

Antisemitism and the American Far Left

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The first thing to note about this book is that it is about the American far left's (that is by what Norwood sees as the American far left after 1920) engagement with Antisemitism and it is not about, or at least not just about, Antisemitism by the American far left. His definition of far left seems to be focused almost entirely on Communists, Trotskyists, and their close allies for most of the book, expanding only when he takes the New Left and its allies into consideration after 1960. There was, however, a far left in the United States long before 1920 and it would have been interesting if Norwood had taken a longer perspective. Nevertheless, his limited time frame and focus still makes for a very interesting history.

The book opens with an introductory section on 'Promoting a socialism of fools' that takes off from Bebel's famous definition of Antisemitism in these terms. Norwood begins by identifying a series of incidents in which clearly Antisemitic stereotypes that were used by some New Leftists and some of their allies from the African-American freedom movement in the 1960s and 1970s. One of his prime exhibits starts with a 1967 article by the editor of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Newsletter on 'The Palestine problem' which, among other things, attributed the origins of the conflict to 'the Rothschilds ... [who] long controlled the wealth of many European Nations' along with 'much of Africa's mineral wealth', a classic Antisemitic formulation. It was accompanied by an illustration showing a hand marked with a Jewish star enclosing a dollar sign pulling on a lynch rope tied around the necks of Egyptian leader Gamal Nasser and United States boxing champion Muhammad Ali. While mainstream Civil Rights leaders denounced the SNCC article and cartoon, the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as a whole and some

leaders of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) jumped to the defense of the SNCC. Norwood follows this with numerous other examples from SDS and its splinter successor groups, the SWP, the Black Panther Party, and some leaders of the radical pacifist movement, most of which, like the SNCC article, started from considerations of developments in the Middle East – where far leftists and Third Worldists in general identified politically with the then self-proclaimed ‘leftism’ of the leading Palestinian and Arab anti-Israel activists (a ‘leftism’ which is no longer evident, though this is a development which seem to have had no impact on the current strains of the American far left). And Norwood demonstrates that along with their unwillingness to recognize any Antisemitism in their own writings, these groups consistently denied the clear Antisemitism of the Palestinian and Arab organizations and states that they were promoting (along with a tendency to deny the existence of Antisemitism in the Soviet Union, a long standing stance of the pro-Soviet part of the far left).

Norwood follows this with a short discussion of ‘the roots of far left Antisemitism’ that more or less summarizes some of Robert Wistrich’s publications on the subject – starting with Karl Marx’ essay ‘On the Jewish Question’ and extending to Antisemitic campaigns in the Soviet bloc countries after the Second World War. Norwood’s summary is far too short to engage properly with the subject, but it does provide an important context for the American experience that is the focus of this book.

It is when Norwood turns to the conflation of anti-Zionism and Antisemitism that he introduces the most problematic element of the book. He starts with the clearly correct proposition that ‘Anti-Zionism is not necessarily antisemitic, but it often is’, and he outlines the ways he will demonstrate that in the rest of the book. It would be hard for a fair minded reader to deny that he is often right on target when he shows how leftist anti-Zionism has often used themes and imagery taken wholesale from traditional Christian anti-Judaism and right wing Antisemitism – as we saw with the SNCC newsletter incident referred to above. The problem is that Norwood seems to forget the first part of this proposition when he also takes up left wing critiques of Zionism that are based on classic leftist analyses based on class, which dismissed ethnic/national/religious issues as epiphenomena and which had nothing obviously to do with Antisemitism. He doesn’t necessarily attribute each of these critiques to Antisemitism, but by throwing them into the same pot without making a distinction explicit he leaves the impression that they are all somehow rooted in Antisemitism. That’s too bad, because a more rigorous analysis distinguishing between purely Antisemitic themes versus those which mix non-Antisemitic themes with Antisemitic ones, and both of these from anti-Zionist critiques which have no Antisemitic components would have been especially useful and which would have strengthened his argument when it comes to the first two sorts of critique. Instead we are left with the inclusion of material which opens him to the charge that he does indeed treat all anti-Zionism as Antisemitism, a charge which will enable some critics to dismiss the reality that far left anti-Zionism has often involved Antisemitism.

Unable to resist the chance to bash Communists, Norwood opens his chapter on ‘American Communists’ tangled responses to Antisemitism and Nazism, 1920–1939’ with an extended review of the Bolsheviks’ appeal to Muslims at the Baku conference in 1920 that had no American aspect – though it did reaffirm the Bolshevik opposition to Zionism on the grounds that it was inherently bourgeois nationalist and a front for British imperialism (a fairly consistent leftist theme which has only been modified by substituting American imperialism for British). Norwood makes some telling criticisms of the Bolshevik line here, but he makes no attempt to link this to Antisemitism. Similarly his description of the Bolshevik suppression of Zionism in the USSR in the 1920s makes no attempt to demonstrate that it was based on Antisemitism rather than being part of an attempt to suppress all non-Bolshevik ideologies. The closest he comes is when he cites the Soviet explanation for their suppression of Hebrew as a dead language in terms that had overtones of Christian supersessionism and shows that this was picked up by American Communists.

Norwood’s argument finally returns to solid ground when he turns to the Communists’ response to the 1929 anti-Jewish pogroms in Palestine. When the Jewish Communists’ Yiddish language newspaper, the *Morgen Freiheit*, condemned the pogroms it was itself condemned as counterrevolutionary by the Communist Party leadership – and it quickly reversed course. Norwood shows how the Communist press claimed the pogroms were class uprisings by Arab peasants, campaigning against ‘Zionist-Fascists’ and even claimed it was the

Jews who were launching pogroms against Arabs. But Norwood shows that even while the Communists in the United States and the Soviet Union were supporting Arab Antisemitism in Palestine, labeling socialist Zionists as 'Pink Nazis', and refusing to support the anti-Nazi boycott of German goods, they were actively promoting an alternative Jewish Autonomous Region in Soviet Birobidzhan. In 1934 Communist leaders appealed to American Jews at a mass rally in Madison Square Garden with the claim that Birobidzhan was proof that the Soviet Union was a bulwark against Antisemitism.

Norwood shows that it was the Communist International's abandonment of its ultra-leftist phase in response to Nazi Germany's military build up that transformed American Communists into active opponents of Antisemitism. With Antisemitism such a prominent part of Nazi ideology Communists took on this role as part of their new focus on promoting a united front against Fascism and threw their cadres into the struggle against American and European Antisemitism, including the movement to boycott the 1936 Berlin Olympics. They highlighted the Antisemitism elements of the American right wing, monitored their organizations and publications, and organized events to counter Antisemitism propaganda. But as Norwood points out, they maintained a class based analysis of Antisemitism that denied any widespread existence of Antisemitism in the working classes and they continued to support Arab outrages against Jews in the Arab Revolt of the late 1930s – which they defended as a 'rising revolutionary movement' that they denied was motivated by Antisemitism despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Norwood points out that they also denied any Antisemitic component to the Soviet purge trials of the 1930s even as Soviet authorities underlined the Jewish origins of leading defendants by constantly repeating their original Jewish names and drew upon some traditional Antisemitic themes. He notes that they held up Birobidzhan as demonstrating a Soviet commitment to Jewish life to counter the charge of Soviet Antisemitism – and ignored the purge's elimination of Birobidzhan's leadership for 'fomenting Jewish nationalism', a purge which effectively ended the Soviet experiment there when further Jewish migration to Birobidzhan was prohibited.

Norwood shows that even as the American Trotskyists drew attention to Antisemitism in the Soviet purges, their class based analysis of Antisemitism caused them to downplay its significance in Nazi Germany and they insisted that the German working class was immune to its influence. They did campaign for opening the United States to refugees from Nazi Germany, including Jews, and condemned the Soviets for being equally unwilling to receive them. They stuck to the line that the conflict with Nazi Germany was between two equally evil imperialisms and that there was no reason for leftists to take either side. They also continued to denounce Zionism as counter-revolutionary and opposed any effort to open any African territories to Jewish refugees.

Of course that was also the line of American Communists between the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939 and the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. When American Jews rallied in protest against Germany's invasion of Poland and its accompanying massacres of Jews, Communists booed them at a counter-rally and called for non-intervention – with Party leader Earl Browder claiming that 'the Jewish people have nothing to gain from an Allied victory'. Norwood notes the irony when the Communists suddenly switched ground and denounced Britain for restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine in order to equate Britain's Jewish policies with those of Nazi Germany. Norwood is unable to resist outlining the anti-Ally, anti-intervention policies of the Communists during these nearly two years of Nazi-Soviet alliance even when they have nothing to do with Antisemitism – though it does make it clear that the Communists' earlier campaigns against Antisemitism were due more to the interests of the Soviet Union than to their principled opposition to Antisemitism. And Norwood notes that the American CP suffered mass resignations, especially by its Jewish members, and lost a majority of its members as a result of their disillusionment when the Party reversed course so drastically.

Norwood doesn't argue that these stands by American Communists and Trotskyists stemmed from any form of leftist Antisemitism, but rather that even at the height of left-wing opposition to Antisemitism in the late 1930s their analysis of Antisemitism was fundamentally flawed and they consistently underestimated its significance even as the near annihilation of Europe's Jews loomed on the horizon.

While the Communists reversed course after the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Trotskyists continued to

maintain that there was nothing to choose between the two sides in the Second World War. The Trotskyists' division into two hostile parties only produced two parties that competed with each other in the extent of their opposition to the war effort and their downplaying of the problem of Antisemitism – both claiming that socialist revolution was the only solution and that the Jews would just have to suffer its consequences until then. Norwood documents this extensively and shows how the Trotskyists even denounced the allied bombing campaign against Germany in terms taken straight from German propaganda while they continued to deny that German workers had ever supported Hitler and to downplay German Antisemitism.

Norwood shows how the Communist volte face allowed them to rediscover the usefulness of campaigning against Antisemitism when such a campaign could be useful in defense of the Soviet Union, though they continued to oppose Zionism as a response to European Antisemitism, as like the Trotskyists they saw socialism as the only solution.

Norwood follows with a chapter on 'Communist resistance to Antisemitism and celebration of Jewish culture in the immediate postwar period'. Here he documents in detail numerous instances when the American Communist Party and its activists engaged in the struggle against Antisemitism in the United States and often took the lead. These ranged from police brutality against Jewish teenagers in Coney Island to the campaign against the Antisemitism of the New York *Daily News*. Norwood points out that the CP even used the news about the Antisemitic pogrom in Kelice, Poland, as evidence for the need to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine. And it denounced the policy of the American government of limiting the numbers of Holocaust survivors allowed into the United States at the same time as it admitted large numbers of anti-Communist refugees from Eastern Europe – refugees who were often linked to groups that had murdered thousands of Jews (the Communist press reported that some of them were even engaging in violent attacks against Jewish leftists in the United States). Here Norwood presents the most positive side of the American far left's engagement with the issue of Antisemitism. Norwood also shows how the CP and its Progressive allies became vigorous promoters of Jewish culture and history during those years and abandoned their earlier advocacy of Jewish assimilation into a working class melting pot.

Norwood follows this with a chapter devoted to the Communists' support for Palestinian partition and their support for Israel in its war of independence. Of course they were following the lead of the Soviet Union, but the genuine enthusiasm they displayed for this cause can't be denied and Norwood shows how 'they expressed pride in the Soviet bloc's shipment of ... armaments to the Haganah'. Norwood points out that their Trotskyist would-be rivals in the Socialist Workers Party remained committed to a pro-Arab 'revolutionary' line that ignored or denied the Antisemitism of the Arab forces fighting to drive the Jews out of Palestine and into the sea. The rival American Trotskyist Workers Party supported Jewish self-defense under the circumstances, though they too called for opposing 'Zionism or the government' (though there is no grounds for attributing this opposition to Antisemitism).

When the Soviet Union began to shift toward a pro-Arab tilt, American Communists and their allies were sometimes slow to follow and Norwood points out that some prominent African-American leaders close to the Communists, like W. E. B. DuBois, remained strong supporters of Israel all through the 1950s.

Norwood then devotes a chapter to the CP's difficulty in dealing with Antisemitism when the Soviet campaign against Jews in the Soviet sphere took off. Soviet support for Jewish culture was shut down: Jewish writers and intellectuals were attacked as 'cosmopolites', Yiddish books were no longer published – and then Jewish writers and intellectuals were arrested and killed. All this was followed by campaigns against leading Jewish Communists in the Soviet bloc, campaigns that were extremely Antisemitic in tone and which generally led to the executions of their targets. Norwood shows at length how the American Communist Party followed the Soviet line in denying that there was any Antisemitism involved in these actions and supported the charges in the show trials which followed. CP organs endorsed the charges that these Communists had engaged in a Zionist conspiracy to overthrow the Peoples' Democracies of Eastern Europe (charges that resembled those made against the Jewish defendants in the Moscow show trials of the 1930s when they had been charged with conspiring with Nazi Germany, but this time with allegations of Zionism thrown in) and leading American Jewish Communists were mobilized to support the Soviet line.

Norwood's extensive exposition here is enlightening and reading this would be a useful exercise for anyone inclined to buy into more recent denials of Antisemitism in some other leftist supported movements. Norwood goes on to explore the ways in which Jewish Communists were pressured to suppress and deny their growing concern about Soviet Antisemitism until Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's crimes broke down their defenses. At that point the majority of the remaining Jewish Communists, like most of their non-Jewish comrades, broke away from the CP and began to acknowledge their concerns. The American CP never recovered from this second mass defection and never again played the leading role in the American far left.

Norwood then turns his attention to various Trotskyist groupings and individuals like Isaac Deutscher in the 1950s. For the most part they remained consistently anti-Zionist and anti-Israel – though Deutscher, who had lost many close relatives in the Holocaust, modified his opposition for while and even expressed regret for having opposed emigration to Palestine at a time when it might have saved many lives. What Norwood fails to do here is to link this to the issue of Antisemitism except when he quotes the SWP leader's claim that concerns about persecution of Jews in Arab countries was merely 'demagogic hullabaloo', a clear denial of any legitimate concern about Antisemitism in the region.

Although the CP was a shadow of its former self after the mid-1950s exodus, Norwood reports that the remainder continued to deny the existence of Soviet Antisemitism even as Khrushchev blamed the failure of Birobidzhan on an alleged inherent unwillingness of Jews to work hard or collectively. The Trotskyists had a field day with this one and continued to highlight Soviet Antisemitism as part of their campaign against the Soviet leadership and American Communists. Norwood points out that having dismissed any Communist claims to leadership, and being unwilling to get bogged down in old left internecine conflicts, the rising New Left of the 1960s paid little attention to the issue of Soviet (or other) Antisemitism.

Norwood attributes the end of this neglect to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. While much of the older generation of opponents to America's war in Vietnam supported Israel, the Trotskyist SWP predictably denounced Israel and even condemned Martin Luther King Jr. for supporting Israel's position. The leading New Left organization, SDS, failed to take any official position, but a series of proposed resolutions showed that SDS was moving towards adopting the long term positions of anti-Zionist socialists, Communists and Trotskyists. Norwood explores the growing debate in New Left publications over Israel/Palestine. Some New Leftists adopted anti-Zionist positions that essentially called for the elimination of Israel as a colonial outpost of imperialism, while others supported Israel's continued existence – though they too often placed the burden of ending the conflict on Israel alone. Norwood draws attention to Paul Jacobs as one of the few New Left leaders who raised the issue of Arab Antisemitism as a crucial issue in the conflict – though even he adopted the Antisemitic rhetoric of his Black Panther Party allies when he referred to a Cadillac as a 'Jew-canoe'. Norwood does point to some other New Leftists who dissented from the developing anti-Zionist theme, but he disassociates them from the far left and calls them moderate leftists.

Norwood shows that by the end of the 1960s and early 1970s some far leftists around *Ramparts* magazine were stating their increasingly anti-Israel positions with themes that closely echoed traditional Antisemitic formulations, referring to Jews' 'awesome power' to suppress criticism. In an influential *New Politics* article Hal Draper denounced Zionism in familiar terms and denied any significant Arab Antisemitism. His fellow anti-Zionist Bernard Rosen argued in the same publication that for all its mistakes Israel faced a real problem with Arab anti-Semites and their determination to wipe out the Jewish state, but Draper doubled down – and seemed to carry the day as the American far left gave increasing deference across the ideological board to their militant African-American allies from SNCC and the Black Panther Party. This tendency was exemplified in 1967 when the National Conference for New Politics allowed its Black Caucus to dominate its proceedings and refused to allow Robert Scheer to even propose calling on Israel to withdraw to its previous borders in exchange for Arab recognition.

Norwood shows how some elements of the far left went over to promoting fully fledged Antisemitism in the 1970s, citing the SWP's 1970 publication of Abraham Leon's book on *The Jewish Question* as a prime example. Norwood shows that among other things Leon repeated classic medieval charges against the Jews

as usurers who were inherently drawn to moneylending, and how Leon denied any Antisemitic discrimination against Jews in Europe. The Vietnam War led to the far left's adoption of guerilla fighters as heroes and Palestinian guerillas were soon adopted into the pantheon. Norwood cites the Antisemitic screed of the leftist editor of the Wayne State University newspaper that combined an attack on Israel with charges that Black Detroit was under 'Jewish occupation'.

Norwood finishes off with a chapter about developments since 1973 which piles on more evidence for persistent far left Antisemitism. He covers the Communist Party's expulsion of Paul Novick and its denunciation of the *Morgen Freiheit* for allegedly slandering the Soviet Union by discussing Antisemitism there. And he covers some of the newer organizations of the far left towards the end of the century and their extreme anti-Zionism. Here again he often fails to distinguish clearly between anti-Zionism based on or mixed with Antisemitism from anti-Zionism that wasn't clearly Antisemitic. And again, that's a pity because he has enough instances of the former to make his case. Explicit support for virulently Antisemitic organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah provide some telling examples and there is no shortage of others here. Norwood's critique here is weakened by his tendency to treat all anti-Zionism as Antisemitism and his tendency to define the far left as only those who promote this sort of extreme anti-Zionism – joining its advocates in reading those leftists who disagree out of the far left by definition and making for a somewhat circular argument.

All in all, however, despite its weaknesses this book makes an important contribution to the history of the American left and to discussions about anti-Zionism and Antisemitism.

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