

Understanding or Capitulation?

(The Jewish Communists and their new attitude towards Zionism)

• by Abraham Revusky

I.

SINCE ITS inception Jewish Communism took an extremely hostile attitude towards Zionism. This hostility was a logical outcome of the general opposition to imperialism with which the Jewish colonization of Palestine was—quite mistakenly—identified. It was still more intensified by the ideological inheritance of the "Bund," the old Jewish Socialist Party, to which many Jewish Communists belonged before their conversion to Bolshevism. The "Bund," founded in 1897, in the same year that the first Zionist Congress was held, displayed from its very beginning a fanatical hatred towards the Jewish aspirations in Palestine. In the eyes of a good "Bundist", the Zionist appeared to be a devil incarnate, who diverts the Jewish workers from revolutionary class-struggle in the Diaspora by reactionary utopias in Palestine.

With this background, the hostility of the Jewish Communists towards Zionism reached its peak during the Arab outbreaks of 1929. Their press then justified the worst pogroms, instigated by the Mufti and his nationalist followers, as allegedly provoked by Zionist oppression. At the same time, their comrades in Palestine actually took a hand in inciting the Arab mobs against the Jews. Some of the leaflets, issued by them at that time, could be hardly distinguished from the Pogrom-propaganda of the Arab extremists.

A fuller description of the Communist attitude towards Zionism in the crucial years of 1920-1935 would be a fascinating study in social psychology and . . . pathology. But that would be outside the scope of this article. Besides, the Communists themselves are now trying to forget this unsavory chapter in their history, and personally I am inclined to help them in that. I would not even mention the above facts now were I convinced that all of our readers are familiar with them. These facts are indispensable for the understanding of the present position of the Jewish Communists towards the Jewish aspirations in Palestine.

II.

Since 1935, when a new party—"line," based on the United Front idea, was launched at the Seventh Comintern Congress in Moscow, the attitude of the Jewish Communists towards Zionism and Palestine underwent a gradual change. It started with making a clear distinction between Zionism and the Jews of Palestine. The first was still attacked as a reactionary clique serving British Imperialism in its nefarious designs against the Arab people. At the same time the Jews of Palestine were pitied as innocent victims of a false policy. Their right to live in the country of their choice and to possess there certain elementary rights was magnanimously conceded, provided they give up Zionism and do not insist on further immigration. A Jewish-Arab understanding, based on the ethnographic *status quo* was ardently advocated as a just and realistic solution of the Palestine problem.

There is not much logic in this position. The present Jewish community of Palestine was mainly created by Zionist efforts. If Zionism is a kind of imperialistic aggression, the Arabs should not be greatly blamed for refusing to grant full equality to people who "invaded" their country as a result of it. Was not the Mufti more logical in demanding that the Jews who entered Palestine after the issuance of the Balfour Declaration (and this would mean 80% of them) should leave the country before granting minority rights to the others?

III.

In any case, new developments forced the Jewish Communists to a further revision of their views concerning the Palestine problem. With the continuous rise of Fascism the previous bogey of British Imperialism began to look much more innocent. In some cases it had even to be defended as the lesser evil. Moreover, the accusation against Zionists of being allies of British imperialism lost all sense after the Mandatory Power, freeing itself of the liberal scruples of yesteryear, shamelessly revealed its true—and hos-

tile attitude towards Zionism and the Jewish National Home.

Another important factor forcing the Communists to reconsider their previous opinion on Zionism, is the foremost part taken by Palestine in the solution of the refugee problem. In spite of all political brakes and handicaps, Palestine took from the very beginning of the Nazi persecutions the first place in the rescuing of its Jewish victims. Due to this record it afterwards became a major factor in all honest plans to solve the tragic problem created by the persecution of Jews in Germany and other anti-Semitic countries of Europe. At the same time Biro Bidjan, the "Jewish region" in the Far East, boomed for years by the Jewish Communists as a sound antidote to the Zionist poison, did not absorb any refugees. This contrast, together with the tragic failure of the Soviet Union in general to offer a haven to a substantial number of victims of racial persecution, could not be explained away by most ingenious excuses.

All these facts, together with the general development of the United Front idea, whose preachers could not ignore the key position taken by the Zionist groups in Jewish life, forced the Jewish Communists to further ideological concessions. They began to find positive traits in the very idea of Zionism, formerly decried as a reactionary utopia. In full contradiction to former "Bundist" tenets they suddenly discovered that the craving of a homeless nation for a territory is not a betrayal of socialism, but a normal instinct deserving, in certain circumstances, sympathy and encouragement.* Instead of being dismissed as a "swindle" the social innovations of the Jewish labor pioneers of Palestine began to be recognized as an important achievement. Without dropping altogether the old—and repeatedly disproved—accusation of driving Arab peasants from the soil, the Communist press reluctantly began to admit that Jewish immigration raised the general standard of living of the Palestinian Arabs. Not recognizing yet the inherent right of the Jewish people to settle in Palestine, Communist authors began to write on the desirability of a further Jewish immigration into Palestine and neighboring countries, provided the Arabs consent to it.

IV.

Gradually retreating before the pressing onslaught of implacable facts, the Communist leaders are trying at the same time, in accordance with generally accepted strategy, to cover their retreat

by strong counter attacks. This is being done by a continuous demand for a Jewish-Arab understanding which is allegedly being sabotaged by the present Zionist leadership.

I concede ungrudgingly that this line of attack is being pursued with considerable skill. The generally admitted fact that immediately after the war the Zionist leadership was not consistent enough in its efforts to reach a political understanding with the Arabs, is being repeatedly used to create the impression that in A.D. 1939, the Arabs are waiting for an honorable offer from Dr. Weizmann; such an offer, we are told, could immediately settle the thorny Arab-Jewish problem on the basis of mutual interests. Every vague statement of obscure Arab politicians—and the Arabs are masters in this field—is being used by the Jewish Communists to create among their followers the impression that such an understanding could now open the gates of Palestine to the unhappy refugees, and create, besides, great opportunities for Jewish immigrants in Iraq and other neighboring countries. Naturally, Jewish leaders who refuse to grasp such splendid opportunities, are nothing short of being traitors.

The gradual readjustment of the Communist approach toward Zionism is being frequently interrupted by "recessions" showing that certain groups in the movement are not able to overcome the blind hatred of yesteryear. The most flagrant example of this kind is the policy of the Communist party in Syria, which approves even now, after all the "self-criticism" in Moscow and New York, the terroristic campaign, conducted in neighboring Palestine by the infamous Mufti, who enjoys, by the way, the full support of Rome and Berlin. Were the Comintern more serious in its new, more tolerant attitude towards Zionism, it would certainly find ways and means of forcing the local leaders to a more correct policy.

Another example of such "recession" is a leaflet issued by the "Jewish Section" of the Palestinian Communists only a few months ago. At the time when their leaders in America were already showing sympathies for Zionism, their followers in Palestine were misrepresenting the refugees wandering for months in cattle boats over the Eastern Mediterranean, hoping against hope for an opportunity to set foot "illegally" on Palestine's soil, as "invaders" who intend to drive out the Arabs from their native country.

At the time when the *Freiheit*, the Yiddish Communist daily in New York, editorially criticized Chamberlain's "White Paper" as a betrayal of Jewish hopes, it suggested in a printed answer to a reader bearing all marks of editorial approval that the Jews should, for the sake of an understanding with the Arabs, give up the immi-

* The experiment of Biro-Bidjan, even if not greatly successful as a practical colonization project, proved to be very helpful in this theoretical rearrangement. Defending the idea of a Jewish republic on the shores of the Amur, the Jewish Communists of Russia had to use many arguments, which would have been previously labeled as "Zionist heresy."
A. R.

gration of 75,000 allowed them by the White Paper for the next five years!*

V.

Aside from such casual lapses into the blind hatred of the past, the new Communist attitude towards Zionism is full of vacillation and evasion. This is the reason why it did not evoke an encouraging response from the Labor Zionist ranks. As a general rule, Labor Zionists are convinced that the Communist spokesmen are insincere in their new approach to Zionism. The sympathy they express at our present woes in Palestine is looked upon as a demagogic manoeuvre intended to appease the conscience of their followers and to ensnare us at the same time into the net of their "United Front". Our best reaction to their present approaches is to ignore them, to leave them strictly alone. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*. Or, to use the Hebrew paraphrase of the same idea—"neither your sting nor your honey."

While there is much moral justification for this bitterness based on the bloody memories of 1929, I strongly disagree with its practical conclusions. The gradual change taking place in the Communist attitude toward Zionism for the last four years is not just a manoeuvre on their part. It is a desperate effort to adjust outgrown theories to new realities. Even if some of the Communist leaders may be suspected of hypocrisy the masses behind them are sincere in their desire to reach a more positive attitude toward Zionism, and Jewish life in general. I believe that even the leaders, or at least the best of them, are now feeling uncomfortable when thinking of the destructive role they played in the history of a movement which proved, after all, to be the most constructive achievement of the Jewish people in the last two generations.

But what is the value of these belated pangs of conscience, many of our readers will ask? Is not Communist thinking prescribed from above? What will happen if Stalin, for any reason whatsoever, will deem it advisable to lure the Mufti from Mussolini's service and to take him to his own bosom? Will not our newly discovered Communist friends, confronted with the dilemma between "party line" and their own conscience, again praise the instigator of the anti-Jewish pogroms in Palestine as the great national revolutionary, who only temporarily stumbled into the Fascist camp?

All this may be true, but I do not believe that such a dilemma is now probable. The wheels of history are not turning that way.

* I am glad to state that this last instance of backsliding was recently denounced by the editor of the *Freiheit*, Mr. M. Olgin in his answer to an article of the author in *Yiddisher Kemfer*. We do not think—says Mr. Olgin—"abandonment of the right of the Jews to settle in Palestine is a price to be paid for an agreement for this would mean to give up the very purpose for which an agreement is needed." An excellent formula which will be used by us for further clarification of Mr. Olgin's position.
A. R.

This is, by the way, another strong reason why I cannot accept the policy of "leaving them alone." We will be of more service to our ideals, if we will consistently help the process of clarification of the Communist attitude toward Zionism. We shall not let them dwell too long in their present vacillating position. They must be pushed forward, towards Zionism, if possible, or backward, towards Muftysim, if that is unavoidable. In the last case they, at least, would not be able to mislead naive people by alleged sympathies for Jewish Palestine.

VI.

With this purpose in mind I recently put before the Jewish Communists a few questions considered by me the acid test of their whole attitude toward Zionism.

(1) Who are the Arabs with whom we must now negotiate about an understanding?

(2) What should be the conditions of the Jewish Arab understanding?

(3) What should we do in the meantime, if such an understanding, in spite of our best intentions, is being repudiated by the other side.

These questions, first posed in the *Yiddisher Kemfer* of June 23, led to considerable discussion. The most substantial contribution to it was made—from the Communist side—by Mr. P. Novick (*Freiheit*, June 30) and M. Olgin, who dealt with my questions in three of his English columns in the same paper (July 21, 22, 26). Although their articles failed to clarify fully the new Communist position toward Palestine, the discussion following my questions was far from futile. It certainly deserves further continuation.

What are the answers given by the Communists to the above questions?

On the first question (with whom we must negotiate) Messrs. Novick and Olgin do not seem to see eye to eye. Their answers to it decidedly contradict each other.

Mr. Novick's answer is, that we must negotiate with the leaders whom the Arabs recognize at present. "We do not like certain Arab leaders, but we don't like Ben Gurion either. Each party must deal with the leaders of the other side."

Olgin's answer is considerably different:

"Understanding with the Arabs must be conceived as a *process* which will have a *preparatory period* of improving the social atmosphere and a *conference period*, when the interested parties shall sit down around the table and reach a formal agreement. It is quite obvious that the conference will have to put a stamp of official approval on much that was already in practice in real life." (My italics—A. R.).

I believe that we, labor Zionists, could fully accept the formula of Mr. Olgin; we would at the same time decidedly reject Novick's answer.

The reason is not a purely moral one. We would not refuse, as a matter of principle, to negotiate even with the Mufti, who is after all the most influential leader of Palestine's Arabs. We would certainly do it with innermost aversion, but we would still do it if there was the slightest probability of reaching an understanding acceptable to Jews and Zionists.

However, such negotiations are senseless because no good results could come from them. An Arab leader, who openly states that there are too many Jews in Palestine, cannot be expected to guarantee us even a moderate quota of Jewish immigration, which is a *conditio sine qua non* for all of us. No understanding could therefore be reached with the present Arab leaders who are reared in the spirit of extreme chauvinism and are moreover—or, at least, many of them—in the service of Mussolini. A period of moral preparation, suggested by Mr. Olgin, is therefore the logical condition for any honest effort of Jewish Arab understanding. It is certainly not a matter of a few months; it would be an extraordinary achievement if the second period of actual negotiations could begin in several years from now.

The sharp contradiction between the answers given by Mr. Novick and Mr. Olgin to our first question (with whom shall we negotiate) is certainly based on their reaction to our second question, concerning the basis of the proposed understanding. Novick, while avoiding a direct answer, seems to demand that we shall reach an *immediate* understanding with the Arabs at all costs. Otherwise his insistence on an agreement with the *present* Arab leaders would be senseless. Olgin answers the question about the conditions in a more direct way. He concedes that if we would abandon the right of the Jews to settle in Palestine "we would give up the very purpose for which understanding is necessary." In other words, the adherents of an *immediate* "understanding" with any leaders who are now recognized by the Arabs, actually advocate *capitulation* because no other kind of understanding is imaginable at this moment. On the other hand, Communists who concede that a true understanding could be reached only after a certain preparatory period, and it must in its final shape contain definite guarantees of Jewish rights (which does not mean, by the way, exclusive possession of the country) are actually trading on Zionist ground.

VII.

To our opponents of the first kind, who incessantly threaten us with dire results of our "obstinacy," and are still trying to smuggle in the ugly

idea of capitulation under the beautiful disguise of bi-national understanding, a clear and frank notice shall be given: "There will be no capitulation in Palestine! The Yishuv in Palestine might go under fighting but it will fight. The Jews of Palestine might have committed political mistakes, and I am the first to admit them, but they are not demoralized. The workers of Palestine still have fire in their hearts."

I beg our opponents not to treat these words as light-hearted braggadaccio. A life-long pacifist, I never accepted the ideology of the "Jewish Legion" of World War fame, and I have only condemnation for the present activities of the Revisionists. We condemn these activities because they are practiced at the wrong time and are pointed in the wrong direction. The situation in Palestine is not hopeless, and in any case innocent Arabs should not become the objects of our struggle. I am confident, however, that if the present cynically corrupted world will still witness an example of supreme heroism of a small national group desperately fighting for its rights and ideals, that example will be given in the small country of Palestine. I hope that such a development will be avoided—but this will not be done by capitulation.

Turning from the Novicks to the Olgins who do not demand a Jewish capitulation, but recognize our right to put definite conditions for an understanding, reached after a period of moral preparation, we ask them to draw logical conclusions from their own position. To be logical, they should recognize that in the meantime, until considerable Arab groups will favorably react to the policy of practical understanding, we must defend our positions against those Arabs who are still under the influence of the Mufti and his murderous bands. Can they, rejecting the "White Paper" as a betrayal of Zionist rights, deny our right to fight against its restrictions with all means at our disposal, including "illegal immigration"?

Or do they, while recognizing our right to free immigration into Palestine at the same time deny our right to fight for it? That would be a very peculiar kind of Communism.

This is the sense of my third question:—What do the Communists advise us to do in the meantime, until a mutually profitable understanding—and not just capitulation—will become possible? On this important question both my opponents prefer to maintain a discreet silence.

The most decisive proof of the sincerity of the "New Deal" offered us by the Jewish Communists is, however, not the theoretical recognition that we are entitled to fight for our rights in Palestine, but the readiness to help us in this fight by actual deeds. The moment we will get not

only nebulous suggestions about an Arab-Jewish "understanding"—a word mostly used to cover the ugly demand for capitulation—but an offer to participate, for instance, in the Gewerkshaften Campaign, wholly devoted to the strengthening of the Jewish labor positions in Palestine, a new situation will be created. Until then a great measure of scepticism on our part is unavoidable.

In one of his columns Mr. Olgin tries to lead the discussion into new channels by directing at me several counter-questions on Zionist policies. I have not the slightest intention of avoiding his questions, and will answer them fully on another

occasion. In the meantime it would be greatly desirable if Messrs. Olgin and Novick settle their inner controversy. Do the Jewish Communists expect us to strive for an understanding with progressive Arab groups which shall be created in Palestine with our active encouragement and support, or do they want us to capitulate to the present Arab leaders with the infamous Mufti at their head? And above all, if understanding is impossible at the present moment, what is going to be their attitude to our future Zionist activities?

More clarity, gentlemen.