

## **Livingstone, Zionism and the Nazis**

### **John Newsinger**

**K**en Livingstone's remarks about the Nazis and Zionism were, to say the least, ill-chosen and unwise. At a time when accusations of anti-Semitism are being used as a stick with which to beat the Left, he played into the hands of those eager to inflict damage by even the most outrageous smears. With the Blairites, the Labour Friends of Israel – urged on by the Israeli Embassy, where the appalling Mark Regev<sup>1</sup> is ambassador – and more or less the entire British media waiting for an opportunity to attack, Livingstone unwittingly but still inexcusably provided them with one. With the exception of his assertion that Hitler's supposed descent into madness was responsible for the Holocaust, his remarks were true. But the dynamic of the Holocaust had nothing to do with insanity, either collective or individual. Nevertheless he provided the appalling John Mann MP with an opportunity to put the Left on the defensive. The spectacle of a blustering, ignorant bullyboy denouncing a lifelong fighter against racism, fascism and anti-Semitism as a 'Nazi apologist' was so grotesque as to almost defy belief. But Livingstone should never have put himself in the position where such an assault could be made – not least because the Holocaust is too important to be treated in this way.

If Mann's performance was not deliberately intended to damage Labour's chances in the local government elections in order to weaken Jeremy Corbyn, then it was a very good impression of one that was. The fact that it was Livingstone

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<sup>1</sup> Regev is an Australian who emigrated to Israel in his early twenties. He lectured at the Israeli Defence Forces Staff College, worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and from 2007 until 2015 was the chief spokesman for the Israeli Prime Minister, a position that saw him justify every Israeli outrage committed in that period. Soon after taking up his new post, he was interviewed on The Andrew Marr Show (1 May) on 'the anti-Semitism crisis' in the Labour Party.

and not Mann who was suspended from Labour Party membership shows what Corbyn is up against. Not only are there are many Labour MPs who would rather lose the next general election than have a left reformist like Corbyn become Prime Minister, there can also be no doubt that the Israeli government regards preventing the election of a Corbyn government, sympathetic to the Palestinian people, as a foreign policy priority. We can safely assume that Regev is working towards that end. Accusations of anti-Semitism against the Left are not only here to stay, but will increase in volume as and when necessary.

### **The Nazis and the Zionists**

**W**hat of the relationship between the Nazis and the Zionists? As Livingstone pointed out, the seminal work here is Lenni Brenner's 1983 volume *Zionism in the Age of Dictators* supplemented by his later 2002 collection *51 Documents: Zionist Collaboration with the Nazis*. But one does not have to turn to Brenner's important, path-breaking books for an exploration of the relationship. What is proposed here is to look at how this question is dealt with by one of the leading British historians of the Holocaust, someone embraced by the Establishment, a recipient of the OBE no less, the late David Cesarani, in his massive posthumous volume, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-49*.

Cesarani was descended from Italian immigrants to Britain and both his grandparents and parents were left-wing. His father, a hairdresser, had joined the Communist Party in the 1930s. As Cesarani puts it: 'Neither my father nor my mother showed much interest in Israel.... For my father the Soviet Union was the idealised territory'. As late as the early 1970s the family holidayed in Yugoslavia because it was cheap, Communist and his father admired Tito. Until he went to secondary school, as far as he was concerned 'almost all Jewish men were hairdressers, camp and hated Tories'.

What won the young Cesarani over to Zionism was the Yom Kippur War of 1973, while he was still at school. He spent

the summer of 1974 on a kibbutz in the Negev where he 'fell madly in love with Israel'. For the next five years he was 'a Zionist activist' and spent a gap year working on a kibbutz before going to university. At university he was on the executive of the Union of Jewish Students but he did have 'nagging doubts over what I had seen in Israel, notably the disrespectful treatment of local Arabs'. He also remarks on his shock during the Freshers' Fair in his first week at university when he had a look at the General Union of Palestinian Students stall and discovered that the ruins in the kibbutz fields that he had worked on were not crusader ruins as he had been told, but in fact the ruins of an Arab village, destroyed in 1948. By the time he went to the USA to do postgraduate studies, he had become disillusioned with Zionism and even attended Edward Said's lectures wearing a keffiah.

This was only a brief phase. On his return to Britain, not only was he reconciled to a liberal Zionism, but he was also involved in one of the earliest attempts to equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, the 1987 controversy over Jim Allen's play, *Perdition*, directed at the Royal Court theatre by Ken Loach. Here we had two absolutely committed anti-fascists and anti-racists, staunch opponents of anti-Semitism, slandered as anti-Semites for the dramatic exploration of the relationship between Zionism and the Nazis.<sup>2</sup> Sounds familiar! He returned to this theme in a short book he wrote for the Labour Friends of Israel in 2004, *The Left and the Jews/The Jews and the Left*, complaining that the 'Nazi-Zionist connection' has 'repeatedly surfaced among left-wing intellectuals and parties'.<sup>3</sup>

Cesarani was an outstanding historian, the author of a number of fine books, culminating in his great *Final Solution*.

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<sup>2</sup> For Cesarani's own account of his biography see his 'Autobiographical Reflections on Writing History, the Holocaust and Hairdressing' in Christopher Browning *et al*, eds., *Holocaust Scholarship: Personal trajectories and Professional Interpretations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015) pp. 67-83. See also his 'The Perdition Affair' in Robert Wistrich ed., *Anti-Zionism and Anti-semitism in the Contemporary World* (London: Macmillan, London 1991).

<sup>3</sup> David Cesarani, *The Left and the Jews/The Jews and the Left*, (London 2004) p. 75

Consequently it is worth looking at what he has to say about Nazi-Zionist relations. Inevitably, this is only a partial examination of the topic, which was not his central concern in the book, but it is nevertheless of considerable interest and he can hardly be accused of being either anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist.

First of all Hitler and the Nazis. For Cesarani the Nazi Party 'did not come to power because of anti-Semitism. Of course, it was an anti-Semitic party, but it had few concrete ideas about what to do with the German Jews if it took office'. In its early years in power, the Nazis' anti-Jewish policies were 'marked by improvisation and muddle' and were not 'systematic, consistent or even premeditated'. (pp. xxx-xxxi)<sup>4</sup> Certainly Hitler hated Jewish people and made clear on numerous occasions that he regarded them as the 'enemy'. In the 1930s, though, Nazi policy developed into an attempt to drive German Jews out of the country by means of what has been described as a 'slow pogrom'. This persecution intensified over time, with German Jews being progressively deprived of their civil rights, excluded from the life of German society, prevented from earning a living, reduced to abject poverty and subjected to humiliation and violence at the whim of the Brownshirts and the like. In the 1930s, German Jews were robbed, beaten, tortured, raped and murdered with complete impunity as part of the attempt to force them out of their country. Cesarani brings home the plight of German Jews most effectively by quoting the African American W. E. B. DuBois' condemnation of the Nazis after a visit to Germany in 1935. He told his African American audience, who had more than enough experience of discrimination, persecution and the most brutal racist violence, that the campaign against the Jews 'surpasses in vindictive cruelty and public insult anything I have ever seen; and I have seen much'. He described Julius Streicher's *Der Sturmer* newspaper as 'the most shameless,

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<sup>4</sup> David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-49*, (London: Macmillan, 2016). The page numbers of quotes from this book are included in the text.

lying advocate of race hate in the world'. (p. 107)<sup>5</sup> What transformed this 'old fashioned' expulsionist and pogromist anti-Semitism into the mass murder of millions of Jewish men, women and children, into attempted genocide was, as Cesarani argues, the Second World War.

The Left critique of Zionism at that time is twofold. First, the Zionist project involved denying self-determination to the Palestinian people and their eventual expulsion from Palestine. Second, instead of fighting anti-Semitism in Germany, Poland and elsewhere, the Zionists saw the Nazis as assisting in and encouraging emigration to Palestine and were on a number of occasions to actually collaborate with the anti-Semites to this end. To point out this historic truth is not anti-Semitic. What it brings home is the fact that the fight against anti-Semitism is an essential and vital part of the fight against Zionism, a point to which we will return.

What does Cesarani have to say? From the time of the Ha'avara Agreement of August 1933 that was concluded between the Nazis and the German Zionist Federation, 'German Zionists took minimal interest in the defence of Jewish rights in the Third Reich. In their eyes, the success of National Socialism vindicated their prognostications about the illusion of emancipation'; (p. 69) and the Zionist movement began to grow in Germany in response to Hitler's rise to power. There were Jewish organisations arguing a different case, most notably the Centralverein (CV), that campaigned against anti-Semitism and for the rights of Jews, and the Jewish ex-servicemen's organisation, the Reichsbund judischer Frontsoldaten (RjF), which caused the Nazis considerable problems, not least in their efforts at portraying German Jews as unpatriotic. As far as the RjF was concerned, emigration was 'a form of surrender'. (p. 90)

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<sup>5</sup> The SS newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps* actually complained in October 1935 about US hypocrisy, pointing out that there were no lynchings in Germany and that if there were the world would be up in arms, while there was international silence when such episodes routinely took place in the USA. See my *Fighting Back: The American working class in the 1930s* (London: Bookmarks, 2012) p. 119. See also footnote 382.

By the winter of 1934, the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), the Nazi intelligence agency, was congratulating itself on the fact that 'the Zionists had gained the upper hand over the CV and Jewish veterans'. There was still a fear, however, that if the Jews could not be forced to emigrate then 'We will perhaps have to recognise the Jews as a minority, and then they will be on our hands for the rest of eternity.' To avoid this, SD policy was, as Cesarani puts it, 'to weaken the national-German Jews' and to help achieve this 'the SD favoured the Zionists and promoted their activity'. Cesarani also quotes Gestapo headquarters on Gestapo policy at this time: 'The efforts of the Gestapo are oriented to promoting Zionism as much as possible and lending support to its efforts to further emigration'. The Gestapo boasted that 'we now have well-regulated emigration whose sole destination is Palestine'. (p. 96) Most astonishingly, although this is not referred to by Cesarani, in September 1935, Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the SD and later one of the principal architects of the Holocaust, wrote in the SS newspaper, *Das Schwarze Korps*, that the regime was 'in complete agreement with the great spiritual movement within Jewry itself, the so-called Zionism, with its recognition of the solidarity of Jewry throughout the world, and the rejection of all assimilationist ideas.'<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, as Cesarani points out: 'The Nazis were not Zionists in any conventional sense of the word' because in the end 'they did not care where Jews went when they left Germany, and treated Palestine as merely a dumping ground'. (p. 126) Regardless of Heydrich's momentary enthusiasm, the Nazis made use of the Zionists as a way of helping them to drive the Jews out of Germany and, when this policy seemed to falter, they were quite content with driving them out regardless of their destination. There were voices raised that warned of the dangers of having the Zionists establish an independent state in the Middle East, but it seems that in the 1930s the main priority remained expelling the Jews from Germany.

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Nicosia, *The Third Reich and the Palestine Question*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) p. 57.

## **Zionism and the German Jews**

**W**hat of the Zionist attitude towards the German Jews as they bore the brunt of this new wave of European anti-Semitism that the Nazis were spearheading? In January 1934, the American, James McDonald, was appalled by the attitude of Chaim Weizmann when he 'expressed his contempt for German Jews as a whole, his indifference to their fate, and for that matter, his indifference to the fate of millions of Jews elsewhere, just so long as a saving remnant could be preserved in Palestine'. (pp. 132-133) Weizmann was not alone among the Zionist leadership in giving expression to such brutal and callous sentiments. Even more notoriously, after the Kristallnacht pogrom, David Ben Gurion told a closed meeting of the Jewish Agency: 'If I knew that all the Jewish children of Europe could be saved by settlement in Britain and only half could be saved by settlement in Palestine, I should choose the latter'.<sup>7</sup> As Cesarani makes clear, the Zionists were not so much concerned with rescuing Jews from persecution as with building their settlement in Palestine. To this end they gave priority to young emigrants so that elderly Zionists found themselves effectively abandoned to their fate. This had 'dramatic consequences.... A wave of suicides swept through the ranks of elderly Zionists who realised their dream was thwarted'. (p. 133) The Nazis actually monitored the Jewish suicide rate which was 'to them.... a benchmark of success'. (p. 225) But how did the Zionists respond to the racist 1935 Nuremberg Laws? According to Cesarani, 'Zionist and Orthodox Jews.... applauded the recognition of Jews as a minority and the establishment of separate spheres along religious and racial lines'. He notes how Willy Cohn, for example, as a Zionist welcomed 'racial separation', while 'from a Jewish point of view' he unhesitatingly approved the ban on mixed marriages'. (p. 109)

By 1936-37 there were fears that the drive to expel German Jews from the country had stalled. Partly this was because of the great Palestinian Revolt, the First Intifada, but

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Avishai, *The Tragedy of Zionism* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985) p. 152

also, as far as the Nazis were concerned, because life was not yet hard enough. In 1937, the SD produced its 'Guidelines on the Jewish Question', which made clear that for the regime the struggle against the Jews was 'from the outset a basic principle of National Socialism.... The Jew is for the National Socialist simply the enemy'. This necessitated 'the total deJewification of Germany' which the Guidelines made clear was 'thinkable only through the Zionist emigration'. (p. 128)

### **Kristallnacht**

The persecution of German Jews was intensified and became increasingly violent, culminating in the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938 which left 'around 1,000 synagogues and prayer rooms.... gutted or smashed up', some '7,500 shops, out of about 9,000 remaining in Jewish hands.... wrecked' and 'over ninety Jews.... killed and several women raped and abused'. (p. 184) Perhaps as many as 30,000 Jews were arrested and interned in concentration camps where they were systematically brutalised, many of them not surviving the experience (in Dachau 187 died, in Buchenwald 222 died and in Sachsenhausen nearly 100). Even though the pogrom was staged without any SD or Gestapo involvement and 'provoked the wrath of Goring and Himmler, neither of whom had been included in the planning' (p. 191), it initiated a dramatic intensification in the persecution of the Jews. Himmler had actually ordered the SS not to get involved (many of them ignored the instruction) and both Heydrich and Eichmann were furious at what they regarded as the return of the old fashioned anti-Semitism of the mob as opposed to their own more modern, bureaucratic methods of achieving the forced emigration of the Jewish population. The two approaches were to be increasingly combined.

Meanwhile in 1936, the SD had even established covert contact with the Haganah, the Zionist self-defence force in Palestine, that helped the British crush the Palestinian revolt. Although Cesarani does not mention it, this relationship involved the smuggling of German weapons to the Haganah

for use against the Palestinians.<sup>8</sup> And in October 1937, two SD officials, Herbert Hagen and Adolf Eichmann, visited Palestine for discussions about 'increasing Jewish emigration'. (p. 131) They were deported by the British. (Eichmann's next visit was when he stood trial in 1961.) The SD was also involved with 'people smuggling', working with the likes of Berthold Storfer, who smuggled people into Palestine for profit, independent of the Zionists. This was 'on the basis of their mutual desire to get Jews out of the country by fair means or foul'. Eichmann 'placed him in charge of organising and financing illegal transports of Jews to Palestine'. (pp. 219, 281) This forced emigration continued up to and beyond the outbreak of the War.

Cesarani's discussion of Nazi anti-Semitism in the 1930s occupies some 200 pages in a book with 796 pages of text. What follows after is a powerful, indeed essential account of the road to mass murder, of the frightful crimes perpetrated by the Nazis and their accomplices, of the terrible fate of European Jews at the hands of their persecutors; but also of their resistance, not only in Warsaw and the ghettos, in the partisan movements across Europe, and even in the death camps themselves, in Treblinka and Sobibor. The book is a fitting monument to the work of a fine historian and deserves to be on the shelves of every library in the country.

## **Justice delayed**

One last point regarding his achievements as a historian: Cesarani's first book, *Justice Delayed: How Britain became a refuge for Nazi war criminals*, needs to be read in conjunction with *Final Solution*. In *Justice Delayed*, Cesarani shows how the post-war Labour government knowingly allowed Baltic and Ukrainian SS veterans to resettle in Britain. In April 1947, the entire 14th Waffen-SS Galizien Division, nearly 9,000 Ukrainians, was shipped from Italy to Britain, although for some of them Britain was merely a transit stop on their way to Canada and elsewhere. As Cesarani observes, with

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Nicosia, *The Third Reich and the Palestine Question*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) p. 63

remarkable restraint, the 'complicity' of certain Foreign Office officials 'extended to concealing possible war criminals.... officials should have known that amongst the men of the Ukrainian Division there were probably Nazi collaborators and mass murderers'. Men who had participated in the murder of Jewish civilians, including women and children, were allowed to settle in Britain. Many of them settled in Yorkshire, where they 'still held pro-fascist views thirty years later' and 'combined perfectly respectable lives with unyielding allegiance to the ideals which had led many of them into the ranks of the Waffen-SS'.

One reason for the Labour government welcoming these men into Britain was that they were 'a fertile recruiting ground for the SIS'. They were also seen as a source of labour in view of the post-war labour shortage, although this caused some problems. Cesarani reports on official discussions regarding the problems likely to be caused if British miners found themselves in the pithead showers alongside men sporting SS tattoos. In the end, the Home Office reluctantly agreed to allow the National Coal Board to ban men with SS tattoos 'from entering mining work' although later 'the policy might be amended'. Instead they would be placed in jobs where 'they were not obliged to remove their outer clothing'. This was, as Cesarani remarks, quite literally a 'cover-up'.

Even more shocking is the fact that at the very same time as former members of the SS were being allowed to settle in Britain, the Labour government took the decision to keep European Jews, survivors of the Holocaust, out. As Cesarani points out, 'Jews were consistently excluded from all labour recruitment schemes'. While over 200,000 East Europeans were allowed in to work and settle, the only Jews allowed in were under the Distressed Relatives Scheme, 'around 2,000, including 743 Jewish children who had lived through the experience of the camps and the ghettos'. 'Jews, Blacks and Asians' were not wanted, and this included Black and Asian men who 'had fought in the British armed forces during the war' but were quickly repatriated once the fighting was over. It is, he observes, once again with remarkable

restraint, 'all but impossible to avoid the conclusion that racism was at work'.<sup>9</sup>

What political conclusions can we draw from all this? One seems overwhelmingly obvious: any campaign against Zionism has to have at its centre an uncompromising opposition and hostility to anti-Semitism. In the 1930s, Zionism only prospered when the anti-Semites were in the ascendancy. Indeed one can go so far as to say that without the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany and Eastern Europe, the likelihood is that the Zionist project would have failed because there would not have been enough Jewish men and women wanting to emigrate to Palestine. So much was certainly recognised by Zionists at the time. If the United States, Britain, and other countries had opened their doors to Jews fleeing the Nazis, these countries would almost certainly have been the destiny of choice for the overwhelming majority of European Jews. Instead, the doors were kept closed except for a comparative few. Once again, this was anti-Semitism at work. It was European anti-Semitism, culminating in mass murder and attempted genocide, that made the Zionist project viable at the expense, we have to insist, of the Palestinian people. Consequently the fight against anti-Semitism is a vital part of the fight against Zionism.

*John Newsinger is a semi-retired academic.  
A new edition of his British Counterinsurgency  
has just been published by Palgrave Macmillan.*

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<sup>9</sup> David Cesarani, *Justice Delayed: How Britain became a refuge for Nazi war criminals* (London: Heinemann, 1992) pp. 79-81, 96, 98-100, 131, 157