

# Zionist Volksgemeinschaft

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Hawara checkpoint in the occupied West Bank (Photo by Magne Hagesæter)

Despite brilliant work on the question of Palestine from Marxists, often Arab or anti-Zionist Jewish, many on the left continue to have an inadequate understanding of Zionism. In this essay, I attempt to offer a Marxist examination of Zionism and some of its essential features: its *völkisch* character, its settler colonial character, and its relation to imperialism.

## Origins of Zionism

Zionism arose out of Europe's antisemitism, 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism, race pseudo-science, and colonialism. It is the distinct origins of the movement with which we must start our examination.

In Europe, modern antisemitism was a tool of "landowners and capitalists [trying] to divert the hatred of the workers and peasants who were tortured by want against the Jews." Russian Jews lived under brutal oppression at the hands of wretched Tsarism, confined to ghettos and subject to the Cossack's sword. While the Jews of Western Europe saw assimilation and integration following the French Revolution, a reactionary turn occurred during the era of the [Dreyfus Affair](#) in the 1890s, which "had its social origin in the hatred of the aristocracy for the Jewish bankers who had bought up their castles, and of the sons of aristocrats who saw the careers that formerly had been 'reserved' exclusively for them now occupied by these dangerous competitors." There were a range of responses to antisemitism. One with the least support among Europe's Jews was Zionism.

Zionism from its genesis was a reactionary bourgeois nationalist movement, entirely *völkisch* and

influenced by other bourgeois ethnonationalist, i.e., national exclusivist, tendencies. Zionism based itself upon the reactionary notion of a Jewish nation. While the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Russia and Eastern Europe arguably comprised of their own nation, the Jews of Western Europe were assimilated, linguistically diverse, and took the nationality of the state in which they lived; as the French socialist Alfred Naquet [proclaimed](#): “although I was born a Jew... I do not recognise Jewish nationality.... I belong to no other nation but the French.”<sup>1</sup> The reactionary Jews who called themselves Zionists *rejected* the progressive process of assimilation, calling it impossible.

Zionism fully endorsed European racial pseudo-science both in seeing the Arab natives of Palestine as inferior and in adopting the position of antisemites that Jews were a race. This most notably reached its climax with the Zionist Federation of Germany agreeing with the Hitlerian distinction of “Ayrans” and “Jews” and separate races. The father of political Zionism Theodor Herzl embraced the forces of antisemitism as the movement’s greatest allies: “the anti-Semites will become our most dependable friends, the anti-Semetic countries our allies.” In *Der Judenstaat*, he stated: “The Governments of all countries scourged by Anti-Semitism will be keenly interested in assisting us to obtain the sovereignty we want.” Unlike the Zionist propagandists of today, who slander *all* anti-Zionists as antisemites, Herzl came to far different conclusions:

“In Paris, then, I gained a freer attitude toward anti-Semitism which I now began to understand historically and make allowances for...I recognized the emptiness and futility of efforts to ‘combat anti-Semitism.’”

The Board of Deputies of British Jews, of the Anglo-Jewish Association, protesting Zionism in a 1917 [letter](#), well understood the absurd notion of “a secular Jewish nationality, recruited on some loose and obscure principle of race and ethnographic peculiarity.” They remarked that the “establishment of a Jewish nationality in Palestine, founded on the theory of Jewish homelessness, must have the effect throughout the world of stamping Jews as strangers in their own native lands and of undermining their hard-won positions as citizens and nationals of those lands.” As the late Noel Ignatiev put it:

“The claim that the Jews have a special right to Palestine has no more validity than would an Irish claim of a divine right to establish a Celtic state all across Germany, France, and Spain on the basis that Celtic tribes once lived there. Nevertheless, on the basis of ascribed descent, the Zionist officials assign those they have selected a privileged place within the state. If that is not racism, then the term has no meaning.”

Just as reactionaries in Germany viewed *Lebensraum*, i.e., the colonization of Eastern Europe and removal of its native populations, as the mystical destiny of the German nation, some reactionary European Jews viewed the colonization of Palestine as *their destiny*. Zionists aimed for the creation of a state in Palestine for the Jewish *Volk* through means of colonization.

Lenin wrote in *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*:

“We [saw] that the development of pre-monopoly capitalism, of capitalism in which free competition was predominant, reached its limit in the 1860s and 1870s. We now see that it is *precisely after that period* that the tremendous “boom” in colonial conquests begins, and that the struggle for the territorial division of the world becomes extraordinarily sharp. It is beyond doubt, therefore, that capitalism’s transition to the stage of monopoly

capitalism, to finance capital, *is connected* with the intensification of the struggle for the partitioning of the world... The more capitalism is developed, the more strongly the shortage of raw materials is felt, the more intense the competition and the hunt for sources of raw materials throughout the whole world, the more desperate the struggle for the acquisition of colonies.”

As Lenin so correctly observed, the development of capitalism towards its highest stage, i.e., imperialism, and its eventual realization in the 1890s, was entirely responsible for the explosion of colonization around the world by the “great” powers of the time. It was precisely in this period to which political Zionism came into being and sought its own colonial conquest.

Palestinian historian Fayeze Sayegh noted:

“The frenzied ‘Scramble for Africa’ of the 1880s stimulated the beginnings of Zionist colonisation in Palestine. As European fortune-hunters, prospective settlers, and empire builders raced for Africa, Zionist settlers and would-be state-builders rushed for Palestine.... Under the influence of the credo of Nationalism then sweeping across Europe, some Jews had come to believe that the religious and alleged racial bonds among Jews constituted a Jewish ‘nationality’ and endowed the so-called ‘Jewish nation’ with normal national rights.... If other European nations had successfully extended themselves into Asia and Africa...the ‘Jewish nation’ – it was argued – was entitled and able to do the same thing for itself.... For, Zionism, then, colonisation would be the instrument of nation-building, not the product of an already-fulfilled nationalism.”

Edward Said, too, observed:

“For although it coincided with an era of the most virulent Western anti-Semitism, Zionism also coincided with the period of unparalleled European territorial acquisition in Africa and Asia, and it was part of this general movement of acquisition and occupation that Zionism was launched initially by Theodor Herzl.”<sup>ii</sup>

Transition into the imperialist stage drove the colonization of the entire planet by the “great” powers, and it was the resultant colonial conquests that inspired Zionism’s aims. While recognizing the other unique social origins of Zionism, we can deduce that transformation into the monopoly stage of capitalism, i.e., imperialism, was responsible for the colonial ambitions and character of the Zionist movement (as it was for other *völkisch* movements). It is only through a scientific understanding of imperialism that we can trace the creation and development of the Zionist movement.

As we shall continue to see, Zionism is inseparably connected with imperialism.

### **Settler Colonialism and Al-Nakba**

Much ignorance concerning Zionism stems from a poor grasp of settler colonialism. Settler-colonialism is the process in which a foreign body of settlers forcibly remove and replace an indigenous population to establish themselves as the majority on expropriated land. As Patrick Wolfe [elaborated](#), settler colonialism “strives for the dissolution of native societies.... it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base.... settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a

structure not an event.” Mark Muhannad Ayyash adds:

“To be sure, all modern nation-states have annexed land in certain respects, but the settler-colonial state’s distinguishing feature is that it does not come into being and cannot continue to exist without claiming sovereignty over land that is forcefully taken from its native inhabitants. In short, the settler colony can only claim its sovereignty through the eradication and erasure of native sovereignty.... their underlying logic: the expulsion of native people from their lands.”

The distinct difference between settler-colonialism and colonialism is demonstrated in the case of Zionism, as Fayeze Sayegh observed:

“Zionist colonisation could not possibly assume the *physical* proportions envisaged by Zionism while the Arab people of Palestine continued to inhabit its homeland; nor could the Zionist political aspirations of racial self-segregation and statehood be accomplished while the nationally-conscious Arab people of Palestine continued to exist in that country. Unlike European colonisation [in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Africa and Asia]...the Zionist colonisation of Palestine was essentially incompatible with the continued existence of the ‘native population’ in the coveted country.”

Edward Said put it this way:

“Zionism (like the view of America as an empty land held by Puritans) was a colonial vision unlike that of most other nineteenth-century European powers, for whom the natives of the outlying territories were *included* in the redemptive *mission civiliance*.”<sup>iii</sup>

This is the principal feature of the Zionist project. The movement’s ideological and political leaders emphasized: to achieve Jewish *Lebensraum* in Palestine, the natives must be dealt with. Herzl wrote of an “involuntary expropriation” of Palestinians being a requirement for the establishment of a Jewish settler state.<sup>iv</sup> He was chillingly correct. In 1917, when the Balfour Declaration was made, Jews comprised 6% of the population in Palestine and owned about 2.5% of the land. Despite an influx of 376,415 settlers from Europe between 1920-1946, Jews only owned about 6% of the land in historic Palestine, the rest inhabited by the indigenous Arabs who made up 67% of the total population. Despite this, the absurd UN partition plan of 1947 gifted to the Zionists 55% of historic Palestine, the rest left for Palestinians and Jerusalem to be internationally governed. To the Zionists, however, this was not enough, partition was always viewed as a temporary demand in the process of colonizing the *totality* of Palestine, if not further. The time for the longstanding Zionist goal of ethnically cleansing Palestinians to fulfill their *Lebensraum* had arrived.

In 1947-48 the Zionists launched their campaign of expulsion and expropriation. Massacres, terror, rape, theft, and vandalism were the means by which Israel was forged. Zionist militias and, after May 1948, the Israeli military operated (and still does) on a doctrine of expulsion: “destruction of villages as much as possible.” The Zionist usurpers ethnically cleansed 750,000 Palestinians from their homelands and destroyed over 530 villages; in doing so the settlers now controlled 78% of historic Palestine. During the 1950s, tens of thousands of the minority of Palestinians who remained within the new Israeli state were subsequently expelled. Later during the Naksa, Israel’s predatory 1967 war against the Arab states, 430,000 more Palestinians were ethnically cleansed as the

Zionists captured the Syrian Golan Heights and the rest of historic Palestine, i.e., East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank. Today through continued settlement, massacres, blockade, systematic economic deprivation, arbitrary arrests, apartheid, and restrictions on every aspect of life, Zionism aims to be rid of Palestinians or to “finish the job” as current Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich put it. These are all not merely isolated events; the Nakba is an *ongoing process of extirpation necessary for the existence, survival, and expansion* of the Zionist state.

### **Zionism and Imperialism**

“If you wish to colonize a land in which people are already living, you must provide a garrison for the land, or find some rich man or benefactor who will provide a garrison on your behalf. ... Zionism is a colonizing adventure and therefore it stands or falls by the question of armed force.”

— Ze’ev Jabotinsky, founder of the Irgun terrorist organization .

Throughout its entire existence, Zionism has served and depended on imperialism. From their movement’s inception, Zionists always maintained the necessity of having a patron “great” power to enable the colonization of Palestine. Herzl vied for the German Kaiser’s support. Moses Hess, the German idealist who Marx and Engels famously ridiculed in the *Manifesto*, attached his ambitions to France, “the savior.” Jabotinsky infamously proclaimed that “Zionist colonisation...can proceed and develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the native population-behind an iron wall, which the native population cannot breach,” and he was entirely correct.<sup>vi</sup>

Ultimately it would be the British who became the Zionists’ vital imperialist sponsor. London strategically wished to establish a faithful European outpost in Palestine to manage any sort of Arab rebellion in the region, along with securing their control of the Suez Canal. As the first military governor of Jerusalem Ronald Storrs stated, Zionism “[formed] for England ‘a little loyal Jewish Ulster’ in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism.”

British imperialism enabled the colonization of Palestine, British imperialism enabled the Nakba, British imperialism made Herzl’s dream of creating “a rampart of Europe against Asia” a reality. It was British imperialism that had condemned the Palestinian people to their tragic fate when Balfour made his infamous declaration in 1917. Zionism had become official policy of the world’s most powerful empire. Rashid Khalidi, analyzing the favors done by the British for their Zionist colonial protégés, observed in his book *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine*:

“Of all the services Britain provided to the Zionist movement before 1939, perhaps the most valuable was the armed suppression of Palestinian resistance in the form of revolt...The savage British repression, the death and exile of so many leaders, and the conflict within their ranks left the Palestinians divided, without direction, and their economy debilitated by the time the [1936-1939] revolt was crushed.... This put Palestinians in a very weak position to confront the now invigorated Zionist movement, which had gone from strength to strength during the revolt, obtaining lavish amounts of arms and extensive training from the British to help them suppress the uprising.”<sup>vii</sup>

The martyred democratic revolutionary and theorist Ghassan Kanafani described how:

“The foundations of the Zionist military apparatus were laid under British supervision. The Zionist force which had been entrusted with the defence of the Haifa-Lyddá railway was later given the defence of the oil pipeline in the Bashan plain. This pipeline, which

had been recently constructed (1934) to bring oil from Kirkuk to Haifa, had several times been blown up by the Palestinian rebels....The British in an early stage were able to see the strategy called by the Americans 30 years later 'Vietnamization'. This was extremely important, because it was this incident that strengthened Britain's conviction that the formation of a Zionist striking force would solve many problems connected with the defence of Imperialist interests accompanied by efforts to form a Zionist armed force to protect these interests."

Zionists commonly claim their violent confrontations with the British following the 1939 White Paper (which restricted Jewish settlement of Palestine) were an anti-imperialist or national liberation struggle.<sup>viii</sup> This is as ridiculous as claiming the same for the Anglo-Boer Wars or Rhodesia's declaration of independence from Britain! The truth of the matter is evidenced by a 1937 [statement before the Royal Commission on Palestine](#):

"Zionism in Palestine could not exist for a single day without the assistance of British 'imperialism'. While Zionism therefore opposes 'imperialism' in all other countries, it is its ally in Palestine."

Shortly after their supposed struggle for liberation, the Zionists were more than happy to employ themselves and their predatory ambitions for their former so-called "occupier" Britain, most notably against Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt in 1956.

By 1967 John Bull was replaced by Uncle Sam. Israel became the privileged and reliant servant of American imperialism. For most of its existence, the Zionist state has been nothing less than a US semi-colonial protectorate. Israel ultimately fulfills the same role for the Americans that it did for the British, and its importance to US imperialism has never been lost on Washington. The Americans have aided the settler state with over \$50 billion since 1949, with defense aid to the tune of \$3.8 billion *per year* having become the present status quo. The US House passed a resolution by a vote of 412-9, in July of this year, affirming that "the United States will *always* be a staunch partner and supporter of Israel." (emphasis added) As President Joe Biden said as recently as July 18: "If there wasn't an Israel, we'd have to invent one."

Israel through its very existence not only serves imperialism but is dependent on it. The Palestinian struggle against Zionism *is a struggle against imperialism*.

### **The Zionists' Political Economy**

The German word *Volksgemeinschaft* translates roughly to English as "national [or] peoples' racial community". It is commonly associated with the Hitlerian vision for the so-called Aryan race (though it had its origins in earlier German *völkisch* movements). Zionism is a racist *blut und boden* (blood and soil) ideology and Israel, the settler colony established and maintained through the ethnic cleansing and expropriation of Palestinians, is a racial state. It maintains itself through apartheid, systematically discriminating against all Palestinians, who are seen as undesirables. Rights in Israel are determined based on one's ethnicity ("nationality" as it is called and designated by the state). Today Palestinians living within the territories seized and annexed by the Zionists in 1947-1948 are subject to systematic racial discrimination; there is an entire database of such racist laws. Palestinians and Syrians living in the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights, places where Zionist settler-colonialist ambitions have ultimately failed thus far, are forced to endure deplorable standards of living, economic strangulation, further settler invasions and violence, and savage, racist colonial-military rule; all the consequences of a *völkisch* state and ideology. This is well summarized by Noel Ignatiev:

“Israel is a racial state, where rights are assigned on the basis of ascribed descent or the approval of the superior race. In this respect it resembles the American South prior to the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, Ireland under the Protestant Ascendancy, and, yes, Hitlerite Germany.”

Zionism has managed to *embody and re-employ the oppression* Jews faced in Europe onto Palestinians, this time through the means of their own *völkisch* movement.

Thus, Israel certainly fits the bill for an existing Jewish *Volksgemeinschaft*, and this is once again evident when observing the settler state’s economy.

Zionist leaders recognized that to establish a Jewish supremacist state, only Jewish labor would be tolerated in a “closed”, segregated economy; the “conquest of labor” in all sectors was the means to achieve this. Ghassan Kanafani explained how “the slogan of ‘Jewish labor only’ was to have grave consequences, as it led to the rapid emergence of fascist patterns in the society of Jewish settlers.” Palestinian trade unionist George Mansour detailed how:

“The attitude of the Mapai [Zionist Labor party of David Ben-Gurion] now towards Arab labour, then, is that of any other colonising immigrants towards the native inhabitants, very much intensified by the fact that Zionists regard the indigenous inhabitants as inconvenient interlopers in a land that ought to be entirely Jewish.”

Kanafani described how consistently “Zionism, in collaboration with the mandatory power, successfully undermined the development of a progressive Jewish labor movement and of Jewish-Arab Proletarian brotherhood.”

The general *völkisch* character of Israel’s economy is well summarized by Sumya Awad and Daphna Thier:

“Israeli workers continue to be committed to apartheid and the racist ideology enabling it.... This is the nature of labor in an apartheid economy. Almost complete separation means that, by design, Jews and Palestinians rarely work alongside one another as coworkers. Instead, they are segregated in ways that entrench racism and ensure that national loyalty trumps class consciousness.... Palestinians occupy the lowest rungs of the economy, making less than minimum wage with no benefits or pensions. Attempts by Palestinian workers to organize for better conditions are met with the threat of permit revocation. Undocumented workers are in even more precarious situations.... Desegregation of the Israeli labor market would mean competition for jobs, the return of stolen wealth, and potentially economic free fall for many Jewish Israeli workers. The end of occupation threatens these workers’ material standing. This is why the majority of Israeli workers oppose democratic rights for all: Zionism prevents working-class solidarity.”

## **The Present**

Recently, bitter internal rifts have exposed Israel’s cracks. Civil conflict amongst the settlers, largely between the fascist and liberal camps, threatens to steer the Zionist state into “an abyss”, in the words of Arnon Bar-David, the head of the Histadrut, the Israeli trade union federation. Sacked

Defence Minister Yoav Gallant proclaimed “The deepening split is seeping into the military and defence institutions.... [it’s] a clear, immediate and real danger to Israel’s security.” It is not uncommon to hear talk of civil war thrown around in discussions of these fractures in Israel’s settler society.

Israelis have also, for the last two decades, lost their demographic majority in historic Palestine which, in itself, was established through ethnic cleansing. This is no insignificant fact. Professor Joseph Massad notes:

“One of the key factors in the survival and irreversibility of white European settler-colonies around the world has been demography. If white colonists are unable to eliminate the majority of the native population, their fate, no matter how long their rule lasts, is ultimately sealed.... That Jewish colonists have again become a minority in historic Palestine is what precipitates the reasonable expectation that Jewish settler-colonialism has become reversible.”

This fact is essential to understanding the intensification of Israeli killings of Palestinians, which already this year have surpassed 2022 as being the deadliest on record in the West Bank since such figures started being recorded in 2005. The massacres, colonial punitive raids (particularly in Jenin), airstrikes in both Gaza and the West Bank, settler pogroms, and calls from Zionists for a “final war” against Palestinians to “subdue them once and for all”, as an Israeli MP recently put it, “are desperate measures of a settler-colony that knows its fate is now sealed, even if it will take a number of years before the final collapse.”

Simultaneously, we are nearing (or at the start of) an inevitable third Intifada as “many young Palestinians are increasingly getting frustrated, and becoming more determined to strike back.” The Palestinian anti-colonial resistance is taking a new form. Palestinian youths, in new community-based armed resistance groups such as Lions’ Den and the Jenin Brigade, have brought the fight to the Israeli occupiers with “independent resistance, free of the shackles of the old political factions.” An anonymous young Palestinian man of the Lions’ Den stated these new resistance groups “brought people together, to create one united resistance, without political factions.... Entire nations have tried to do this and failed.” This has caused serious trouble for the Israeli occupiers who, militarily, have been strategically defeated and tactically outsmarted by the new Palestinian resistance groups.

We are now at a pivotal moment for the Palestinian struggle as a revolutionary situation is simmering into fruition. There must be no illusions or ignorance about Zionism or what it is amongst revolutionary Marxists. If we are to see Zionism to its end, to cast it into the dustbin of history where it belongs, we must understand it. In contemporary discussions of Israel, the term apartheid is commonly used to describe Israel, but this is not the most fitting descriptor; not because apartheid does not presently exist in the Zionist state (it most certainly does as detailed), but because apartheid arose naturally from Israel’s *blut und boden* ideology. We first and foremost must emphasize the *völkisch*, *settler colonial*, and *pro-imperialist* nature of Zionism in our agitation against and analysis of this ideology/Israel. We too must stress that Zionism *fundamentally violates* Palestinian self-determination, an essential democratic demand of all serious internationalists. Our staunch campaign against Zionism must be matched with ardent support for the Palestinian national-revolutionary struggle.



i The Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe, with their distinctive language, culture, geographical location, etc. comprised a nation. It is a reactionary notion, however, to consider this Yiddish-speaking nation one with the Jews of Western Europe who were assimilated into the nation-states of their residence (France, Britain, the Low Countries, Austria, etc.) or to the Jews of the Middle East, North Africa, and the Caucasus who were rightly viewed as Arabs, Persians, Georgians, etc. who *practiced Judaism*.

ii Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979, p. 69.

iii Ibid., p. 68.

iv Ibid., p. 71.

v Ibid., p. 67.

vi Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2020, p. 13.

vii Ibid., pp. 44-47.

viii While the White Paper marked a change in British policy, London "never seriously intended for one moment to be faithful to its promise," said Husayn al-Khalidi, who foresaw that it was a means "to please the Arabs so they would stop their revolution," and to allow the British imperialists "time to catch their breath as war clouds gathered." This aside, "Britain had already more than done its duty to its Zionist protégé." From: Khalidi, p. 49.