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978-1-107-03601-7 - Antisemitism and the American Far Left

Stephen H. Norwood

Excerpt

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I

Promoting a Socialism of Fools*The New Left's Debt to the Old Left*USING ANTISEMITIC STEREOTYPES TO DEMONIZE
ISRAEL, 1967–1973

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the American far left repeatedly denounced Israel as a criminal regime resembling Nazi Germany and enthusiastically endorsed the Arab guerilla movement's terrorist campaign to eradicate the Jewish state. This was a period, bounded by two wars that threatened Israel with destruction, in which the far left devoted particular attention to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Leading far left publications joined the Arab guerillas in charging that Israel was aggressively racist and expansionist.

To support these claims, the far left often invoked long-standing antisemitic stereotypes, both economic and theological. It attributed to Jews enormous financial power and an arrogance and sense of superiority that drove them to exploit and dominate other peoples. In a three-part series published in 1969 on what it called the "History of Middle East Liberation Struggle," *New Left Notes*, the newspaper of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), declared that the Jews' chosen people concept gives Israel "the right to expand and expand." Like Nazi Germany, the Jewish state would "not contain itself within any set borders." It explained that the "architects of Zionism were mainly bourgeois Jewish intellectuals" and that the movement's early sponsors were "leaders in ... world imperialism" like wealthy Jewish banker Edmond de Rothschild, who wanted to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine to promote "his own financial interests."¹

The Black Panther Party, which identified as Marxist-Leninist, made similar charges rooted in a tradition of economic antisemitism dating to medieval Europe. For the Black Panthers the core of the Middle East conflict was a war between heroic Palestinian guerillas and "Israeli Pigs." They referred to Zionism as "Kosher Nationalism." In 1973 the Black Panther Party newspaper approvingly quoted South African pan-Africanist David Sibeko, who

charged that since its creation in 1948, Israel had sustained itself on “the blood and wealth” that “Zionist Jews” extracted from South Africa. He claimed that South Africa’s gold mines were “owned by Zionists.” Using the term “Zionist” to mean “Jew,” a technique popularized decades before by right-wing antisemites, Sibeko declared that “the Zionists” had “assume[d] superiority in the take-over” of South Africa’s industries. He dismissed as a “red herring” the argument that a Jewish state was needed because of the existence of antisemitism; it was part of a scheme to “cover up imperialism’s designs against Africa [and its] rich resources.”²

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which in 1966 had expelled its white members and positioned itself on the far left of the African American movement, made similar charges. A sizeable proportion of SNCC’s white membership had been Jewish. Shortly after the Six-Day War in 1967, it published an article in the *SNCC Newsletter* entitled “The Palestine Problem” that compared Israel to Nazi Germany and accused it of committing “atrocities” against the Palestinians. The article was written at the request of the SNCC National Committee by the newsletter’s editor, Ethel Minor, a former member of the virulently antisemitic Nation of Islam. It was accompanied by a blurred photograph that purported to show Israelis shooting Arab prisoners lined up against a wall. The caption read, “This is the Gaza Strip, Palestine, not Dachau, Germany.” According to SNCC, the Jewish state had been established “through terror, force, and massacres.” The “Zionists” had committed mass slaughter, indiscriminately murdering and mutilating Arab men, women, and children.

SNCC’s article implied that the Zionists’ primary motivation had been the lust for wealth. It declared that “the famous European Jews, the Rothschilds,” who had “long controlled the wealth of many European nations,” had conspired with the British to create the state of Israel. Like the Black Panther Party, SNCC claimed that the Rothschilds controlled “much of Africa’s mineral wealth.” The article was illustrated by two blatantly antisemitic cartoons. One depicted a hand, stamped with both a Star of David and a dollar sign, tightening a rope around the necks of Egyptian dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser and African American boxer Muhammad Ali. In the other, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan appeared with dollar signs on his shoulders.³

Around that time, SNCC engaged in other explicitly antisemitic outbursts that, unlike the *Newsletter* article, went unreported in the mainstream and far left press. On June 22, 1967, SNCC distributed an anti-Israel leaflet at a Washington, D.C., Black Power rally featuring a speech by its president, Rap Brown, who stereotyped Jews as inordinately wealthy, parasitic, and exploitative. The leaflet claimed that Jews had extracted from ghetto blacks a sizeable proportion of the funds they sent to Israel during the Six-Day War: “We have recently seen another minority group in the United States raise, in a matter of hours, millions of dollars to aid their brothers in distress.

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PHOTO 1. SNCC antisemitic drawing.

Much of this money came directly from the pockets of black people.”⁴ Ethel Minor recalled that Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown, who succeeded Carmichael as SNCC’s chairman in May 1967, “drove through a black neighborhood shouting, ‘Guns for the Arabs, sneakers for the Jews.’”⁵

The most prominent African American civil rights leaders joined Jewish organizations in promptly denouncing the *SNCC Newsletter* article. A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, organizers of the 1963 March on Washington, declared that they were “appalled” by SNCC’s “anti-Semitic article.” National Urban League head Whitney Young said that SNCC’s article expressed views similar to those of the American Nazi Party. The African American Los Angeles *Sentinel* reported that Martin Luther King, Jr., “took a slap at SNCC,” vowing that he would “never be anti-Semitic.”⁶

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By contrast, the Trotskyist newspaper the *Militant*, organ of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), insisted that the SNCC article was not antisemitic and accused Jews who had denounced it of “chauvinist hysteria.” It claimed that SNCC had presented a “well-known fact” in “defense of the Arab nations,” which faced “imperialist-backed invasion by the Zionists.” The *Militant* even minimized the significance of the antisemitic cartoons, conceding only that the Star of David might be “misinterpreted.” It suggested that SNCC meant to use it as “an insignia of Zionism,” noting that mainstream newspaper cartoons depicted Israeli soldiers wearing it.⁷

The *Militant* had itself claimed that the Jewish state was created as a beachhead for Western imperialism to economically exploit the Middle East. It declared that Israel owed its prosperity to sizeable financial contributions from American Jews and to West German Holocaust reparations payments, in addition to U.S. government aid.⁸

SDS published two contrasting letters on the SNCC controversy in *New Left Notes* but refused to take a position as an organization and did not otherwise address the issue of antisemitism. Itzhak Epstein asked the SDS National Council to adopt a resolution expressing regret about SNCC’s “recent inclination towards racism in general and antisemitism in particular.” He wanted SDS to maintain a fraternal relationship with SNCC and called on the two organizations to engage “in a mutual dialogue on racism and antisemitism.” Michael Meeropol, son of the executed atom spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, responded by accusing Epstein of “hav[ing] bought the lies of the Establishment Press about SNCC.” He called Epstein’s proposed resolution patronizing and declared that SDS had no right “to charge SNCC with a trend towards racism.” Meeropol suggested instead a resolution that would reaffirm SDS’s “continuing support for the revolutionary program of SNCC.”⁹

The radical pacifist Daniel Berrigan, one of the most prominent figures in the anti-Vietnam War movement, drew on both theological and economic antisemitism in an address condemning Israel before the Association of Arab-American University Graduates during the Yom Kippur War in October 1973. The Jesuit priest invoked the hoary image of the demonic Jew in the Christian Bible. Berrigan denounced Israel as a racist “settler state” that used the Hebrew Bible to justify its “crimes against humanity.” He claimed that, a generation after the Holocaust, Israel had embraced a Nazi-style ideology “aimed at proving its racial superiority to the people [the Arabs] it has crushed.” Blinded by “the blood myths of divine election,” Israel had “closed her sacred books” and become morally bankrupt. An “imperial entity,” Israel now resembled its ancient adversary, Pharaoh’s Egypt: “The slave became master, and created slaves.” Like Nazi Germany, Israel created ghettos and disenfranchised peoples; its citizens existed “for the well-being of the state.” The Jewish state had become a nightmare, “an Orwellian transplant,” a totalitarian society “taken bodily from Big Brother’s bloody heart.”

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Berrigan castigated American Jewish leaders for abandoning the prophetic tradition centered on social justice by backing Israel. He accused them of ignoring the “Asian holocaust,” his term for the American military effort in Vietnam.¹⁰ Here Berrigan raised a standard claim of the far left: that the Holocaust was not unique. Berrigan’s portrayal of a morally bankrupt American Jewish leadership was shaped by the Christian Bible’s condemnation and misrepresentation of the Pharisees. As Arthur Hertzberg noted, Berrigan was repeating an “ancient canard” that the Jews’ “horrible leaders, ‘the pharisees,’” had caused them to reject Jesus.¹¹

David Dellinger, another leader of the anti-Vietnam War movement and long-time pacifist, strongly supported Berrigan’s tirade against Israel and its American Jewish supporters. He acknowledged that it had precipitated a storm of criticism from prominent liberals and conservatives. But Dellinger declared that such a reaction was inevitable because of what he called a “taboo against serious public criticism of Israel”: “It was almost impossible ... to speak truth to power grown arrogant.”¹²

In speaking of a taboo against public criticism of Israel, Dellinger raised a hackneyed charge long leveled by conservative anti-Zionists: that Jews had the power to suppress public debate about Zionism and Israel. This implied that American Jews controlled the mass media. For example, Virginia Gildersleeve, dean of Barnard College from 1911 to 1947, who had introduced quotas to reduce Jewish enrollment, claimed in her decades-long campaign against what she called “International Zionism” that “Zionist control of the media of communication” made it difficult for Americans to obtain accurate information about the Middle East.¹³ The Black Panther Party declared that Jewish money dictated U.S. government support of Israel: “Nearly every presidential and congressional candidate is heavily financed by American Zionists in exchange for support of Israel.”¹⁴

Shortly after the Six-Day War the far left underground newspaper the Berkeley *Barb* had also depicted the Jewish state as Pharaoh’s Egypt, a monstrous Goliath contemptuous of the Jewish ethical tradition. It ran a cartoon whose top panel showed an ancient Egyptian commander in a chariot, sword thrust forward, leading spear-bearing warriors against fleeing Hebrews following Moses, carrying only walking staffs. The bottom panel depicted Israeli jets marked with the Star of David flying above similarly identified Israeli tanks, accompanied by infantry, pursuing retreating Arabs. A few years later the SWP also drew on traditional Christian theological antisemitism in declaring that the creation of Israel “symbolize[d] the spiritual degeneration of ... [the] Jewish community.”¹⁵

Drawing a parallel between Israel and Nazi Germany was the most dramatic way to make the Jewish state appear demonic. In 1970 Mike Klonsky, leader of SDS’s Revolutionary Movement II faction, equated what he called Israel’s “continuous attacks on the Arab people” with the Nazis’ annihilation of the Jews. During the Yom Kippur War, the Maoist Progressive

Labor Party published a lengthy statement in the UCLA student newspaper calling Israel “a Nazi state” and denouncing Zionism as a “racist atrocity.” The Weatherman newspaper *Fire* even claimed that Nazi antisemitic propaganda was directly modeled on “Zionist writings.”¹⁶ Far left groups repeatedly referred to Israel’s campaign to defend itself against fourteen Arab nations during the Six-Day War as a “blitzkrieg,” suggesting a parallel with the Wehrmacht’s conquest of Poland in 1939 and its Western offensive in the spring of 1940.¹⁷ The Black Panther Party called Israeli soldiers “fascist storm troopers” and charged that Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War resulted in Arab refugees being forced into “modern concentration camps.”¹⁸

The far left made this analogy while remaining silent about the sizeable numbers of Nazi war criminals harbored by such Arab governments as Egypt’s and Syria’s, which placed many of them in high political and military positions. It ignored the collaboration of Arab heads of state like Egypt’s Anwar Sadat with the Hitler regime during World War II. Nor did far left groups mention the participation of former Wehrmacht troops in the Arab military effort during Israel’s War of Independence, a charge that American Communists had leveled against the Arabs in 1948.¹⁹

The far left’s denigration of Israel was shaped in part by its trivialization of antisemitism, which it considered a nonissue.²⁰ It dismissed charges that it existed in Arab countries and among black nationalists. Following the lead of the Arab guerilla groups, the American far left of the late 1960s and early 1970s not only ignored the pervasive and centuries-old antisemitism in the Middle East but also denied that it had ever been significant there, or in the Islamic tradition. In this sense it replicated the Communist Party’s decades-long insistence that no antisemitism existed in the Soviet Union. To do otherwise would bolster arguments for a Jewish state.

Adhering rigidly to a narrow economic analysis, the far left could never properly assess or understand antisemitism. It ignored the highly important role of Christian and Islamic theology in forming, shaping, and sustaining antisemitism. For the far left, antisemitism was merely a device employed by the ruling class to maintain control by preventing the working masses from uniting against it. Typical was the *Militant’s* explanation that “the real source of anti-Semitism is ... the capitalist system.” Zionism was part of a ruling-class divide-and-conquer strategy: it “pits the Jewish people against those [the Arab masses] who should be their natural allies.”²¹

American far left groups echoed Palestinian guerilla spokesmen like Yassir Arafat, leader of Al Fatah, whom *New Left Notes* quoted in 1969 as stating that “Arabs have never discriminated against the Jews.” Similarly, in 1968 the *Militant* quoted an Al Fatah “commando” who declared: “Before 1948 we lived in peace with Jewish people.” Only the creation of Israel had disrupted perfectly harmonious relations.²² The *Militant* claimed after the Six-Day War that Israel had raised the issue of Arab antisemitism “to divert attention from the virulent anti-Arab racism the Zionists have pumped into

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the Israeli masses.”²³ During the Yom Kippur War, when Israel came very close to being overrun by invading Arab armies, who launched a surprise attack on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, the *Militant* stated that Arab “hostility to Jews came about as a result of the crimes of Zionism.”²⁴ The Black Panther Party similarly ridiculed the notion that a Jewish state was needed to protect Jews from extermination. It maintained that Arabs and Jews had “lived in complete friendship until the advent of Zionism.”²⁵

The far left’s proposed solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict – that Israel be dismantled and replaced with a state composed of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, with an Arab majority and Jewish minority – assumed not only the insignificance of Arab antisemitism but the speciousness of Jewish claims to be a people with valid national aspirations. The Palestinian guerilla movement also claimed that Jews were merely a religious group, not a people. As Al Fatah’s chief public information officer put it in 1969, “Judaism is a religion ... and it cannot construct a national identity.”²⁶ The SWP rejected as “false to the core” the notion that Jews had “a right to a state of their own or to self-determination of any kind.”²⁷ The Weatherman organ *Fire*, to delegitimize the Jewish claim to a homeland in Palestine, described the ancient Hebrews as “invaders,” whose subsequent “occupation” of what they called Judaea was “intermittent and unstable.” Moreover, although “Zionist mythology pretende[d]” that the Roman conquest of Judaea and destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE was a catastrophe for the Jewish people, *Fire* maintained that the Jews had for centuries “been emigrating from Palestine of their own choice.” Anticipating the claims of the rabidly antisemitic Nation of Islam and Christian Identity movements that contemporary Jews were “imposters,” *Fire* asserted that “Zionist racial theory” connecting “modern European-American Jews” to the ancient Hebrews was “demonstrably false.”²⁸ The Black Panther Party similarly denied Jewish claims to a long-term presence in Judaea and the land the Romans renamed Palestine. It claimed that the ancient Hebrews were latecomers to the region and remained there for only 100 years, whereas “the Palestinians” maintained “their continuous residence in Palestine until they were expelled by the Zionists in 1948.”²⁹

Fire even suggested that Zionism bore significant responsibility for the annihilation of Europe’s Jews during the Holocaust. Quoting British historian Arnold Toynbee’s claim that “Zionism and anti-Semitism are expressions of an identical point of view,” *Fire* argued that the Zionists propagandized that the Jews were an alien people who could never be integrated into the nations in which they lived.³⁰ This intensified prejudice against Jews such that in Eastern Europe, where Jews were inclined toward Zionism, hardly anyone objected to their slaughter during the Holocaust. *Fire* claimed that in Western Europe, by contrast, where Jews had acculturated and “were distinguished by religion only,” the surrounding gentile population made “concerted efforts” to rescue them. Weatherman went so far as to suggest a

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moral equivalency between “organized Jewry” and the Nazis, alleging that the former’s willing “collaboration” with those committing mass genocide was almost “universal.” Without this collaboration, Weatherman claimed, the Holocaust would have been impossible: “There would have been chaos or an impossibly severe drain on German manpower.” Facing two enemies – “the Nazi authorities and the Jewish authorities” – the victims were doomed.³¹

Portraying Israel as a racist, genocidal settler-state similar to Nazi Germany led far left groups to justify or excuse the most brutal acts of terrorism against its population. At its 1971 convention, the SWP declared, “We unconditionally support the struggles of the Arab peoples against the state of Israel.” A 1973 column in the *Militant* called “By Any Means Necessary” implied that any act of violence the Palestinian terrorists committed in the effort to destroy Israel was excusable.³² The SWP might label certain terrorist acts counterproductive, but it invariably claimed that Israeli policies had driven the Arabs to commit them. Weatherman leader Eric Mann declared in 1970 that “Israeli embassies, tourist offices, airlines and Zionist fund-raising and social affairs are important targets for whatever action is decided to be appropriate.”³³

Such was the reasoning that shaped the far left’s reaction to the massacre of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists at the Munich Olympics in 1972. The *Militant* expressed concern that the public outcry against the kidnapping and murder of the Olympic athletes made “the criminal [Israel] look like the victim.”³⁴ The SWP’s candidate for U.S. House of Representatives in the California district that included Berkeley, Ken Miliner, a national Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) leader, denounced what he called “the anti-Arab campaign over the Munich killings.” Showing no sympathy for the slaughtered Israelis, Miliner condemned both President Nixon and Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern for labeling the Palestinian terrorists “international outlaws.” He accused the American press of deliberately inciting prejudice against Arabs by using headlines that referred to “murder” or “terror” at the Olympics. Miliner’s only objections to the murders were tactical. He worried that targeting Israeli civilians for killing or kidnapping generated sympathy for the “Zionist state,” allowing it to “pose as the innocent victim.” The only effective strategy for eradicating the Jewish state, Miliner argued, was the revolutionary mobilization of “the Arab masses.”³⁵

The Black Panther Party justified the Palestinian murder of the Israeli athletes, comparing it to the prison uprising at the Attica penitentiary in New York State: “The same events unfolded: desperate, disenfranchised men take other men as hostages in order to command the attention of the world to their plight.” It absolved the Palestinian terrorists of responsibility for the murders at Munich, blaming the authorities instead: “In Munich, as in Attica ... heads of state did not hesitate to condemn the athletes to death ... to hide from the world the unbearable suffering of the Palestinians.”³⁶

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Many on the far left openly endorsed the hijacking of airplanes, which risked large numbers of civilian lives, as a legitimate way for the Palestinians to publicize their cause. In 1970, the *Black Panther* reprinted an article entitled “The Sky’s the Limit,” which glorified the hijacking by members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine of a TWA passenger plane flying from Rome to Athens. The hijackers took hand grenades into the cockpit and ordered the pilots to fly to Damascus, Syria. The article was accompanied by a photograph of hijacker Leila Khaled, identified as a “Revolutionary Sister.” SDS’s *New Left Notes* also supported Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israeli airliners as one of the “requirements of total war, of resistance to the [Israeli] occupier.”³⁷

During the period from 1968 to 1973, the far left did express some discomfort with the frequent calls from Arabs for a jihad, or Muslim holy war, against Israel and the Jews, and the boasts of such Arab leaders as Egyptian dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser that the Arabs would drive the Jews of Israel “into the sea,” a euphemism for genocide, a second Holocaust for the Jewish people. On the eve of the Six-Day War, Ahmad Shuqayri, the first head of the Palestine Liberation Organization, predicted that none of Israel’s Jews would survive.³⁸ Believing that class interest fundamentally shaped the outlook of the Arab masses, the far left dismissed religious and cultural factors, including radical Islamic theology, as only of superficial importance. SDS stated that the calls for jihad against the Jews were merely a desperate tactic of “the Arab bourgeoisie” to deflect the anger of the Arab working masses from “their own throats.” *New Left Notes* called this “the non-progressive aspect of the Palestinian liberation struggle.”³⁹

Shortly after the Six-Day War, the *Militant* admitted that “the Egyptian and other Arab leaders ... ha[d] called for a ‘jihad’ or holy war against Israel.” It considered such appeals unwise. They would cause “the Israeli Jewish masses to fear that a successful Arab struggle against Zionism would result in the extermination or suppression of the Jews in the Middle East.”⁴⁰ Calls for jihad would discourage Israeli workers from joining their Arab counterparts in a class war to dismantle Israel and establish a revolutionary binational state with an Arab majority, which the SWP advocated as the solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Although they acknowledged that Arab heads of state called for driving the Jews of Israel into the sea, the far left organizations never thought through the implications of denying Israel the right to defend itself against armed attacks that could annihilate its population. On the very rare occasions when far left newspapers addressed the issue, they simply characterized Arab threats to wipe out Israel’s Jews as meaningless bombast. Typical was the claim of the communist weekly *National Guardian* shortly after the Six-Day War, during which it had strongly backed the Arabs. The *National Guardian* had been founded by Stalinist supporters of the Progressive Party in October 1948. In 1967 its circulation probably surpassed that of

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any other American far left newspaper. Responding to the question posed by several readers, “Has not Nasser threatened to destroy Israel?” the *National Guardian* declared, “Unbiased observers tend to view the reckless but essentially empty threats to exterminate Israel as internal propaganda directed to the Cairo radio audience, unsupported by Egypt’s actual military preparations.”⁴¹

Of course, the *National Guardian*’s answer implied that the Cairo masses indeed harbored genocidal intentions toward Israel’s Jews, for why else would the Nasser dictatorship mobilize the populace by broadcasting radio appeals to drive them into the sea? The far left, which vehemently denied the existence of Arab antisemitism, assumed that Islamic theology barely affected the Arab masses. It made no mention, if it was even aware, of Islam’s concept of *dhimmitude*, which placed Jews in Muslim countries in an inferior position and status; of the implications of Muslim sharia law for Jews and women; of the numerous and horrific antisemitic pogroms in the Muslim world, including those in Baghdad in 1941 and in Tripoli, Cairo, and Alexandria in 1945; and of the forced expulsion of nearly all Jews from Arab countries after 1948, destroying centuries-old Jewish communities. Nor did the far left express any concern about how Jews’ rights or existence could be safeguarded in an Arab-dominated “Palestine,” or what the implications would be for women, who were subjugated, often brutally, in much of the Arab world.

In an article published in the radical *Ramparts* magazine in 1971, Sol Stern, then a New Leftist in Berkeley, recounted his astonishment and distress as Bay Area activists began their campaign to “demonize Israel and turn it into a pariah among the nations.” Stern described *Ramparts* as “the flagship publication of the New Left.” He recalled more than thirty years later that *Ramparts* gave him “permission to deviate from the party line on Israel” because he was a reliable left-wing radical “on virtually every issue.” Stern noted that it was the “last time that anything sympathetic to the Jewish state appeared in *Ramparts* or in any other New Left journal.”⁴²

In the article, Stern described attending a meeting at a Berkeley “political commune,” at which members of San Francisco Newsreel, which produced New Left propaganda films, reported on their recent visit to Palestinian guerilla camps in Jordan and Lebanon. The main speaker was a “hip-talking, thirtyish radical” who declared that Al Fatah was “correct” in “calling for [Israel’s] destruction” because the Jews had “ripped off the land” and established a “racist and imperialist” state. When Stern asked about the Jews’ right to self-determination, the speaker responded that the Jews were not a nation. The speaker charged that the Zionists had collaborated with the Nazis, a “gem,” Stern noted, “apparently picked up in the guerilla camps.” “Don’t you know,” the speaker asked, “that Theodore Herzl had discussions with Hitler?”⁴³ Of course, the two never met, and Hitler was only fifteen when Herzl died.