

# Cause at Heart: Socialists & the Abolition of Antisemitism

Wednesday 24 July 2024, by [WALD Alan](#) (Date first published: 15 July 2024).

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"...the anti-Semite is inevitably a negrophobe."  
—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952

## Written in Honor of Noam Chomsky

*Safety Through Solidarity:*

*A Radical Guide to Fighting Antisemitism*

By Shane Burley and Ben Lorber.

Brooklyn: Melville House, 2024. 375 pages. \$19.99 paperback.

*Zionism: An Emotional State*

By Derek J. Penslar

New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023. 321 pages.

\$21.30 paperback.

*The Threshold of Dissent:*

*A History of American Jewish Critics of Zionism*

By Marjorie N. Feld

New York: New York University Press, 2024. 279 pages. \$30 hardback.

*Tolerance is a Wasteland:*

*Palestine and the Culture of Denial*

By Saree Makdisi

Oakland, California: California University Press, 2022. 228 pages.

\$29.49 hardback.

*Colonizing Palestine:*

*The Zionist Left and the Making of the Palestinian Nakba*

By Areej Sabbagh-Khoury

## **I. The Latest Form of Jew-Baiting**

FOR DECADES, a bogus accusation of antisemitism was tolerated by too many people as the two-bit rhetorical ruse of pro-Zionists to shield their nationalist project from scrutiny by Arab and especially Palestinian anti-colonial challengers in the Middle East.

In the United States, it also served to divert attention from criticisms of evidence of Israeli state racism, occupation, and expansionism, critiques articulated by small Marxist groups and found in books by noteworthy intellectuals such as the Jewish linguist Noam Chomsky and Palestinian literary scholar Edward Said. The aim was to manufacture a consensus in intellectual life by marginalizing opposition.



*People pay their respects at a memorial to the victims of a mass shooting in front of the Tree of Life – Or L'Simcha Congregation in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 4, 2018. Photo daveynin from United States, CC BY 2.0*

Over the last decade, this gravely misguided stratagem of ostracization was reworked to put a new generation of anti-Zionist political candidates in the crosshairs of more conservative rivals in elections. With the growing popularity of British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, and U.S. congresswomen Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, it was a line of attack that grew ever more frequent and more pronounced in the public sphere.

Then came October 7, 2023 and a metamorphosis that would make Ovid salivate. This evil genie of slander, long loosed from its bottle, was instantaneously hijacked by more powerful and reactionary forces and reshaped for their own needs.

In April 2024, the revamped falsehood hit peak cringe when televised to millions as the leitmotif of the House of Representatives Hearings on Antisemitism. There it operated as gonzo demagoguery servicing the Congressional friends of the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, [\[1\]](#) some of whom are also arms-length fellow travelers of Holocaust deniers Nick Fuentes and Ye (formerly known as Kanye West).

Liberals were intimidated, and the brains of viewers were scorched by a fiery stream of false and misleading claims. Most gushed from the mouth of MAGA flamethrower Rep. Elise Stefanik — an internet troll disguised as a politician. [\[2\]](#) In a mind-boggling feat of political alchemy, antisemites became the ones defining “antisemitism.”

The chief accusation was against young protestors opposed to the Israeli-U.S. collateral murder in Gaza — students of many ethnicities but who were disproportionately Jewish and mostly anti-Zionist. [\[3\]](#) These demonstrators were supposedly guilty of Jew-hatred, one of the most odious forms of racism, according to the vanguard of Right-wing Republicans.

Such a branding of anti-racist activists as “antisemites” was mainly achieved through unreliable misconstructions and inflations of fringe behavior. After each hearing, these ran in the press as an endless loop of allegations without fact-checked evidence.

The same genre of intellectual and ethical malpractice reverberated among panicky administrators at colleges and universities and quickly became routine. Thanks to the browbeating of these mostly cowering enablers by wealthy corporate types who are donors and regents, the news is filled with inflated and embellished concerns about “Jewish safety.”

The reference point for this is mostly to elite campuses such as Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard, where Jews are very well represented among the faculty, administration, and student body. [4] While few of these alarmist allegations pass the smell test, they are repetitively used to bureaucratically quash dissent even as fidelity to “academic freedom” and “free speech” are synchronically proclaimed with straight faces. [5]

In part because of the extensive documented history of confronting antisemitism, Jews have been disproportionately present as activists and leaders in radical movements. [6] The past two decades have witnessed the considerable growth of organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now that are pledged to conduct the fight against antisemitism in solidarity with the campaign for Palestinian rights.

As I write, Jewish students are conspicuous among those who have been physically assaulted by police on campus, and Jewish faculty are prominent among those excluded from academic positions—not on scholarly merit but due to their non-conformist political views. [7]

And just like that, antisemitism-baiting has become the latest form of Jew-baiting.



*Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now have been prominent in campus encampments including the nearly month-long one at the University of Michigan.*

## **II. Social Justice Activism as “Jew-hatred”?**

Simultaneously, a Right-wing campaign led by sanctimonious play-actors and abetted by centrist liberals, some of them Jewish, is manipulating accusations of alleged Jew-hatred to roll back progressive advances in education for people of color and women.

George Soros (born György Schwartz), a billionaire Jewish Holocaust survivor, is a primary target in nothing less than a classic antisemitic conspiracy theory.

Having given most of his fortune to the Open Society Foundations, Soros is depicted as a puppet master financing the Gaza ceasefire demonstrations and promoting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) activities. [8]

Other claims of collusion between an academic Left that is substantially Jewish, and a rise in Jew-hatred, are amply visible in the media. For example, *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens puts the blame for Jew-hatred on scholarly fields associated with anti-racism: “the real problem lies with

some of the main convictions and currents of today's academia: intersectionality, critical theory, post-colonialism, ethnic studies and other concepts that may not seem antisemitic on their face but tend to politicize classrooms and cast Jews as privileged and oppressive." [9]

There are even some Jewish publications, such as *Tablet*, linking Left-wing social activism as a whole to "the current climate of antisemitism on college campuses":

*"Whether wearing a hijab or a Star of David, SJP [Students for Justice in Palestine] anti-Israel activists are not simply freaks who demonstrate in favor of Hamas. They are mainstream products of the monoculture of the academic left. They are similar, indeed identical, to the social justice, Black Lives Matter, climate, gender, decolonizing, and woke activists who have been wreaking havoc on the U.S. and tearing apart our institutions for years."* [10]

To future generations, the persecution of those who should be honored, and the incendiary manipulation of hyperbolic concerns about Jewish safety on campuses to disempower people of color, will certainly seem abominable. Yet the alarmingly reactionary implications of the new normalization of the duplicity around "Jewish safety," coexisting with the literal "genocide denial" perpetrated by the same people, can hardly be overestimated.

This is practically a Defcon 1 moment, as we are on the brink of a whole new era, possibly a global shift toward chauvinistic nationalisms, and the coming days are crucial. Authentic antisemitism from the Right is escalating, even as we mostly read journalistic analysis of "Left antisemitism" — with anecdotal lunacy continuously dialed up as click-bait. The Right is exploiting Israel's problems and manipulating many Jewish-Americans for its own reactionary and antisemitic agenda.

Trying to counterpose "Jewish safety" to those working for social progress around race and gender is a sure way to make Bret Stephens' fear of Jews being seen as "oppressive and privileged" come true.

Even with the imminence of Right-wing parties coming to power, sham accusations of Jew-hatred are playing a role in driving a wedge between Jews and the Left that is all the more disconcerting as they are spewed out by known antisemites in MAGA and the National Rally party (formerly the National Front in France, which has fascist roots).

Meanwhile, much of the U.S. Jewish establishment is in an alliance with some of these dangerous elements for the aim of policing opinion (especially of young Jews) in respect to maintaining a false narrative of Israel's history and security needs. To be sure, Jews are not to blame for antisemitism, but individual Jews and organizations can collaborate with antisemites out of perceived selfish short-term needs.

This is a maneuver that goes back for decades, as socialist Peter Seidman noted in a pamphlet on *Socialists and the Fight Against Anti-Semitism* published in 1973: "The desire of the Zionist leaders to win the support of U.S. imperialism for the Jewish state in Palestine is what caused them to act in ways [in the 1930s] so detrimental to the real needs and interests of the Jewish people." [11]

Among the most sickening examples today is the embrace of Christian nationalists who fetishize support for Israel due to their belief in the country's key role in "The End Times," at which Jews must control Jerusalem and then choose between conversion or death — which means the annihilation of Judaism.

At the same time, these spiritual heirs of the KKK regard Jewish people as “the worst of the worst” because of paranoia about George Soros and their fantasy that Jews are behind the growing threat of immigrants, gender equality, and people of color. [12] Another example of a dangerous alliance with antisemitism is that of Amichai Chikli, Israel’s Diaspora Affairs Minister, who backs National Rally leader Marine Le Pen for president of France. [13]

Any confusion as to the definition, actual causes, and real targets of Jew-hatred will hinder the obligatory task of uprooting antisemitism wherever it appears. Militant socialists understand that the rise of racism in general — and not the (mostly justified) criticisms of the Israeli state — is the foremost enemy of Jewish safety.

We must find our own forms of abolishing antisemitism, independent of groups such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). Taking the lead in this effort, in our press and in social movement activism, we must provide conceptual clarity and effective tactics that reach out. Our object is to convert people who presently have little understanding of the vile history of Jew-hatred as well as the unconscionable treatment of Palestinians.

Let’s be clear: Just as the European Right is out to set European Jews and Muslims against each other, so the U.S. Right is aiming to use Jews for the same purpose regarding the social movements of people of color as well as discrediting efforts to halt the genocide in Gaza. Both this development and actual antisemitism must be contested at once.

To help untangle the existing confusion, there are five new books, all far above mid, one of which can help us name and locate antisemitism as it relates to the present, and the others which provide evidence for *the necessity of anti-Zionism as part of the same struggle*. That is to say, in the present context we can most effectively counter antisemitism in connection with defeating Zionism (along with other forms of racism and discrimination).

In what follows, I will not provide a soup-to-nuts assessment of each book; there is considerable overlap among them, and some matters are expounded where I lack expertise to offer a useful appraisal. Instead, I will spotlight the components that are most worthwhile in examining how and why the abolition of both antisemitism and Zionism are presently intertwined.

The first two volumes, by Jewish authors Shane Burley/Ben Lorber and Derek Penslar, are of a more general character, providing probing and insightful surveys of the complicated landscapes of antisemitic and Zionist ideas and activities. The last three, by Jewish author Marjorie N. Feld, and Palestinians Saree Makdisi and Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, are comparatively focused and treated more briefly.

These home in on the historical counter-narrative of admirable U.S. anti-Zionist thought at which accusations of antisemitism have long been trained; the Zionist propaganda strategy of “denial by affirmation” to mask the history of Palestine/Israel so that U.S. citizens (especially Jews) end up supporting a system in contradiction to their basic values; and the devastating analysis of the failed attempt to reconcile socialist ideals with nationalist practice in the colonization of Palestine.

Together the five volumes provide footholds of information and argument that help make sense of the true locus of antisemitism and the deceptive character of Zionism. In that sense they help explain why socialists follow Frantz Fanon’s warning about the bond of hatred between the antisemite and the “negrophobe.”

We do not define the enemies of social justice by any ethnicity, religion, nationality or physical features; only by their opposition in practice to the quest for a way of life that ensures universal

equal rights, security, freedom of expression, and workers' control over production — which we call socialism.

### **III. Danger on the Right**

One never-to-be-forgotten event underscores many critical features of antisemitism's most pernicious and present form. On the morning of Saturday, 27 October 2018, white nationalist Robert Bowers posted an instructive message on an alt-right social networking service just before advancing toward Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue: "HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in." [\[14\]](#)

The bearded, heavy-set, 46-year old white man then fired a Colt AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and three Glock .357 Sig semi-automatic pistols for twenty minutes, killing eleven and wounding six Jewish worshippers at the morning Shabbat services.

This atrocity clearly underscores how antisemitism is now back in the center of U.S. racism. For a while it seemed as if Jew-hatred had been significantly displaced by Islamophobia, but as Right-wing forces have strengthened around the world, antisemitism has also revived.

Bowers' was not merely a personal act born of a Jew-hatred from "time immemorial." It was the outcome of a current culture rife with conspiracy theories, the pillar of antisemitic beliefs and ideology. Burley and Lorber's *Safety Through Solidarity*, the product of two committed activists and researchers of U.S. fascism and antisemitism, is more than an unerring guide to this most threatening aspect.

In 355 pages the authors take hold of the entire subject of antisemitism and attack it from every side. Theirs is a tome that includes the history of antisemitism as it progressed from pagan Roman times to the Christian era to the rise and consolidation of capitalism. At that point antisemitism, evolving from a religious to a racial basis, was undoubtedly part of the ideological fabric of reactionary and oppressive movements in society.

Then the authors pursue its persistence all the way through its uses in the Red Scare and its continuation in white nationalist movements and the Christian Right. What comes through above all is that, although antisemitism has persisted for centuries, its roots are social and historical. [\[15\]](#) This means that, like other forms of modern racism and oppression, it can be understood, fought, and changed by political action.

That point is critical, because the alternative strategies — such as relying on powerful protectors or conquering another's land to build an imagined fortress of security — have brought us to the present moment of crisis. Jews who are justifiably worried about persecution and violence are bitterly divided among themselves in a way that increases the danger from the Right.

The book is held together through a rather loose narrative arc that works effectively in providing both finely reported history and sometimes intimate accounts that tell the personal stories of individuals (including the authors). Despite the rather agonizing topics, Burley and Lorber maintain a cool, unruffled analysis, summarizing their main points in a cogent way for a general audience.

As one might expect of relatively younger militants, Burley and Lorber propose a frankly "intersectional" methodology to combat Jew-hatred, inasmuch as it is one kind of oppression interlocked with others. Thus, the battle to extirpate Islamophobia, anti-Black racism, antisemitism, and all types of ethnic and gender discrimination must be addressed as a collective project.



This does not mean that all modes of bigotry are interchangeable. The authors are explicit that oppressions do not function that way; compared to African Americans, “at this historic moment, Jews do not face structural levels of police violence, poverty, and other commonly understood effects of state-sponsored institutional racism as Jews.” (45)

Nevertheless, Jews can be subject to hate crimes and personal prejudice, and the authors embrace the tradition of Jewish Marxists and socialists committed to the strategy expressed in the title of their book, “safety through solidarity.”

#### **IV. Quandaries on the Left**

Burley and Lorber are far from oblivious to the Left’s own quandaries. The text cites instances of antisemitism that have episodically appeared in radical circles: ugly statements by Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin and French socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon; post-World War II purges in the Soviet bloc where “Zionism” was a stand-in for “Jew;” and the appearance of dubious “anti-Zionist” figures such as Gilad Atzmon (an Israeli-born British saxophonist and author who has expressed openly antisemitic views) and Alison Weir (a U.S. journalist whose antisemitic subtexts are more veiled), both of whom were repudiated by the Jewish Left. [16]

The book also enunciates a harsh critique of the manner in which some on the Left responded to October 7: “On social media and at some rallies across the country, some activists uncritically celebrated Hamas’ overall attack as ‘resistance,’ minimizing Israeli civilian victims into a homogenous category of ‘settlers,’ unworthy of solidarity or support.” (206)

The most disturbing episode, however, may be Lorber’s revelation of the pain and shame he felt at a radical political meeting where blatant antisemitic statements were made promoting conspiracy theories: “They painted a picture of an immensely powerful multi-tentacled global Zionist adversary, working behind the scenes to stir up anti-Blackness and global repression.” (179)

Complicating the matter was that the audience, which was universally opposed to antisemitism, didn’t seem to *recognize* these remarks for what they were; Lorber “worried that if he named antisemitism, he would be accused of defending Israel’s oppression of Palestinians.” (180)

Of course, the experience he recounts is similar to those of any one of us who have been in a pro-Israel audience — or even just among friends and family! — and feared objecting to obviously false claims about Palestine because that would elicit denunciations of oneself as an antisemite or self-hating Jew.

Nevertheless, this element of intimidation in Left culture, whether from ignorance or knee-jerk defensiveness, must surely be eliminated if we are to have a movement that effectively moves toward the future we want.

Most antisemitism (as opposed to insensitivity) on the Left is probably either at the level of the individual or at the margins, but vile notions about global Jewish conspiracies must still be politically defeated by socialists. The relationship between the United States and Israel, for example, is not dictated by the Israel Lobby (which of course includes the seven-million strong Christians United for Israel) but is a self-interested collaboration between two capitalist states.

Naturally the socialist Left cannot follow the Zionists’ script in defining antisemitism, any more than it can regarding their command to “condemn Hamas” — when the Israeli state firstly requires condemnation for its human rights violations of a far greater magnitude.

Still, we need to figure out our socialist method of rigorously differentiating between an actual Jew-hating slogan or action (such as “Hitler was right!” or harassing a person simply because they appear to be Jewish), and the plethora of ignorant, ultra-Left, provocative, and even deeply stupid behaviors that have always appeared in radical movements. [17]

On the other hand, there is a hurdle for radicals in dealing with those among us who are not just disagreeing on facts but unable to perceive the same reality — for example, those who proclaim the need for “peace” in the Middle East in a manner that implies political capitulation by the weaker population.

And there’s a “both-sides-ism” approach that doesn’t work in Palestine when there are vast differences in the situations of oppressors and the oppressed. Talk of “two states for two peoples” may sound good in the abstract, but *not* if one ignores the serious danger that the Palestinian one will end up a reservation or a prison camp.

Of course, complicating any discussion of solutions is the widespread misperception that the religion of Judaism and the nationalist movement of Zionism are virtually one and the same. This simplified melding exists even among those who recognize that the majority of Jews don’t live in Israel and have zero intention of responding to calls to “return” (known as “making Aliyah”) to what is depicted as their rightful homeland.

Students beguiled by that conflation are certainly going to feel discomforted by current protests and will misinterpret militant slogans and chants as threatening. Although such emotions are part of the source for overblown claims about “safety,” they should not be callously dismissed. Shane and Lorber have a chapter on “Generations of Trauma” that points to the mistake of belittling Jewish experiences.

Moreover, this false merging of Judaism and Zionism leads to the canard that transforming the Israeli ethno-state into a modern democratic one is code for eliminating the Jewish population. It’s now a standard talking point usually combined with the claim that Israel is somehow being “demonized” and “singled out” in a manner tantamount to antisemitism.

Yet socialists aim to be consistent in opposing state forms that are not to the benefit of the entire population. No doubt the Chinese regime regards our socialist denunciation of its own colonial-settler policies against the Uyghurs as similarly “demonizing.” Likewise, the antisemitic and reactionary leaders of Iran hold that our support for the domestic movement of young people to overturn the authoritarian state system of the Iranian theocracy means the destruction of Iran or its people.

What *does* singularize the student protests against Israel is that the United States is financially and militarily backing Israel’s genocidal actions, while holding it up as a model democracy.

How one should address all this has not yet been effectively resolved, a requisite for serious political dialogue. Anger and frustration are understandable, and their expressions will occur. Yet is hardly helpful to defame ill-informed people by snarling “Zionist” or “Israeli apologist” as an epithet in situations when a bridge might be built, so that united mass action around a principled demand can occur.

Even when confronting self-professed mainstream Zionists, arguing too aggressively only makes people double down instead of rethinking with the unfortunate result that bullying, intimidation and shaming spread quickly within the Left itself to eventually silence *all* questioning. No one wants to be trapped in a room with a jack hammer.



Guidance in such matters is among those areas where I find some weaknesses in the Burley/Lorber book. In addition, there can be a surfeit of platitudes regarding vague political terminology. The authors are in support of “Progressives,” although it is not clear what this means in terms of politics (socialists, liberals?).

Also, they call for “justice for Palestine” and “struggling for a better world” without explaining what that entails, which seems necessary if one is to convince people that de-Zionizing Israel is in the interests and security of Jews as well as Palestinians.

Probably there needs to be more discussion about the matter of Palestinian resistance, because having an armed resistance *is a right*, under international law. Then again, without repudiating a just struggle, it is common sense that all acts of resistance are neither effective nor ethical. The Palestinian Left is far from monolithic and there is much to be learned from hearing a variety of perspectives.

Moreover, the challenges of dealing with nationalism in political movements can’t be hedged. Nationalist movements of the oppressed have a very different dynamic from nationalisms of the oppressor, and socialists support the former even while promoting internationalist ideology. But history shows retrograde ideas and practices (often including antisemitism) are frequently present in *all* forms of nationalism.

Likewise, the Burley/Lorber volume might have said more about the expression of grief and horror about the treatment of Israeli civilians on October 7. Whether or not Hamas turns out to be responsible for every single atrocity attributed to it (certainly debatable at this point), such feelings of human compassion need not take away from the grief and horror felt at the Israeli state mass murder that ensued.

Nevertheless, the volume is replete with many deeply observed insights, careful and respectful judgments, measured analysis, and certainly a passionate critique of fascism and settler colonialism. The authors are not afraid of expressing uncomfortable truths, and they know that trying to win a debate by simply shoving one’s politics down other people’s throats is a prelude to an authoritarian culture.

## **V. “Political Emotions” and “Zionism Reconsidered”**

Some ways of arguing against Zionism are more effective than others. Penslar’s *Zionism: An Emotional State* is an unusual examination that considers the passions that drive supporters and antagonists, both of whom fall into diverse groups. The author is an American-Canadian who is Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University.

Penslar is no Marxist, and has professed a love of the Israeli state, yet his 2024 appointment to co-chair Harvard’s Presidential Task Force on Combatting Antisemitism caused an uproar. This was initiated by billionaire hedge fund manager Bill Ackman and taken up by troll Stefanik, who denounced Penslar for “despicable antisemitic views.” His crime was that he had described the Netanyahu government’s West Bank policy as “apartheid.” [18]

What’s appealing about Penslar’s book is his search for less polemical ways to address Zionism and colonialism; he convincingly argues that there is no basis for denying that Zionism is colonialism but also no grounds for seeing it as a pure form. To me, this seems consistent with the views of Columbia University scholar Rashid Khalidi, one of the most informed Palestinian critics of Zionism, who stated in a recent interview with Tariq Ali:

*"Israel is not a typical settler colony, by any means; it's also a national project, with a significant Biblical dimension, and a refuge from persecution. No other settler colony was a refuge from persecution to such a degree — the Puritans and other religious dissidents, like the Quakers, who came to North America, certainly experienced repression, but not on the same scale."* [19]

My impression is that Penslar himself does not take a very clear side on this issue. [20] Nevertheless, his analysis should help readers see why Zionism came to be considered as an invading force in the Middle East. This was the main cause of anger at the Jewish ethno-state, especially during 1948 and after when violent acts by Israeli Jews toward Palestinians were whitewashed by systematic coverup and falsifications.

Penslar explains why Zionists, even if secular, are generally marked by a feeling of intrinsic loyalty to the state of Israel due to a history of European antisemitism. The upshot is feeling a need to defend Israel's virtue, and also that a destruction of the protecting state will happen unless there is "defensive" action against all perceived threats.

That is why exposure of atrocities by the Israeli military and settlers, presently in the form of an open-ended license to kill on an industrial scale, seems to have negligible impact.

Penslar's analysis involves the role of emotions in the campaign to resettle Jews in what is regarded as their Biblical homeland. His argument is somewhat similar to philosopher Martha Nussbaum's view that emotions are a critical form of knowledge and a way of reasoning: "Emotion is a component of cognition, and there is no contradiction or even divide between emotions and ideas. Ideas are sustained interpretations of experience in terms of beliefs and values." (9)

Thus, the book is a study in political emotion, tracking the evolution of the emotions (emotional state) Zionism has aroused over time, since its origins in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and up till recent decades.

Probably the most constructive aspect is his revelation of Zionists' self-understanding of their project, critical to those of us who wish to better understand what we are opposing. This is elaborated in chapters on "Staging Zionism" and "Zionism as Colonialism," and developed up to the present in "Zionism to 1948" and "Zionism Since 1948."

All this is achieved with nuance, balance and elegance of expression, not to mention impressive academic rigor. In concise, pithy, and sensible prose Penslar crafts a cogent and revealing account of how Zionism and anti-Zionism inflame powerful emotions that are characteristic in debates about nationalism in the modern world.

A work of strenuous and intelligent exegesis, alert to paradox and the telling detail, this book will probably not satisfy partisans of any camp, but it surely expands our knowledge and understanding.

Where Penslar is less substantial is in his treatment of the actual history of anti-Zionism. Edward Said gets a page or two, but Martin Buber is never mentioned, Hannah Arendt (author of the prophetic 1945 essay, "Zionism Reconsidered") [21] is cited only twice in passing, and Noam Chomsky only once.

The Soviet Union is discussed a bit, but there is nothing about various Communist Parties and not a single reference to the Jewish Leon Trotsky, who made the following memorable prophecy in July 1940:

*“The attempt to solve the Jewish question through the migration of Jews to Palestine can now be seen for what it is, a tragic mockery of the Jewish people. Interested in winning the sympathies of the Arabs who are more numerous than the Jews, the British government has sharply altered its policy toward the Jews, and has actually renounced its promise to help them found their “own home” in a foreign land. The future development of military events may well transform Palestine into a bloody trap for several hundred thousand Jews. Never was it so clear as it is today that the salvation of the Jewish people is bound up inseparably with the overthrow of the capitalist system.”* [22]

Happily, there exists a growing number of new studies showcasing a history of many valuable critiques of Zionism in the United States, although not all of these earlier efforts were embedded in the kind of socialist politics necessary to address the crisis we have inherited.

## **VI. Return of the Repressed**

This record of discord is superbly illuminated by Marjorie N. Feld’s *The Threshold of Dissent*, which follows in the wake of the publication of two other outstanding studies, Geoffrey Levin’s *Our Palestine Question: Israel and Jewish American Dissent, 1948-1978* (2023) and Jonathan Graubert’s *Jewish Self-Determination beyond Zionism: Lessons from Hannah Arendt and Other Pariahs* (2023).

Written with dramatic verve and backed up with a plethora of evidence, Feld, who is Professor of History at Babson College, covers some of the same ground as Levin and Graubert, but encompasses a much longer narrative sweep in her book.

Moreover, *The Threshold of Dissent* has unique value in demonstrating that the current slurring of anti-Zionism in U.S. culture as Jew-hatred is part of a long tradition that has now given birth to a confusion: one that puts Jews in greater danger than ever before even as it facilitates the U.S. government’s collaboration in a genocide that is transforming Israel into a pariah state.

Her genealogy begins in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and moves to the present in four long chapters that are sandwiched between an Introduction and Conclusion followed by a Coda. It is a disturbingly powerful narrative but filled with close and penetrating observations that are expressed moderately in tone — even as they are far from that in content.

Feld’s initial focus is on the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Reform Movement. This is followed by the mid-century activism of William Zuckerman (1885-1961) and his *Jewish Newsletter*, the 1960s anti-colonialist and Black Freedom Movement, and the appearance of the now defunct New Jewish Agenda (a progressive Jewish organization) in the 1980s.

A capsule summary of her story is that anti-Zionism in the United States emerged from the mainstream, although not always for the same reasons as those of Marxist-internationalists, but was incrementally marginalized over the decades. These moments are connected and contextualized with extensive commentary by a scholar who writes with historical acuity and human sensitivity.

What may capture special attention of the contemporary reader are the accounts of individuals and groups that prefigure our own experiences of the past several years. Long before 1948, many anti-Zionist and non-Zionist critics saw numerous problems that would vex the Israeli state and lead to the current calamity and divisions.

Even after the Nazi Holocaust, the American Council for Judaism argued that the United States and

Britain needed to increase immigration of Jewish refugees and that "Palestine should be 'neither a Jewish state nor an Arab state' because it is a 'Holy Land, sacred to Christian, to Jew, and to Moslem alike....it is not and can never become, a land which any race or religion can justly claim as its very own.'" (31)

Zuckerman, a journalist with a Leftist past, was particularly impressive for his understanding that, if fighting racism and fighting antisemitism in the United States are part of the same struggle, then the Zionist establishment is full of hypocrisy when it comes to Palestinians: "How can the American Jewish Congress and other outspoken Zionist organizations honestly fight segregation in the South, if opposition to integration of Jews with non-Jews is the basic principle of Zionism?" (80)

Page after page of Feld's inspiring book is filled with arguments to the effect that fighting racism consistently is what will make Jews safer, not abetting Right-wing resistance, and that embracing Israel was more about enabling nationalist colonialism than supporting Jews because ethnic nationalism in power had led to supremacist aggression.

The book also showcases how individuals can politically evolve given exposure to information, even if not on Marxist principles. This was the case with journalist I.F. Stone.

Like many with a fellow-traveling Communist background, Stone was a one-time partisan of the Israeli side in the 1940s, but argued differently in the *New York Review of Books* in 1967: "How we [Jews] act toward the Arabs will determine what kind of people we become: either oppressors and racists in our turn like those from whom we have suffered, or a nobler race able to transcend the tribal xenophobias that afflict mankind." (107)

The danger of repression is another major theme — especially from the constant Zionist efforts to marginalize leaders and organizations professing anti- and non-Zionism in the post-World War II era through the present.

In 1973, a course at Tufts University by Marty Blatt innocuously called "Zionism Reconsidered" was invaded by the Jewish Defense League and denounced in the Boston press as "a grievous affront to the Jewish community." (134)

When the Jewish organization Breira ("choice") was formed in 1973 to express disagreement with Israeli occupation of the West Bank, "Jewish leaders [led by the ADL] launched campaigns indicating that Breira members, like the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization], were 'dedicated to the destruction of the Jewish state.'" (144)

In part, Feld's book is the sad story of what happens to communities that do not permit meaningful dissent, told meticulously with a clarity of thought and shrewdness of diagnosis.

## **VII. Resisting Zionism**

Feld unmaskes the half-hidden history of opposition to Zionism, but there remains the need for an explanation of why the U.S. public has been largely unable to recognize the profound contradiction between what is claimed about Israel and its actual record. How is it possible that a state that has committed major violations of human rights can be celebrated as a model of tolerance?

UCLA English and Comparative Literature Professor Makdisi's *Tolerance is a Wasteland* may strike some outside of academia as exhaustingly relentless and perhaps hyperdense at times, but it is the work of a witty and allusive maestro at the height of his powers.

Makdisi, a nephew of Edward Said, displays a rare multi-disciplinary talent that punches a gigantic

hole in the very heart of fables about the reality of the Zionist project. He writes cerebrally, as if each sentence were a performance, and knows how to craft a lapidary phrase with an enviable ear for the *mot juste*, as some of the following phrasing in quotations will demonstrate.

In four central chapters — Sustainability, Democracy, Diversity, Tolerance — he braids politics, theory and cultural criticism in a coolly devastating takedown of how a very specific form of denial is at work in the operation of the Zionist myth through reframing and inversion, whereby the virtues of liberalism are ardently embraced to obscure what would be unacceptable to most people in the United States.

As the book jacket accurately explains, through the “whitewashing, greenwashing, and pinkwashing of colonial violence” the Israeli state partisans offer “curated perceptions that make this massive project of cognitive dissonance possible.”

One of the most effective gambits in Makdisi’s calm and methodical response to the battering ram of Israeli state propaganda, is his insistence that most U.S. Zionist supporters are actually decent and well-meaning people; they would not support Israel’s state practice if they could see what it actually is, including the *Nakba* (“catastrophe”) that began in 1948 but still goes on.

To make Israel appear as if it did *not* come into existence as a minority ruling a majority, values are pronounced that occlude what has and is happening, and the mind-numbing repetition of mantras (such as “Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East”) “helps us willingly to suspend our disbelief.” (50)

Surely a grotesque example of Zionist hubris was the construction beginning in 2004 of a Museum of Tolerance to address global antisemitism – a museum that intruded into a centuries-old Muslim burial site:

*“Only a profound form of denial could enable the placement of a monument to Zionism-as-tolerance on an ethnically-cleansed graveyard. After all, not many people would knowingly endorse the desecration of a cemetery; but who would not want to support tolerance?”* (17)

This is a book filled with endless observations about the paradoxes of Zionist perception: how can it be that Israel serves as a caretaker for Jews everywhere, but not its own actual citizens? With all its military might, why does Israel still feel insecure? How can resistance to ethnic cleansing be regarded as intolerance?

There is an extraordinary discussion of how apartheid operates in the Israeli state and the land it occupies, as a racism in practice that avoids overt racist language.

Another feature of Makdisi’s scholarship is that he is the clearest among all the authors of the books surveyed about the political direction he favors.

*Tolerance is a Wasteland* was published before 7 October 2023, which has obviously reconfigured the current political conjuncture. But at the time of publication, he was optimistic about the growth of BDS (the nonviolent Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement) that “emerged from the terrain once dominated by older Palestinian formations, notably Hamas and Fateh.”

He clearly favors its simple demands of “an end to the military occupation of Palestinian territory; the elimination of racial discrimination within Israel; and the right of return of those Palestinians

ethnically cleansed from their homeland in 1948, along with their descendants.” (144-5)

The BDS movement, although officially “agnostic” as to whether these objectives can be obtained in one state or two, makes it clear that the “violent enterprise” of Zionism must be abolished. In Makdisi’s view this actually makes the case stronger for “the establishment of a single democratic and secular state encompassing the territory of historical Palestine, a position that I personally support.”

Such an approach, he believes, has shifted the “conflict between Zionism and the Palestinians from a confrontation between an occupying power and an armed national liberation movement to a confrontation between a people demanding equality and rights and a state representing grotesque inequality....” (145)

This movement from an Algerian paradigm (armed resistance to occupation) to a South African one (one-person-one-vote), he speculates, may have both greater international appeal and is more threatening to the ethno-state regime itself.

Such a forthright consideration of alternatives to the Zionist state are necessary for the development of strategy, tactics, and education aimed at dismantling colonial privilege, and the transformation of the region into a society in conformity with 21<sup>st</sup> century norms of democratic citizenship.

For those of us educated over the years by Palestinian experts on the Left like Edward Said and Rashid Khalidi, the challenge is to formulate a perspective on the future that allows two nationalities (Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish), along with others, to live in harmony and equality. This includes the expression of national rights that do not take oppressive state forms.

## **VIII. The Past is Not Past**

Further illumination can be achieved by understanding why 1967 isn’t ground zero for grasping the current crisis, or even 1948. That point comes through brilliantly in Areej Sabbagh-Khoury’s *Colonizing Palestine*. To claim that fighting antisemitism and Zionism are linked struggles, it is critical to explain why the Palestinian past cannot be left to the past, and the *origins* of the Israeli state must be confronted.

Zionist propaganda, now heightened by the events of 7 October, depicts Palestinians as inherently violent Jew-haters who cannot be dealt with rationally. More than ever, we must urge that people listen to the voices of Palestinians in explaining that it is the very ideology of Zionism, including socialist variants, that is responsible for a century of intentional dispossession.

The scholarship of Hebrew University Sociologist and Anthropologist Professor Sabbagh-Khoury, like that of Makdisi, should be at the top of the list.

Her formidable Introduction (46 pages) and six chapters cover the origins of the colonization process; the interaction of socialist kibbutz settlers (Hashomer Hatzair, Young Guard, a labor Zionist secular Jewish youth movement founded in 1913) [23] with Palestinians; and how the settler colonial “memory process” represented the events leading up to and including the 1948 *Nakba*.

What may be a surprise to some readers is that Sabbagh-Khoury’s research places “the kibbutz movement squarely in the colonizing of Palestine and shift[s] our understanding of the Zionist movement from its origins in Europe to its interactions with indigenous Palestinians.” (45)

It was these Labor Zionists who were originally bi-nationalists, not the Zionist Right, who “configured the social and political relations of settler colonization that would set a path dependency



[historically-produced resistance to change] of hierarchization and violence.” (45)

Although the socialists may have seriously intended to uplift their Arab brothers and sisters, their practice became collaboration in the defining features of the Zionist nation-state: replacement, dispossession and removal, and discrimination.

Here Sabbagh-Khoury makes a crucial point about terminology: “comparison [with other settler colonial projects] is a vital element of my analysis, not to argue for absolute equation of Zionism or the State of Israel with other settler colonial histories, but to trace patterned ways of doing and thinking and its relation to other cases termed settler colonial.”

Moreover, she emphasizes that using settler-colonialism as a “diagnostic analytic category” is aimed at describing encounters and transformational processes that turned into structures that favored Zionist settlers and denied indigenous sovereignty: “it does not refute Jewish religious and historical connections to what they term Erets Yishra’el.” (10)

This prefigures a moving conclusion addressing the present: “Palestinians continue to live in their homeland. They are planning with their (relatively few) anti-colonial Jewish-Israeli comrades a decolonized sociality, taking inspiration from and further stimulating global anti-colonial movements for justice.” (272)

This 348-page book is not exactly a beach read, but one finds rare intelligence and imagination in its conceptualizations as well as tenacity and resourcefulness in research. In her account of how the initial Zionist pioneers thought about and interacted with indigenous Palestinians, she has produced a beguiling and brilliantly unsettling work that subjects the history of socialist Zionists to searing scrutiny.

With exquisite craftsmanship and a many-layered style, she has gone beyond an impressive archive of primary sources to inhale a massive number of books. This is without doubt a signal intervention that is an emotionally honest reckoning, impressively learned, and with a splendidly original analysis.

## **IX. Zero Tolerance**

The myths of the past about the Zionist record must give way to the realities of the present so that Jew-hatred can be addressed directly. Both forms of persecution, Zionism and antisemitism, are seen by socialists as appreciably products of class society, and the indispensable combat for the abolition of antisemitism cannot mean any support to the ongoing deprivation and suppression of another people.

The current situation, wherein a claim of “Jewish safety” is strategized to put a target on Jewish and other Left-wing defenders of Palestinian rights as the source of Jew-hatred, is worse than merely a world-class snipe hunt.

As Gilbert Achcar has pointed out, “the accusation of antisemitism has become a weapon in the hands of neofascism.” [24] In using Jews as a shield to beat back radical movements for change, the Right aims to blame Jews as the antagonist of social justice. This opens the door to all sorts of antisemitic prejudices and clichés, such as the belief that Jews have a unique relationship to power and are privileged.

We can’t let anyone be fooled. This instrumentalization of “Jewish safety” is poison to the fight against antisemitism. Socialists must vigorously contest it, especially among the parts of the Jewish

community that we can reach, and the five books considered in this essay can be a springboard to the creative thinking still required to overcome entrenched positions.

As long as we socialists are divided over whether abolishing antisemitism is a priority, and whether it must be linked to anti-Zionism, we will not be able to impose a counter-narrative to the dominant one at this time. Consequently, we must create a political culture in which we will be able to stand together to make it quite clear that the social movements are not antisemitic ones, and that socialists are the frontline allies of all those contesting racial and other inequalities.

It means zero tolerance for any antisemitic actions threatening the Jewish community as well any hate-filled actions aimed at our Palestinian and Muslim communities. It also means fighting for social and economic justice *side-by-side* with Palestinians and all menaced groups, although one cannot be intimidated from proposing more effective strategies.

Our solidarity is social and built organically from the ground up. It is solidarity, first of all, *with people, not states*, and socialist Jews today should act toward Palestinians like those few but honorable “righteous among the nations” who assisted victims of the Nazi extermination. This will be the way in which socialists reintegrate the fight against antisemitism within the broader battle against racism.

**Alan Wald**

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## **P.S.**

- Solidarity. Posted July 15, 2024:  
<https://solidarity-us.org/cause-at-heart-socialists-the-abolition-of-antisemitism/>

To appear in the September-October 2024 ATC, ATC 233

- Alan Wald, an editor of *Against the Current*, is a member of the Academic Advisory Council of Jewish Voice for Peace and a founder of Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine at the University of Michigan.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] The conspiracy theory in Europe and the United States that liberal elites (mainly Jews) are trying to replace white people with people of color who will vote for them and destroy the traditional, nationalist culture.

[2] See:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/dec/11/elise-stefanik-antisemitism-congress-trump-upenn-resignation>

[3] The most useful short introduction to the current situation in Gaza and the need to end complicity in crimes against humanity is Gilbert Achcar, *Israel's War on Gaza* (London: Resistance Books, 2023).

[4] <https://theintercept.com/2024/03/28/safety-college-columbia-stanford-antisemitism-israel-palestine/#:~:text=Right%2Dwing%20GOP%20culture%20warriors,have%20slaughtered%20over%2031%2C000%20people>

[5] See:

<https://againstthecurrent.org/university-of-michigan-president-ono-the-pepper-spray-gang/>

[6] See: <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc209/jewish-revolutionaries/>

[7] See: [https://www.democracynow.org/2024/6/18/raz\\_segal\\_university\\_of\\_minnesota](https://www.democracynow.org/2024/6/18/raz_segal_university_of_minnesota)

[8] See:

<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2024/05/16/far-right-uses-antisemitic-george-soros-trope-attack-campus-protests>

[9] See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/25/opinion/jews-ivy-league-antisemitism.html>

[10] See:

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/liberal-jews-deluded-themselves-palestine-antisemitism>

[11] Peter Seidman, *Socialists and the Fight Against Anti-Semitism: An Answer to the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 31.

[12] See:

[https://forward.com/opinion/630042/steve-bannon-christian-nationalists-jews/?utm\\_source=The+Forward+Association&utm\\_campaign=e8d587dbbd-AfternoonEditionNL\\_%2A%7CDATE%3AYmd%7C%2A\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_-878b15fee9-%5BLIST\\_EMAIL\\_ID%5D](https://forward.com/opinion/630042/steve-bannon-christian-nationalists-jews/?utm_source=The+Forward+Association&utm_campaign=e8d587dbbd-AfternoonEditionNL_%2A%7CDATE%3AYmd%7C%2A_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-878b15fee9-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D)

[13] See:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/far-right-le-pen-would-be-excellent-as-french-president-says-likud-minister/>

[14] See:

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/why-the-tree-of-life-shooter-was-fixated-on-the-ebrew-immigrant-aid-society>

[15] The latest theoretical work on antisemitism from a Marxist point of view can be found in the double-volume "Marxism and the Critique of Antisemitism," special issue of *Historical Materialism*. The Introduction is online at:

<https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/article/marxism-and-the-critique-of-antisemitism/>

[16] See David Finkel's informative critique of Atzmon:

<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc157/p3542/>

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[17] In regard to developing effective strategies for mass movement-building in the face of 1960s ultraleftism, two of the most helpful resources are: Peter Camejo, *How to Make a Revolution Plus Liberalism, Ultraleftism, or Mass Action* (Chippendale, Australia: Resistance Books, 1999 ) and Fred Halstead, *Out Now: A Participant's Account of the Movement in the United States Against*

the Vietnam War (New York: Pathfinder, 2001).

[18] See:

<https://stefanik.house.gov/2024/1/stefanik-statement-on-harvard-s-continued-failure-to-protect-jewish-students-unacceptable-appointment-on-antisemitism-task-force>

[19] See: <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii147/articles/the-neck-and-the-sword>

[20] See the thoughtful interrogation of Penslar's approach to colonialism and Zionism by Joshua Cole:

[https://www.academia.edu/13072235/\\_Derek\\_Penslars\\_Algebra\\_of\\_Modernity\\_How\\_Should\\_We\\_Understand\\_the\\_Relation\\_between\\_Zionism\\_and\\_Colonialism\\_in\\_Ethan\\_B\\_Katz\\_Lisa\\_Moses\\_Leff\\_and\\_Maud\\_S\\_Mandel\\_Colonialism\\_and\\_the\\_Jews\\_Bloomington\\_IN\\_Indiana\\_University\\_Press\\_2107\\_](https://www.academia.edu/13072235/_Derek_Penslars_Algebra_of_Modernity_How_Should_We_Understand_the_Relation_between_Zionism_and_Colonialism_in_Ethan_B_Katz_Lisa_Moses_Leff_and_Maud_S_Mandel_Colonialism_and_the_Jews_Bloomington_IN_Indiana_University_Press_2107_)

[21] See the excerpt from "Zionism Reconsidered" reprinted in Against the Current:

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/atc/534.html>

[22] See: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1940/xx/jewish.htm>

[23] 23. Retired Stanford University History Professor Joel Beinin has written in a number of places about Hashomir Hatzair; see for example, "'Knowing Your Enemy, Knowing Your Ally: The Arabists of Hashomer Hatzair (MAPAM),' Social Text no. 28 (July 1991):100-21.

[24] See: <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8581>