

When NYC Jewish Organizations Enthusiastically Supported Boycotts

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The Jewish establishment has condemned the NYC Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) for asking candidates if they would forgo plans to take trips to Israel as an act of solidarity with Palestinians. The Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), which arranges these trips for City Council members, expressed outrage and that group and a number of politicians raised a cry of “anti-Semitism”. Of course it’s a croc. It’s also hypocrisy.

There were times when leaders of the Jewish community (very properly) embraced boycotts as necessary measures of self-defense. At the start of the 1900’s New York City banker Jacob Schiff led a bankers boycott of the intensely anti-Semitic Imperial Russia. In the 1920’s there was a successful boycott of the company owned by the then world’s most famous anti-Semite, Henry Ford. In 1927 he gave in, wrote a public letter of apology to Jews and sold his anti-Jewish paper, the Dearborn Independent.

The most serious boycott, though, started in 1933 when Adolf Hitler became German Chancellor. In his book *Mein Kampf* he had outlined his murderous plans for Jews and his goons had beaten and harassed German Jews for years. Within weeks of Hitler’s appointment (January 30, 1933) calls sounded for a boycott of Germany.

Its earliest proponent was the JWV (Jewish War Veterans), made up of men who had fought in the Great War. After hearing accounts of Nazi thugs in German cities rioting and calling for anti-Jewish boycotts, the JWV announced a boycott campaign on March 12. On the 23rd the JWV led thousands down New York City streets to City Hall where they presented Mayor John O’Brien with a resolution

calling for a boycott of Germany.

Four days later, on March 27, 1933, major Jewish organizations held a huge rally in Madison Square Garden. It was jammed full and tens of thousands were outside on the streets around it and in Columbus Circle. The New York Times account the next day was headlined, "55,000 Here Stage Protest on Hitler Attack on Jews".

A photo of Madison Square Garden of the rally shows the huge size of the crowd that evening. Up on the stage there's one giant poster. It's a picture of a man with some kind of tool ripping apart a swastika and above it the words "Boycott Nazi Germany". Speakers denounced Hitler and Nazi attacks on Jews. Besides Jewish leaders, important non-Jews spoke, like the head of the American Federation of Labor and Senator Robert Wagner.

The idea behind the anti-German boycott was to harm German manufacturing and get the owners of the big companies to pressure Hitler and his gang to stop its violence and discrimination against Jews. In many ways it had a very similar motive to the BDS campaign against the Israeli Apartheid of today.

The Jewish War Veterans was the first group to go into the streets with boycott activities. They gave out flyers and picketed stores that sold German products.

By the end of '33 the main leader of the boycott was millionaire and NYC Tammany Hall politician Samuel Untermyer. He raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for boycott offices, flyers, telephones, etc. Offices were set up all over the country.

Another leader of the boycott was Rabbi Stephen Wise, a famous U.S. Zionist leader and head of a very important Manhattan synagogue. He was put in charge of boycott activities by the World Jewish Conference, an international group formed to fight Hitlerism.

In May 1933 there was an immense march in New York City lead by Untermyer, Wise and the American Jewish Congress. Former Congressman (and future mayor) Fiorello LaGuardia was one of the speakers before the march. Untermyer spoke too and urged all Americans to ban all German products and services. Edwin Black describes the march dramatically in his book "The Transfer Agreement". He writes, "Roars of applause and volcanic cheers greeted a hat-waving Stephen Wise at every corner. For hours, Wise, 100,000 behind him, marched south toward Battery Park." Marchers were showered with ticker tape. On their way from Madison Square to Battery Park thousands of labor unionists joined the march. Mayor O'Brien sat on the reviewing stand and watched the march pass by for four hours.

The boycott started in 1933 and went on until World War II. It obviously did not succeed in moderating Hitler, but few today would argue it was a wrong thing to do. Nor would anyone (but Nazis) argue that it was racist to be so "anti-German".

An Important Difference

There is a big difference between the boycott of the 1930s and BDS today. BDS is led by a movement of Palestinian civil society organizations. (It was never advocated by the Palestinian Authority.) BDS is targeted against entities cooperating with or enriching themselves from oppression. The boycott of the 1930s was against all German goods.

The BDS movement site explains, "the BDS movement is impactful when it focuses its consumer boycotts and campaigns on a number of companies that are most deeply involved in Israel's occupation and apartheid." As far as boycotts of Israeli colleges the site states, "The academic

boycott is a boycott of complicit Israeli academic institutions not individuals.” In answer to the question about boycotts of artists, the site explains, “BDS does not target artists. It targets institutions based on their complicity in Israel’s violations of international law.”

The boycott of the 1930s was not selective. It targeted all German goods from gloves to cheese products to medicines. For instance in Newark, NJ in 1935 squads of women went into Bamburger’s department store to make sure there were no German products.

Neither boycott was racist. Both were attempts to use peaceful economic pressure to fight for human rights. Clearly though the Palestinians are going the extra mile to show their boycott is principled and not based on ethnic hatred.

New York Jewish leaders had a proud role in the anti-Nazi boycott of the 1930s. The Rightists who control the big Jewish organizations today don’t measure up to them in the slightest. It’s sheer hypocrisy for them to criticize the Palestinian-led BDS movement struggling against modern-day apartheid and oppression.

Footnote: Zionist Sabotaging of the Anti-Nazi Boycott

In 1984 Lenni Brenner wrote about something that had been buried for decades, a deal bargained by Zionist leader of British Palestine and Nazi officials, the “Transfer Agreement”. Under the agreement German Jewish wealth was taken out of the Germany in the form of products and sold in Palestine. The refugees got a lot of the proceeds and Zionist organizations got a slice, too. Realize though that when Jews of the world were *boycotting* German goods, Palestinian Jews were *selling German goods*. Whatever it did for Zionism and refugees the Transfer Agreement, in the words of Zionist historian Edwin Black, “pierce[d] a stake through the heart of the Jewish-led anti-Nazi boycott “. I write about this in one section of my book, “Zionist Betrayal of Jews” (2019).