

Zionism's Roots Help Us Interpret Israel Today

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It was an assessment no one expected from the deputy head of the Israeli military. In his Holocaust Day speech last week, Yair Golan compared current trends in Israel with Germany in the early 1930s. In today's Israel, he said, could be recognised "the revolting processes that occurred in Europe ... There is nothing easier than hating the stranger, nothing easier than to stir fears and intimidate."

The furore over Gen Golan's remarks followed a similar outcry in Britain at statements by former London mayor Ken Livingstone. He observed that Hitler had been "supporting Zionism" in 1933 when the Nazis signed a transfer agreement, allowing some German Jews to emigrate to Palestine.

In their different ways both comments refer back to a heated argument among Jews about whether Zionism was a blessing or a blight. Although largely overlooked today, the dispute throws much light on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Those differences came to a head in 1917 when the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, a document promising for the first time to realise the Zionist goal of a "national home" for the Jews in Palestine. Only one minister, Edwin Montagu, dissented. Notably, he was the only Jew in the British cabinet. The two facts were not unconnected. In a memo, he warned that his government's policy would be a "rallying ground for anti-Semites in every country".

He was far from alone in that view. Of the 4 million Jews who left Europe between 1880 and 1920, only 100,000 went to Palestine in line with Zionist expectations. As the Israeli novelist A B Yehoshua once noted: "If the Zionist party had run in an election in the early 20th century, it would have received only 6 or 7 per cent of the Jewish people's vote."

What Montagu feared was that the creation of a Jewish state in a far-flung territory dovetailed a little too neatly with the aspirations of Europe's anti-Semites, then much in evidence, including in the British government.

According to the dominant assumptions of Europe's ethnic nationalisms of the time, the region should be divided into peoples or biological "races", and each should control a territory in which it could flourish. The Jews were viewed as a "problem" because – in addition to lingering Christian anti-Semitism – they were considered subversive of this national model.

Jews were seen as a race apart, one that could not – or should not – be allowed to assimilate. Better, on this view, to encourage their emigration from Europe. For British

elites, the Balfour Declaration was a means to achieve that end.

Theodor Herzl, the father of political Zionism, understood this trenchant anti-Semitism very well. His idea for a Jewish state was inspired in part by the infamous Dreyfus affair, in which a Jewish French army officer was framed by his commanders for treason. Herzl was convinced that anti-Semitism would always exclude Jews from true acceptance in Europe.

It is for this reason that Mr Livingstone's comments – however clumsily expressed – point to an important truth. Herzl and other early Zionists implicitly accepted the ugly framework of European bigotry.

Jews, Herzl concluded, must embrace their otherness and regard themselves as a separate race. Once they found a benefactor to give them a territory – soon Britain would oblige with Palestine – they could emulate the other European peoples from afar.

For a while, some Nazi leaders were sympathetic. Adolf Eichmann, one of the later engineers of the Holocaust, visited Palestine in 1937 to promote the "Zionist emigration" of Jews.

Hannah Arendt, the German Jewish scholar of totalitarianism, argued even in 1944 – long after the Nazis abandoned ideas of emigration and embraced genocide instead – that the ideology underpinning Zionism was "nothing else than the uncritical acceptance of German-inspired nationalism".

Israel and its supporters would prefer we forget that, before the rise of the Nazis, most Jews deeply opposed a future in which they were consigned to Palestine.

Those who try to remind us of this forgotten history are likely to be denounced, like Livingstone, as anti-Semites. They are accused of making a simplistic comparison between Zionism and Nazism.

But there is good reason to examine this uncomfortable period.

Modern Israeli politicians, including Benjamin Netanyahu, still regularly declare that Jews have only one home – in Israel. After every terror attack in Europe, they urge Jews to hurry to Israel, telling them they can never be safe where they are.

It also alerts us to the fact that even today the Zionist movement cannot help but mirror many of the flaws of those now-discredited European ethnic nationalisms, as Gen Golan appears to appreciate.

Such characteristics – all too apparent in Israel – include: an exclusionary definition of peoplehood; a need to foment fear and hatred of the other as a way to keep the nation tightly bound; an obsession with and hunger for territory; and a highly militarised culture.

Recognising Zionism's ideological roots, inspired by racial theories of peoplehood that in part fuelled the Second World War, might allow us to understand modern Israel a little better. And why it seems incapable of extending a hand of peace to the Palestinians.

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