

YIDDISH ANARCHISTS BREAK OVER PALESTINE



Introduced and translated from the Yiddish by Eyshe Beirich

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An exchange in the anarchist newspaper Di fraye arbeter shtime after the 1929 Hebron massacre offers a case study in Jewish discourse and political reaction after immense violence.

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On Friday, August 23rd, 1929, exaggerated rumors about the extent of Jewish violence against Palestinians and the desecration of holy sites in Jerusalem reached the Palestinian community of Hebron (Al-Khalil, in Arabic). What started as incensed Palestinians throwing stones at Jewish homes, and ultimately the stabbing to death a young yeshiva student, soon erupted in a full-blown riot: The next morning, more Palestinians entered the Orthodox Jewish community of Hebron and killed 67 Jews of various ages and backgrounds—all of whom were unarmed, and who had earlier refused to collaborate with Zionist militias on account of their theological opposition to Zionism. At the same time, dozens of Palestinian families in Al-Khalil sheltered hundreds of their Jewish neighbors from the violence.

August 1929 was a time of widespread protest and violent riots which had broken out all over Palestine in response to the growing British colonial repression, Zionist anti-Palestinian agitation, and ideological splits within the Palestinian national movement. The events of August 1929—which left 116 Palestinians and 133 Jews dead by the end of the month—are referred to differently in different sources, depending on their perspective: “riots,” “happenings,” or, in much of the Palestinian press, “uprisings.” Often, they are referred to metonymically as “the Hebron massacre” or “the Hebron pogrom,” particularly in Zionist historical memory.

These events substantially changed the political allegiances of Jewish communities outside of Palestine. Up to this point, left-wing and Communist Yiddish newspapers in America had diverse positions on Zionism, ranging from passive support to agnosticism to explicit anti-Zionism. After 1929, many Yiddish papers slid rightward, openly embracing aspects of Zionism they once rejected in response to what they saw as antisemitic, Eastern European-style “pogroms” at the hands of “the barbarous Arabs.”

The most widely read anarchist Yiddish newspaper in the world, *Di fraye arbeter shtime* (FAS), offers a lesser-known case study in Jewish discourse and political reaction after immense violence. On August 30th, not even a week after the Hebron massacre, the paper broke from its historical opposition to Zionism to publish an editorial titled “A Disgraceful Blot on Humanity” which endorsed Zionist militancy in order to defend the Jewish communities and Zionist settlements in Palestine. “It is woeful,” the editors wrote, “but we have no other choice.” Unlike their Communist competitor, the *Morgn frayhayt*, which was also fracturing internally after 1929, the FAS had never taken a passionately anti-Zionist stance. Still, for many of its contributors, Zionism was antithetical to their anarchist politics and principles. This is precisely what makes their sudden embrace of Zionist militancy so shocking: The FAS went from denouncing as fascist the “raw, physical violence”

course, the effendis did not do this for a love of Zionism, but for the love of Jewish coin.

It must also not be lost to our attention the vulgar, shameful role which the Zionists have played as a first line of protection and means of fortification for the thieving English occupation. Which of us is not familiar with the holy and historic mission which the Zionists have taken upon themselves—to defend the interests of the English occupation and serve as a bulwark for the West against the savage East?

This is only confirmation that as long as the Jewish Yishuv was without pretensions for exclusive power, they were left alone! When the Yishuv began to write on their flags “A State for Jews,” only then was it confronted with the marginalized right of the Arabs, who regard the land as their Arab country, not with the power of “prior privileges,” but with the current, factual, and concrete privilege of a people that is settled in its own land!

We believe however that there is a third way out of these agitating, useless chauvinist slogans like “Jewish State” and “National Home.” Stop acting as a bulwark between the English occupation and the Arabs. Make the effort to the come to an understanding with the Arabs—not with the effendis, but with the fellahin, the peasants—if it’s not already too late for such work.

1. Literally, “settlement,” or “colony.” Yishuv can refer either to the “Old Yishuv,” the Jewish community residing in Palestine for centuries before the arrival of the Zionist movement, or the “New Yishuv,” which refers to the Zionist settlement of Palestine.
2. An Ottoman title referring to a lord or landlord. In this text, it is being used as an Ottoman loan word approximating the Yiddish term “balebos,” or “boss,” “landowner.” The writers are referring to the wealthier class of (post-)Ottoman subjects who owned much of the land in Palestine.
3. The writers here are referring to Ramsay MacDonald, the English prime minister who had recently taken back power from the Conservatives to form a Labour government earlier that year.
4. A perek (Yiddish, peyrek) refers to a chapter of a Jewish text, like the Tanach. Here, it is being used facetiously in reference to Marxist texts, as if they were Jewish liturgical texts.
5. The phrase “conquest of labor” refers to the Zionist campaign of “Kibbush ha-Avodah”—an initiative to boycott Arab products and Arab workers to strengthen and homogenize the Jewish sector of the economy. This was seen as a racist agitation as well as proof of Zionist aspirations for ownership of the land by many Palestinians.
6. Polish slogan, “Each to their own,” used by Polish nationalists during the 1912-1914 Polish boycott of Jewish goods in Warsaw.
7. The Black Hundreds movement was a far-right, pro-Czar, Russian nationalist movement that incited pogrom violence against Jews.
8. The Hibbat Zion or Hovevei Zion (meaning “Love of Zion” or “Lovers of Zion”) movement was the first, some argue “proto-,” Zionist movement to reach Palestine. Largely unsuccessful, the Hibbat Zion movement did succeed in founding the first Zionist settlement in Palestine, Rishon LeZion (First to Zion) in 1882, thereby beginning “the New Yishuv.”

“from the effendis and the local government to turn the anger of their people away from the truly guilty and towards the helpless Jews, who are always the scapegoat.” Precisely now, the “helpless Jews” are not helpless, nor are they a scapegoat.

The Zionist devil, with its criminal, irresponsible demagogic agitation, has convinced the “helpless” Jews, the naïve masses, that it will return them to their national home under the protection of the expansive, powerful wings of that great biblical people, the English. The gullible, naïve masses took this at face value and set upon the conquest of Palestine’s land with cries of “Hurrah!” under the British flag and assisted by English battalions. This pitiful people, agitated by Zionist demagoguery, was not content with just conquering the land, with just becoming the owners of the land, but they also joyfully began a new campaign: the conquest of labor[5] with the slogan “Swój do swego,”[6] under which they themselves suffered in their land of Poland and condemned as an injustice.

It was not enough simply to steal the Arab’s land; we needed to then drive him from his land! Jews wanted to consolidate all rights for themselves. When it looked like a certain right would fall into the hands of the Arabs and do them good, the Zionists began an outcry: “The Philistines are upon you, Israel!” The goal is to turn the Arab into a disenfranchised, degraded creature which should never stop shaking in fear at the thought of the Jewish landowner.

We had the chance to speak with many ordinary Jews in Palestine who gleefully bragged that the Arabs shake in fear for the Jew; “We hold them in fear!”; “Should an Arab make a peep, he gets a strike in the teeth and learns not to do it again.”

This criminal Zionist agitation has brought so much foolish chutzpah against the Arabs into the psychology of the Jewish public, that they regard the Arabs worse than the Black Hundreds[7] in the Czarist period regarded the Jews! Is it such a wonder, then, that the Arab spirit has gathered so much hate of an uncontrollable nature that it was bound to break out sooner or later? The kindling was certainly taken advantage of by both the English imperialists, the Communist schemers, as well as the effendis who all sped up the whole process. But even without them, it was bound to be released.

If only the Jews had merely come with their “piece of historic pretension”! As you have written, they have instead come to “drain [Palestine’s] swamps, construct cities and villages, increasing the quality of life of its backwards, half-savage inhabitants.” Without this, there would have been no confrontation! One piece of evidence is the history of the Old Yishuv, as well as the long and quiet Hibbat Zion[8] movement which the Arabs regarded with calm and largely left alone. This was not enough for political Zionism, however, which wanted to exploit its “historic pretensions” to become the sole owners of the land. It is for this reason that the Jewish “historic pretension” was destined to clash with the concrete claim of the Arabs, the actual owners of the land. The Arabs answered the Zionists with an old Jewish saying: Loy meuktsekho velay miduvshekko, “We don’t want your honey and we don’t want your sting!”

We must also not forget that the construction of cities and villages was done over the poor bodies of the fellahin, who were pushed off their land by the effendis. Land which they and their ancestors worked for generations. Of

associated with revisionist Zionism and its leader Vladimir Jabotinsky to viewing it as the sole way to secure the safety of the Jewish community in Palestine. This outlook is justified through strikingly racist depictions of Palestinians, who are cast as “savages” who will never be able to learn the teachings of Marxism and could therefore never become fully human.

Several months later, a group of young Polish Jewish anarchists published their dissent. In striking and forceful Yiddish prose, they condemned the FAS for what they saw as the paper’s sympathy for “the Zionist devil” and their hypocritical embrace of fascist politics. They resist the reduction of Palestinians to “pogromists.” Instead, they identify the plight of the Jewish proletariat with the Palestinian peasants, the fellahin, whom they contend have more in common with the victims of antisemitic pogroms than the perpetrators. All the while, they maintain an absolute insistence on the Palestinian right to remain on their own land: “We must also not forget that the construction of cities and villages was done over the poor bodies of the [Palestinian peasants] . . . land which they and their ancestors worked for generations.”

Ninety-five years later, the problem of the alleged necessity of retaliatory and punitive violence persists as the State of Israel posits its genocidal campaign in Gaza as a righteous response to the Hamas attacks on October 7th. Both the post-1929 and post-October 7th period emerge as among the most painful and violent periods of Palestine’s history, periods where large swaths of the global Jewish community were enlisted into a discourse of “necessary” exterminationist violence. At the same time, visible Jewish protest in solidarity with Gaza—at landmarks like New York City’s Grand Central Station or side-by-side with Palestinians and others in student encampments across the country—has brought a broader communal fracture into view.

The rebuttal by the Polish Jewish activists of 1929 offers a corrective to the dominant politics of the present: “Our spirits are also upset by the destruction that has affected so many Jews. This is, however, no justification whatsoever to lose yourself . . . the greater and stronger the violence grows, the greater our responsibility and duty grows to find the correct cause and diagnosis.” They act as a counterweight to what they saw as a cycle of violence and counter-violence destined for further destruction.

The anti-Zionist and socialist politics of Polish Jewish radicals are too often dismissed as a deadly naivety which somehow led to their own deaths in the Nazi genocide, or they are occluded in favor of Zionist histories that brush aside the urgency of their demands for a better world. But it’s worth remembering their principled stance—rejecting reactionary and exclusionary politics in favor of sober material analysis and solidarity—despite the growing danger around them. These articles offer a glimpse of that tradition.

The following translation has been edited for brevity and clarity. The full Yiddish text can be found at [jewishcurrents.org].

“A Disgraceful Blot on Humanity”

The Di fraye arbeter shtime Editorial Board
August 30th, 1929

Jewish blood flows again like rivers. Dozens were murdered in Jerusalem, in Hebron, in Tel Piyot, and even in Tel Aviv. Hundreds were wounded in the old cities, villages and colonies in all of the Land of Israel. Downtrodden, beaten down, and banished Jews are scattered over the entire Yishuv[1], chased from their homes, and full of doubt about the future that awaits them. Such destruction has not been wreaked upon the Jewish People in our Jewish land for many long centuries.

We stand here browbeaten and in shocked amazement at these bloody events. We are still unable to account for what has transpired there. Who is responsible for this spilled innocent blood? To whom should we ascribe fault for these crimes of our times? Is this simply a question of racial hatred? Religious fanaticism? Opposition to immigration? Or are economic and political interests hiding behind these excuses?

Are the Arabs, or at least many of them, truly inspired by the desire to free their land of foreign domination, as the Communists are attempting to convince us of? Are these pogroms nothing more than a precursor of an uprising, an attempt from the effendis[2] and the local government to turn the anger of their people away from the truly guilty, and towards the helpless Jews, who are always the scapegoat?

Who can know and who can say with certainty which powers can animate a savage, unruly mob, unleashed to murder and slaughter? It's possible that all previously mentioned causes and powers have worked together to produce these unbelievable pictures of horror. At any rate, now is not the time for speculations and nit-picking. That will not stop the calamity at this moment.

The Jew's fate is wretched no matter what he does and where he is. The Jew finds protection nowhere: no security for his life and no possibility to exist as an equal person. Coming from wherever it may be, with great exhaustion, Jews settle in an empty land in which they have a piece of historic pretension. They drain its swamps, construct cities and villages, increasing the quality of life of its backwards, half-savage inhabitants—then they are once again driven like sheep to the slaughter under the so-called protection of an English Labour government[3]!

Their existence has been abandoned. Their greatest calamity inspires no spare empathy in anyone's heart. Even the Jews themselves, however shameful this may be, are not moved whatsoever by the plight that their own brothers have suffered!

Many smart Jewish Leftists silently derive some sadistic pride from these events—chanting “May we live to see more of such revenge upon the loathsome Zionists!” Indeed, we are not lacking in Jews who portray the Arab murderers as heroes, freedom fighters and revolutionaries. The barbarian, the animal—there are many among us. And they will be set loose to destroy the world at the first opportunity.

The current pogrom is in many respects a much worse destruction than similar happenings in the former Russian Empire, or whatever has occurred in contemporary Romania. The malevolence of the government and the

wretchedness of the regime were responsible for those pogroms—powers which we had hoped would be quickly made insignificant [through revolution].

Now, even our hope and consolation has been taken from us. Our last and only hope—a sad and regretful hope, there is no question—is to create within ourselves, in our own people, the power to strike back and fight violence with violence. The Jewish youth must be raised, evolved, and prepared to defend their own land against an attack. In Palestine, above all, this is an unconditional necessity that may no longer be postponed.

It is woeful that in the 20th century raw physical power is still the only protection against assault and mortal danger. It is also regretful, as this leads to more conflicts, to fascism, and to a strengthening of barbarism.

However, we have no other choice.

We will only be able to moralize with the savage Arabs—to teach them a perek[4] of Marxism, to enlighten them, to turn them into people and internationalists—when they have ceased their outbursts, when they feel and know that attacks on Jews means putting their own lives in danger.

Their lives will receive no other security from anything else.

“The Other Side of the Coin”

An Anonymous Group of Polish Anarchists
November 8th, 1929

We read your article, “A Disgraceful Blot on Humanity.” As it turns out, you have granted a reactionary ideology citizenship in your minds. Such ideology spares you difficult and straining thought. And whaddya know—you just happen to publish an opinion that every other national chauvinist Zionist would endorse wholeheartedly!

We can understand that the rivers of spilled Jewish blood have deeply upset your spirits. Our spirits are also upset by the destruction that has affected so many Jews. This is, however, no justification whatsoever to lose yourself. You write: “Now is not the time for speculations and nit-picking. That won't stop this calamity in this moment.” On the contrary, the greater and stronger the violence grows, the greater our responsibility and duty grows to find the correct cause and determine our diagnosis.

We understand very well that English imperialism is the modern Rome, and we know how vulgar and dirty its nails are. It's clear to us that England would have it that both the Jews and the [Arab] workers receive nothing, shut up, and be content with allowing England to practice its colonial murder and politics of theft. But our sinful world possesses no such contented people. Both sides come with their demands and complaints, and England makes use of the old Roman method: divide and conquer. Make a fire between the peoples and then whip them for their dishonesty.

We know this all too well. We also know, however, that this would not be possible if there was not already the necessary kindling for the fire. It is for this reason that we cannot summarily dismiss the recent events with the meager pretext of English interests. We are also just as far away from laying the entire blame on our detested capitalism and declaring this as an attempt