent to the intelligentsia that it could never be truly believed even by a population already so inclined toward antisemitism. The chant "Bey zhidov, spasaj Rossiyu" ("Beat the kikes, save Russia!") had echoed through the tsarist empire long before any KGB operative dreamed up Zionist demonology. What the population possessed, in other words, was hatred; what the state supplied was ideology. The two coexisted but never really merged. "Bytovoy antisemitism" — everyday, street-level Jew-hatred — ran on its own ancient fuel and needed little doctrinal sanction, while state anti-Zionism relied on printing presses, "Zionology," and party directives that rarely translated into conviction.

The intelligentsia had a word for Soviet doublethink: *pokazukha*, loosely understood as "façade over reality," the performance of belief with no inner meaning behind it. When the state declared Zionism the enemy of all progressive mankind, sophisticated Soviet citizens filed it alongside the five-year-plan figures and the grain-harvest statistics — information to be nodded at in public and quietly discarded in private. Refuseniks found significant sympathy among Russian dissidents, not because dissident Russians were necessarily philosemites, but because the propaganda bore the same stench of official mendacity. The dissidents felt a sense of kinship with those targeted for social engineering by the totalitarian state.

While the state could command conformity, engineering true belief proved a difficult task. For this reason, when the Soviet empire collapsed, the entire anti-Zionist complex collapsed with it. In the turbulent months leading up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the imperative to stay in power coincided with pressure to normalize relations with Israel. This abrupt reversal on anti-Zionism should be read for what it was: evidence that anti-Zionism had been a political

instrument rather than popular conviction. As Izabella Tabarovsky recently observed, it was embraced insofar as it served the regime's interests and discarded just as quickly once it no longer did.

To be sure, the disappearance of state anti-Zionism did not signal the end of anti-Jewish hostility in the former Soviet states. Indeed, the best evidence of anti-Zionism's shallow purchase lies in what happened to the politics of Jew-hatred after the collapse of the USSR: It migrated to the political Right, shed the language of anti-colonialism, and returned to what Soviet Jewish writer Friedrich Gorenshyeyn calls "national zoological tendencies," captured in popular Russian antisemitic sayings such as "If the tap has run dry, the Jews drank the supply; if the tap runs anew, it's been pissed in by a Jew." Tellingly, post-Soviet anti-Jewish hostility revived the ancient blood libel in *Pravda*, the former flagship newspaper of the Communist Party.



Here we come to the second question: If the Russian intelligentsia, the educated class of writers, professors, poets, artists, and human rights activists, could see through the lies of anti-Zionism, why is the exact same class of citizenry in the West the one most reliably promoting the same lies? Why is anti-Zionism voluntarily embraced by those who claim intellectual independence? How have they helped anti-Zionism succeed in the West more than it ever could in the East?

The answer is: timing. Anti-Zionism arrived in the United States during the era of the anti-Vietnam War protests and the civil rights movement—the precise historical moment when the American moral imagination was being reorganized around the single axis of racism versus what would later be called antiracism. The timing was auspicious for anti-Zionism. While in the Soviet Union anti-Zionism was an extension of the cold and bureaucratic state, in

America it was packaged as part of the armed struggle against racism. As Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton wrote in a 1970 statement: “We support the Palestinians’ just struggle for liberation one hundred percent. We will go on doing this, and we would like for all of the progressive people of the world to join our ranks in order to make a world in which all people can live.” When George Jackson, known as the Black Panthers’ field marshal, was killed by San Quentin prison guards the following year, a handwritten copy of the poem “Enemy of the Sun,” by Palestinian poet Samih al-Qasim, was found among his belongings, and the *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service* erroneously attributed its authorship to Jackson.

This rather literal conflation of Palestinian nationalism with revolutionary black nationalism illustrates how anti-Zionist propaganda from the Soviet revolutionary empire slipped through America’s moral cracks, namely, anti-black racism. Once inside that moral framework, it became nearly impossible to dislodge because to question anti-Zionism was to question the entire tradition of American antiracist thought to which it had attached itself. The parasite found its ideal host in the American protest movement, embedding itself within the structure of the activist and academic disciplines devoted to social deconstruction.

Americans are, in many ways, culturally conditioned to view political mobilization and public dissent as democratic virtues. Yet this very openness, America’s identity as a beacon of freedom, also renders it vulnerable to propaganda. The euphoric support that anti-Zionism enjoys among left-wing protesters stands in direct contrast to its failure to find a foothold among those who protested the regime that manufactured it. My mother, who grew up in the Soviet Union, puts it simply: “The Soviet reader developed a skill almost entirely absent in the free world, an instinctive nose for ideological slop.” In effect, anti-Zionism was a product of state propaganda that entered

the American landscape in a highly strategic way. It passed through the field of vision in a free society ill-equipped to confront blatant hatred veiled as legitimate discourse.

This reveals something distinctive about American culture itself, specifically about the limits of how Americans understand hatred. As Shaul Kelner recently observed, “Americans do not have a conceptual language of thinking about the Othering of Jews” outside of “Nazi and racist referents.” Can an American recognize hate that has nothing to do with race?

The question is not rhetorical. A dominant framework through which Americans process bigotry can be seen in what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, a sociologist and proponent of critical race theory, calls the “racial grammar of everyday life,” the underlying structure through which people interpret reality. Consider how the Holocaust is taught in American schools: as a story about political power. The Nazis had it; the Jews did not. The Nazis othered a powerless minority on the basis of racial impurity. That framing, however well-intentioned, quietly assimilates the Holocaust into the American story of racial oppression. It makes it legible to a society that thinks of oppression in primarily racial terms.

But antisemitism is not racism. Or rather, it is not *only* racism, and the part that is not is the part that matters most. In conventional racism, the hatred flows downward: The powerful despise the powerless precisely because they are seen as subhuman. But the Jew-hater does not hate Jews this way. The antisemite is not so much contemptuous of the inferior Jews as he is afraid and resentful of them. In the antisemitic imagination, the Jew is not subhuman but superhuman, possessed of an almost supernatural capacity to infiltrate, manipulate, transform, and corrupt. The threat is that the Jew will get inside your institutions, your culture, your bloodline, and make you into something you are not. “Yes, through

the Jewish nation, Germany will become a western New Palestine,” wrote Wilhelm Marr, the father of modern antisemitism, in 1879. That same year, the chaplain and conservative politician Adolf Stoecker said that “we are on the way to having public opinion fully dominated by Jews and labor fully exploited by them,” constructing the Jew as a moral villain. Likewise, the anti-Zionist is not genuinely concerned with Zionism or Israel as they exist. Rather, the Jewish state is distorted and mythologized into a 21st-century bogeyman, a repository for society’s fears, grievances, and moral anxieties.

Americans are susceptible to the equation of anti-Zionism with antiracism, which is simply an alternative form of the USSR’s equation of Zionism with racism. Like a sniper trained to hit a single target, the American moral eye has been calibrated with extraordinary precision on one thing: racism. But a sniper’s focus is also his blind spot. Everything outside the crosshairs blurs into illegibility. Anti-Zionism simply had to step inside the one narrow field of vision that scrutiny was already trained on. And everything outside that field, 2,000 years of the particular, shape-shifting hatred of Jews, remained exactly where it had always been: out of frame, out of focus, and therefore invisible.

There is a revelation here as fascinating as it is frightening. To riff on an old adage, there are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies, and definitions. Anti-Zionism was easily definable as a lie in the Soviet Union but is less so in the West because it is defined as a movement against the power structure rather than a product of it. Soviet anti-Zionist arguments, which found limited traction within the totalitarian state that manufactured them, have found extraordinary hospitality in the free democratic West because for Western audiences, and for Americans in particular, anti-Zionism offers Americans a guilt-free way to reckon with race and power by divesting themselves of neither but of Israel instead.

The history of American racism has, in addition to its many horrors, produced a myopic and self-referential moral framework that attempts to place every social phenomenon somewhere on the spectrum of racism to antiracism. Within its logic, power is to oppression as smoke is to fire. Wherever there is the first, there is also the other. Here is what happens when the logic is applied to the all-powerful Jews or the all-powerful Jewish state: The Jew is powerful, the powerful are oppressive, ergo, the hatred of the Jew or the Jewish state is not hatred but justice. Anything can be done in the name of justice, including everything you saw on October 7. This is why so many Americans educated in this narrow framework insistently refused to mourn or love the dead Jews of that day. Instead, they saw the massacre as an act of virtue and “an inevitable consequence of apartheid,” as Melat Kiros, a democratic socialist and Colorado congressional candidate, said in May.



Anti-Zionism is thus living a very different life in America than it did in the Soviet Union, a life of conviction rather than coercion. And that is precisely what makes the West’s predicament harder. Sincere convictions cannot be decreed out of existence; they can be undone only where they are formed. And in America, they are largely formed in educational settings. The corrective, therefore, must be educational.

America’s education system needs to stop teaching about antisemitism as an example of racial hatred. As important as it is that most states require Holocaust education in K–12 schools, these mandates and requirements tend to become the anchor for teaching antisemitism through the prism of racial othering of which the Holocaust is considered a historic example. It’s a cautionary tale in the culmination of racial violence. In that context, when Jewish students tell admin-

istrators that a course on the “genocide in Gaza” is antisemitic, the administrators genuinely do not understand the complaint because within the framework they were given, it’s not. It is akin to the Holocaust education mandated by the state. Many of them genuinely don’t understand that in the historical span of Jew-hatred, the Holocaust is one version among many, and that anti-Zionism is another. Nothing in their education prepared them to recognize a hatred aimed at perceived power, which is one of the threads that connects anti-Zionism with conventional antisemitism and that is absent from most forms of racial hatred.

The corrective is that educational requirements must be reformulated to teach that while America’s history of hatred is oriented primarily around race, there are many other forms, and students must learn how to identify them. We need a new curriculum not merely on antisemitism but on the broad spectrum of hatred and prejudice. That educational program will necessarily stress the uniqueness of anti-Jewish hate as an act of demonization cloaked in virtue. Here is the essential lesson of anti-Jewish hostility in all its forms (anti-Judaism, antisemitism, anti-Zionism): Jews are hated not merely for being different but for allegedly corrupting the world’s morality. A reformation of education around Jew-hatred must therefore precede any broader intervention. *

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