

# *The Perplexities of the Middle Eastern Conflict*

## A Musing on Historical Relativism and Universal History

*If...we cast a glance over the World's-History generally, we see a vast picture of changes and transactions; of infinitely manifold forms of peoples, states, individuals, in unresting succession... On every hand there is the motliest throng of events drawing us within the circle of its interest, and when one combination vanishes another immediately appears in its place.*

**-GWF Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 1820s**

### I

Whatever one's ultimate perspective on the Middle East may be, it is undeniably true that the bleakness shrouding the region appears to grow blacker and blacker daily. The idea of mutual co-existence between Arab and Jew seems to fade as the Israeli state tightens its control of the occupied territories. Meanwhile, as a desperate response, those living in the occupied territories respond with suicide bombings. There is no justification for the level of brutality and cold-blooded murder on either side, but it remains a seldom spoken truth that the state of Israel holds a monopoly on weapons and high-tech corralling agents. With a few explosives, rocks and old guns, inhabitants under occupation in this region are unable to defend themselves against the terror of the state.

There is, in the midst of this relatively modern crisis, something of a mystical "aura" to the land that has whetted the appetites of Christian, Jew and Muslim alike. Palestine is associated with Jesus Christ among fundamentalist Christians who believe that his Second Coming will take place in this "Holy Land." To many Jews, who refer to themselves as God's chosen people, this is the land that is rightly theirs for the simple reason that they, as an "eternally" persecuted group, deserve to dwell among other persecuted Jews. There are also Biblical notions floating about among certain Jews who insist that their God bequeathed the land to their father Abraham thousands of years ago. But a number of Muslims then retort and yell ferociously that they too descend from Abraham and because of this are entitled to the land. According to these Muslims they, as inhabitants of the land since the days of the Romans, shouldn't be subject to expulsion from, and destruction of their land. After all, Jews only reentered the land in relatively recent times. With the founding of the Zionist movement in 1897 by Theodore Herzl and the Balfour Declaration in 1917 as well as the subsequent settlement in Palestine, the Jews, it could be said, are colonizers for deciding to evacuate those Palestinians residing in the land.

It is here that we start to enter murky waters. Any notion or claim that doesn't take into account the fact that the respective groups involved in this debacle descend from Semitic speaking peoples is built on unsolid foundations. But even the idea of people with the same linguistic tongue constituting a "race" is highly suspect. A more apt way of putting it would be those who were from the Arabian Peninsula (Akkadians, Hebrews, Arabs, Egyptians and Phoenicians) shared similar social patterns and traditions. Such shared influences in the social realm or the realm of religious traditions does not mean that there was a unity between each of these ancient peoples, but it did mean that each of these social groupings drew from one another.<sup>1</sup>

To think that after centuries of migration, conversions from one religion to another (Judaism to Christianity or Christianity to Islam or any combination thereof) and mixing between Jews, Christians or Muslims there still exists a purity of "ethnicity," "race" or religion is as preposterous as believing that those who have blond hair are superior or purer than those who have black hair. Here biology becomes destiny and the destiny of the specific "superior" ethnicity becomes a worldview. There is something mystical about the suggestion that history is a mere constellation and concentration of different groups battling it out solely based upon what biology or genes they inherited from their parents (and the larger "ethnic" or "racial" configuration they are a part of). The influential French author, Michel Leiris, posits that:

It is...absurd to talk about an English "race" or even to regard the English as being of the "Nordic" race. In point of fact, history teaches that, like all the people of Europe, the English people has become what it is through successive contributions of different peoples. England is a Celtic country, partially colonized by successive waves of Saxons, Danes and Normans from France, with some addition of Roman stock from the age of Julius Caesar onwards. Moreover, while an Englishman can be identified by his way of dressing, or even by his behavior, it is impossible to tell that he is an Englishman merely from his physical appearance. Among the English, as among other Europeans, there are fair people and dark, tall men and short, dolichocephalics and brachycephalics. It may be claimed that that an Englishman can be readily identified from certain external characteristics which give him a "look" of his own: restraint in gesture (unlike the conventional and gesticulating southerner), gait and facial expression, all expressing what is usually included under the rather vague term of "phlegm." However, anyone who made this claim would be likely to be found at fault in many instances, for by no means all the English have these characteristics of the "typical Englishman," the fact would still remain that these outward characteristics are not "physique" in the true sense: bodily attitudes and motions and expressions of the face all come under the heading of behavior; and being habits determined by the subject's social background, are cultural, not "natural." Moreover, though loosely describable as "traits," they typify not a whole nation, but a particular social group within it and thus cannot be included among the distinctive marks of race.<sup>2</sup>

But why the revival of ethnic and racial notions of superiority? There is no clear-cut explanation for this turn to identity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The phrase ethnic group is the politically correct word for race. The "enlightened" Western man looks back on legal segregation in the Southern states in the period before integration as a product of a racist mindset that was fortunately overcome, but never tires of suggesting that the conflict in the Middle East is an eternal problem that has been festering in the Holy Land because of the inherent differences between Arabs and Jews. Similarly, the ethnic studies professor would scoff at the idea of measuring skulls to determine the intelligence of a supposed "race" of people but has no qualms in endlessly prattling on about ethnic difference. Instead of trying to figure out what one has in common with other human beings, our age strives to find an ethnic, linguistic, religious or sexual characteristic that sets one group of human beings apart from another group. At its worst, this "special" characteristic (or set of "special" characteristics) is then used to justify persecution or exclusion of those who don't conform to the respective group's identity.

For a time that is said to be inclusive we see a whole host of exclusions occurring right before our very eyes. Such exclusion is being acutely played out in Iraq where the Western media never tires of promoting the idea that there is no way Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims could ever mutually co-exist. In the same breath, we hear of how the US is (virtually single-handedly no less) building a secular democracy which will allow for all sorts of ethnic co-existence. What some have speculated about years ago regarding the Middle East has almost come true: an "Ottomanization" of the region. In practical terms what this would mean is that instead of Turkey being in the center Israel would play that role with US backing. On the periphery of Israel would be ethno-religious groups murdering one another.

## II

At the height of the Russian Revolution of 1917, the world was in the throes of major turmoil and class conflict. Indeed, the bourgeoisie was fearful that the revolution in Russia would spread far and wide. And it did to a very limited extent (more than we've ever seen historically). In Germany in November 1918 workers, soldiers and sailors mutinied and put a nail in the coffin of the First World War. Around the same period there were scattered strikes – inspired by the Russian and German examples we might add – up and down the Northwest coast of the US. There is plenty to critique in the Russian and German revolutions as well as the proletarian movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the significant point is that humans were collectively rebelling against their condition. Moreover, there was the idea of international solidarity between workers which would transcend boundaries like gender and race (as bound up in *workerism* as it absurdly was, there was a sharp edge to it). It was proposed that relationships between human beings were grounded in a social nexus and the terrible divisions of gender, for example, could only be reasonably challenged if human beings transformed the world *collectively* (we emphasize collectively because many are of the opinion today that all individuals need to do is to mystically change their psyche through meditation and group therapy sessions).

The influence for such a conception was the work of Marx who believed – wrongly so, we should add – that the spread of capital would herald the inevitable global unification of the proletariat. Surely, this proletariat would struggle in defense of his or her class interests, and in the process of doing so throw to the winds any illusions of fighting for fatherland or nation. As a logical continuum of this, the national being was seen to be in the interests of the bourgeoisie while the proletariat lodged its authenticity in the human being against all borders as well as the whole of international capital. When this took place national feeling would be dissolved and humanity would constitute itself fraternally in the world human community.

All of this, however, changed when the Russian and German revolutions failed to encompass the rest of the world. This was in no small measure because the Bolshevik elite came to dominate the revolution which led to its final degeneration. When Lenin died in 1924 Stalin took over definitively with his crude notions of socialism in one country and the sacredness of the family. Then came Stalin's purges and mass murder of peasants. Similarly, German workers, a large minority of whom was once militantly opposed to class society, allied themselves along nationalist lines with Hitler in the Nuremberg rallies. How could such a thing happen? For one it is in the opinion of this author that the various Communist Parties – which were attached to the Third International – did a remarkable job in helping to bastardize socialism and communism to the point where they betrayed those very ideas. We see this in the Stalinist infiltration of the Spanish Revolution in the mid-late 1930s when the rank and file started to think that Popular Fronts against fascism were the way of the future. In such a conception, the defense of the national republic of Spain against the advances of fascism only made sense.

And it is here, after the May Days of 1937 in Spain, that the festering smell of nationalism started to encompass the whole globe. Nationalism is the inevitable response to a world divided up into nation-states. (Trotsky, however, maintained that the Second World War would end in a similar manner as the First World War had. In Trotsky's mind, the proletariat would rise up in revolution against the bourgeoisie and align itself in a Socialist United States of Europe. His prediction was dead wrong. Capitalism emerged from the Second World War stronger than it ever had and the proletariat enjoyed the benefits of the consumer society which led, momentarily at least, to its integration into the dominant society.)

The idea of a National Home for the "Jewish people" was fittingly part of this process. At the time of the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate there was little broad based support among the Jewish proletariat for such a project. Jewish workers were, by and large, more enamored by ideas of the international solidarity of man in a world human community than a "pure" Jewish ethnicity. It is no surprise that certain leading lights of the revolutionary movement were Jews. At the time experience of persecution led them to, in large numbers, agitate against all forms of exploitation and

oppression. This opposition, to be sure, wasn't limited to assuring rights for their own ethnic group. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 many Jewish socialists and anarchists returned from exile to their native Russia to participate in the reconstruction of society as a *whole*. If examined carefully it can be seen that what we know as political Zionism had very little influence on Jews at the time. As Aghis Stinas writes in his amazing *Memoirs – Sixty Years under the Flag of Socialist Revolution* about his life fighting for internationalist socialism in Greece:

We knew about the “Balfour declaration,” the official promise made to the Jews by the British government during the First World War that it would set them up on the soil “of their fathers.” The Jewish community and the Thessaloniki synagogue had called the Jews together to celebrate the news. The gathering took place in the morning, and behind closed doors. The afternoon of the same day masses of Jewish workers and intellectuals took to the streets, waving red flags, with these slogans: “It is not in the state of Israel but in the world socialist society, united fraternally with all the peoples of the world, that we, the Jews, will guarantee our lives, our security and our well-being,” “Long live the world socialist revolution,” “Down with Zionism.”

There is something we should note here. It was not only the Jews of Thessaloniki but millions of Jews across the world who put all their hope in socialism and struggled for it.<sup>3</sup>

After the defeat of the revolutionary wave in the 1930s and the death of millions of Jews in the holocaust, the idea of a separate state for Jews started to look more and more appealing to a group of people who had felt utterly betrayed by the refusal of the US, French and British governments to admit them as refugees. As a consequence countless numbers of Jews rallied to the cause of nationalism. Even the Left Zionists, with ideas of mutual co-existence between Arab and Jew, had been silenced after the Second World War (as ambiguous and lacking in coherence as many of their perspectives and visions tended to be, I fail to see real malicious intent in many of their writings) by lunatics who wanted to forcefully uproot and transfer a whole population from a land they lived in for centuries. Such colonization was different than most past forms of expropriation in that the Arabic inhabitants were, by and large, not made use of for their labor power, but were forcefully *transferred* from the land. (Traditionally colonists have kept the native inhabitants on hand to serve as laborers for the accumulation of capital.) Zionists have been known to say that this transfer was just desserts for the Nazi holocaust.

As Peter Novick notes in his scholarly work *The Holocaust in American Life*, after 1967 there was a heightened interest in phenomena such as anti-Semitism, the Nazi holocaust and the mythology of the state of Israel.<sup>4</sup> What are the reasons for this? At the close of the Six Day War in June of 1967, Israel emerged as victor. It was because of this victory that the Middle Eastern world became realigned and in this realignment Israel was cast as an ally of the US. Israel was perceived by US statesmen (and various right wing zealots) as a force to be reckoned with in the region. And along with all of this came the instillation of fear. The fear that Israel would be wiped off the map by the Arabic world helped to solidify US support for the Israeli project of infinite military expansion. In this fear the Nazi holocaust was invoked (“Jews need a home to call their own so the Holocaust does not happen again,” was the frequent incantation fulminated by Zionists).

Why are some aspects of the past revived while others aren't? Why did certain Croatians, Serbs and Bosnians in the Balkans in the mid-1990s fixate on the suffering of their “own” respective group in history rather than their combined discoveries and mutual interminglings? Or why is it that in the late 1960s on into our current era the holocaust was suddenly seen (almost exclusively) in light of the suffering of Jews and Jews alone?

This system *cannot* understand how potentially murderous it is. There is no way that it can understand, for example, how an industry and trade that came to be more and more internationally linked led to the trenches of 1914-1918. It never will be able to. As the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukacs observed, the bourgeoisie is unable to grasp history (and itself) as a totality. Yet, at times, the capitalist world is able to strive and look forward. In times of doubt, it turns back and contemplates the consequences of its destructive nature that it cannot account for and can only earmark as “evils”, and in turn the bourgeoisie attributes such evil things to causes outside of itself.

Elites the world over will use whatever means to continue to hold onto their wealth and political power. Exploitation of notions of identity and group suffering are useful tools to keep the world functioning as it is. When Hannah Arendt wrote her classic trial examination of Nazi bureaucrat, Adolf Eichmann, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she was strenuously labeled as insensitive to Jewish suffering.<sup>5</sup> The reason? She thought that Eichmann was a reflection of the society that created him. She refers to Eichmann as a clown and fumbling bureaucrat who was merely trying to advance his career within the Reich. Unlike Daniel Goldhagen's balderdash about the Germans being eternally *Hitler's Willing Executioners*<sup>6</sup>, Arendt thought that Eichmann's behavior was normal and fit into essential patterns of the world we *all* inhabit. No doubt, the conditions that allowed the torture and death of six million Jews were extreme, but such destruction of life has to be placed in the context of a bloody world war! Attempts at mythologizing history to fit molds of eternal butchers and eternal victims misses the boat entirely.

If one is looking at history as merely disembodied events, the logical result is an inability to comprehend the magnitude of the Nazi cruelty which was inflicted upon the Jewish other. It then becomes simple to erect mythologies around the German people as being the incarnation of evil. What is most frightening, however, is not merely that a significant chunk of German citizenry rallied to the cause of the Nazis, but that becoming a Nazi was perceived as the *normal* thing to do (just as fighting the "terrorist" bogeyman is consecrated as a normal response to what is presented as the endemic problem plaguing our century). The Nazi rise to power cannot be explained by specific character traits that are said to be woven into the fabric of the ordinary German. As vile as the anti-Semitism was which arose in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, it was, for the most part, not an abiding faith in Nazi doctrines that propelled so many Germans to rally alongside Hitler and his cronies.<sup>7</sup> Hitler's resounding success, on the contrary, had more to do with the fact that Germany was faced with an economic crisis in the 1930s, and the Nazis, with their violent anti-Marxist rhetoric, sought to alleviate the failing economy by searching underneath the fence for scapegoats. Similarly, there was nothing inherent in Germany's development prior to the 1930s that provides culpable evidence that Germans would, in the near future, make gestures in favor of fascist dictatorship on a mass scale. Fascism was a means of assuring national unity in a period of calculated barbarity.

If we look at the Balkans we can develop our point further. When Serbian nationalists dwelled on their defeat at the battle of Kosovo Polde in 1389 in the 1980s-1990s, they were resurrecting an old national mythology. The Serb nationalists' viewed their past struggle against the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century as similar to their current fight for a national state. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen made use of his "willing executioner" hypothesis in 1999 to advocate for ethnic cleansing of Serbians.<sup>8</sup> His thesis – which should be rejected, spit upon and viewed with informed contempt – essentially states that Serbians as a whole are guilty for all the carnage that has besieged the Balkans. Without any qualifiers like Serbian nationalists or a vocal portion of Serbians, he goes on to suggest that there were no other people or leaders who contributed to turning the Balkans into a welter of human sewage. But there was nothing special about some Serbs' turn to nationalism as a response to the social, economic and political crisis that scarred the whole region. In effect, scores of nationalist Bosnian Muslims and nationalist Croatians made their contribution to the whole debacle that despoiled the land and one another.

In a like vein, Zionists use the past calamities Jews have experienced (and continue to experience) as a stick with which to prod those who reject the idea (and practice) of national state entities. What makes it all the more harrowing is that political Zionists claim to speak for all Jews – thus assuming that all those who are Jewish are a homogenous group. Zionists tend to project onto Jews the idea that they are an eternally oppressed group. For this reason, it is of tantamount necessity – according to Zionists – to have a strong national Jewish state that can guard against the ravages of anti-Semitism. The Nazi holocaust is then invoked to legitimate the heinous encampment of the Palestinians and the broader Arabic world. As regards to the Six Day War in 1967 offered "a folk theology of "Holocaust and Redemption." In Jacob Neuser's words, it was a salvation myth: "Of the darkness followed by the light; of passage through the Netherworld...then, purified by suffering and by blood, into a new age."

The extermination of European Jewry could become the *Holocaust* only on 9 June, when, in the aftermath of a remarkable victory, the State of Israel celebrated the return of the people of Israel to the ancient wall of the Temple of Jerusalem. On that day the extermination of European Jewry attained the – if not happy, at least viable – ending that served to transform events into a myth, and to endow a symbol with a single, ineluctable meaning.<sup>9</sup>

In a nutshell, what such a perspective has come to mean in practice for the state of Israel is that all those who are not the “chosen people” – as expressed by God’s edict – should be viewed with suspicion, fear and hatred.

The idea that there are specific groups who will always exhibit oppressive behavior (Serb or German) and then other groups who will always be oppressed by such behavior (Jew, Croat or Bosnian Muslim) imputes a quality onto human groups which is plainly false. Human behavior varies depending upon each particular situation human beings find themselves in. Because certain Germans turned to Nazism in the 1930s doesn’t mean that Germans are destined to enslave and coerce other human beings. In rebellious times human beings have broken out of their assigned roles and expressed themselves in ways that we would describe as giving and compassionate. During the Los Angeles riots in the early 1990s a woman was quoted as saying, “The rebellion was community. It was liberation.”

*As long as history is written in a national framework it should elicit our strongest reservations.*

**- Andre Breton, *Arcanum 17*, 1944**

In an all too real way this turn to national identity obscures the class disparities engendered by capitalism. But all the more disconcerting is how notions of the uniqueness of “immutable” peoples (who are somehow mystically suspended above human history, no less!) have replaced a stirringly universal call for human self-emancipation. Even with all the historical relativist mutterings regarding how this particular culture developed this way or that culture developed the other way, what remains remarkable is how societies share stark comparisons in how they came to manifest through the ages. Whether one is examining how modern chemistry is an extension of alchemy (which is said to have arisen in Egypt) or the explication of Greek philosophy, science and poetry in Andalus in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, what is revealed is the continuity of human endeavor (for better or worse) and how humanity shares a thread of unity throughout its history.

The past is frequently a reflection of the present. How true! The failure of the revolutionary movement following the First World War, the carving up of the Middle East during the same era, and the various national wars that ensued because of the realignment of the world, are all pieces that fit into the jigsaw puzzle. The gloomy social reality that dominates our lives is perceived as being in a perpetual state of stasis and merely part of a history that was inevitable. We almost never hear about humanity’s legendary history of fighting against exploitation and tyranny. The media keeps most people aloof about those who are working towards reconciliation in the Middle East, while the class struggle is all too frequently dismissed as temporary blips on the radar screen.

To summarize, it is true that nationalism following the First World War was in part inevitable because the revolutionary movement was defeated. But history wasn’t predetermined, and had the revolutionary chain of events following the First World War been successful, the world we inhabit might be a qualitatively different place. However much we ask ourselves questions about what could have been done differently in the past, we must also actively resist the horror of the present world.

As CLR James once coyly remarked, “We were not able to choose the mess we have to live in – this collapse of a whole society – but we can choose our way out.”

### III

Among the many myths we have come to associate with groups who share the same skin color or religious affiliation, the myth of a pure unspoiled nature or “race” is a common one. The idea that there is a pure untrammelled “race” or ethnicity is the boon of capitalism which is founded on exclusion and dispossession. During the height of the breakup of the Balkans in the mid-1990s we can see notions of ethnicity becoming stronger as workers and the poor searched for scapegoats for their declining standard of living. Nationalism spread at an alarming rate among Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims which had the effect of making the population (or portions of it) align themselves with bourgeois nationalists who were interested in cementing their own political and economic domination over the working class. The supposed “differences” between the three groups that had lived in relative neighborly peace with one another were exacerbated to a level of thorough absurdity. In an article from the communist journal *Wildcat* about the war in Yugoslavia, the editors brilliantly sum up the efforts of nationalists to divide the population along ethno-national lines:

The attempts by Serb-Croat-speaking ethnic nationalists in Serbia, Croatia and even Bosnia to define their “languages” as separate is one of the more laughable aspects of the war. In Croatia all official “Croatian” has been created which has been purged of “foreign” words (apart from German ones) and which has incorporated many “Croatian” words not used since before the Second World War. The Serbian nationalists have interfered less with the language but *have* revived the Cyrillic alphabet for most official purposes. In Serbia itself this was not *so* ludicrous because most people had some familiarity with it. In “Serb” regions of Croatia, however, many people had never used it and had to learn it as quickly as possible to show that they were proper Serbs!?

If someone tries to convince you that “Serbian,” “Croatian,” and “Bosnian” are separate languages don’t say “Your ideas about Balkan linguistics are interesting but I must however disagree with them.” Just say: “*crkni, nacionalisticki drkadzijo!*” (Drop dead, nationalist wanker!) – this should be understandable in all three ‘languages.’<sup>10</sup>

As regards to Zionism’s and the state of Israel’s flirtation with racial and ethnic myths, such falsities permeate the whole conflict. The lines that the state of Israel has drawn in the sand between Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Oriental Jews are stark.

### Ashkenazi Jews

The “founders” of the state of Israel “descend” from what is known as Ashkenazi stock. Ashkenazi Jews are roughly referred to as those Jews whose dialect was German but spoke Yiddish which is an amalgam of Slavic languages like Polish. During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries several million Jews lived in the relatively small geographical area of Eastern Europe. Jews who lived in this area tended to be poor or working class farmers and artisans. Life was precarious and Jews were subjected to the rampant anti-Semitism that emanated from the Russian Empire. Pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe had the effect of driving Jews out of their homes or off their parcel of land. In the late 1800s and early 1900s such sweepingly brutal pogroms caused the untimely deaths of innumerable Jews.

But how did such a vast number of Jews come to dwell in this area? A theory has been postulated by historian Arthur Koestler in his book, *The Thirteenth Tribe*.<sup>11</sup> According to Koestler the Turco-Mongolians converted to Judaism in 740 AD as a means to stave off the attempts made by the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic rulers to convert them to their respective religions. Because of their conversion to Judaism – or at least the assorted rulers, the king as well as his courts’ conversion – it became the state religion of the kingdom. The Khazars lived in a region that was of strategic importance to Byzantium and Persia (as well as tribal invaders like the Magyars and Bulgars). This region constituted an entry point for the Caspian and Black Seas.

From the research of Dunlop and Koestler we can draw the conclusion that the First Crusade of 1096 AD did not lead to the mass migration of Jews to Poland. If such a migration had taken place it would have meant that German Jews (who, along with Muslims, were some of the victims of the First Crusade) made a treacherous journey through the Rhineland on into Eastern Germany and then out. Koestler remarks that, “We are made to realize that the Jewish community in the German Rhineland was numerically small, even before the First Crusade, and had shrunk to even small proportions after having gone through the winepress of the lord.”<sup>12</sup> The Second and Third Crusades, in line with Koestler’s theory, elicited little or no exodus to Poland among German Jews.

Despite all of this, many scholars and historians, continue to insist that the reason as to why Poland was inhabited by so many Jews was by dint of the Crusades. Summing up, Koestler states that the idea of migration from the Rhineland to Poland “is incompatible with the small size of the Rhenish communities, their reluctance to branch out from the Rhine valley towards the east, their stereotyped behavior in adversity, and the absence of references to migratory movements in contemporary chronicles.”<sup>13</sup>

Koestler’s final assessment is that modern Jewry is largely of Caucasian, not Palestinian, origin. Encapsulating his research, Koestler forces us to carefully rethink commonly held assumptions by asserting that:

The mainstream of Jewish migrations did not flow from the Mediterranean across France and Germany to the east and then back again. The stream moved in a consistently westerly direction, from the Caucasus through the Ukraine into Poland and thence into Central Europe. When the unprecedented mass-settlement in Poland came into being, there were simply not enough Jews around in the West to account for it; while in the east a whole nation was on the move to new frontiers.

...the Khazar contribution to the genetic make-up of the Jews must be substantial, and in all likelihood dominant.<sup>14</sup>

If there is any truth in this fashionable assertion, it decidedly demolishes the idea that the bulk of today’s Jews are of Semitic speaking origin. Of course, it has been suggested that not a large enough number of people who were part of the Khazar empire converted to Judaism which makes it difficult to confirm the Khazar hypothesis. Additionally, those arguing this point have stated that the Judaism of the Khazars was at best superficial. The documentation in support of the Khazar speculation is also lacking. One should *not* take our summarization of Koestler’s book as an endorsement of it. In any event, it is a postulation that deserves to be explored further.

### *Sephardic Jews*

Sephardic Jews populated Eastern Spain. During the rule of Andalus they spoke Arabic. Although Jews living in this area had to pay a special tax which was levied upon them, Jews and Muslims co-existed rather peacefully. Indeed, the period between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, is frequently (and not inaccurately) referred to as the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. Jews derived from the Muslims a whole manner of cultural tableau like dress, musical melodies and poetry. We find that in modern discussions of the Middle East there is a tendency to forget to mention that when the Jews were driven out of Spain during the inquisition, Muslims (in greater numbers, in fact) were forced to flee along with them.

Once the Jews were driven out of the region in 1492 they came to speak a language derived from their Roman conquerors. This language is known as Spanish-Ladino and those who spoke this language spread to the Ottoman Empire.

### *Oriental Jews*

The Oriental Jews are often referred to as Sephardic Jews. This amalgamation between the two is not entirely accurate. Oriental Jews did not speak Spanish but rather spoke Arabic. The trick of the Israeli state is to sow divisions between those Jews who descend from Europe and America (Ashkenazi) and those who are from the Mediterranean, North Africa, Egypt or Yemen (Sephardic and Oriental). Oriental Jews are generally from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and so on while, as pointed out above, Sephardic Jews were concentrated in the Mediterranean basin (until their dispersion to the Turkish Empire).

This real social division between Oriental/Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews is further exasperated by the policies of the Israeli state which is, in a sense, based on racism against those deemed as being of inferior “racial” stock (Sephardic/Oriental Jews). Even though roughly 60 percent of Israel is composed of Oriental Jews, the Israeli state and the employing class is made up of Ashkenazi Jews. Although the divisions between Ashkenazi and Oriental/Sephardic Jews are not as pronounced as during the formation and final founding of the state of Israel in 1948, it remains a little spoken fact that this has contributed to furthering class divisions between Palestinians and Jews.

Sephardic/Oriental Jews are in competition for jobs with Arabs. It is apparent that the Arabs are willing to labor for low wages while Sephardic/Oriental Jews have come to despise the Arabs for this. The lines have been drawn in the sand even to the point where Sephardic/Oriental Jews have advocated the out-and-out death of Arabs who are seen as a drain on the economy.

This ethnic stratification among those who make up the economy is a stumbling block to class solidarity. It is so glaringly pronounced that Sephardic/Oriental Jews unite with one another on the basis of their hatred of the Arab worker. One person who inhabits the town of Netivot is quoted as sharply remarking that,

“The Arab has no honor and the Jew does, that’s the problem. With my own hands I would kill all of them, they are animals,” one man says while the others laugh, “their hatred of Jews uniting them in a special manner.” “A good Arab is a dead Arab,” they repeat.<sup>15</sup>

But there is a complexity to the situation that suggests it transcends a racist mindset. Shlomo Swirski, in his outstanding book, *Israel: The Oriental Majority*, intelligently proclaims that:

Orientals did not do these jobs (editor’s note: work in the military government) out of “latent hatred of Arabs;” for many, the jobs meant an opportunity for advancement in a situation in which such opportunities were severely limited. However, for Ashkenazi commanders and administrators, viewing the Orientals as they carried out the task assigned to them from above, it was convenient to attribute the latter’s consciousness to “hatred of Arabs.” Such a stance enabled them to present themselves as having a higher order of humanity than their underlings and as having a monopoly on humane feelings and lofty ideals. It also allowed them to ignore the fact that they were the ones in charge of the policy of control and expropriation.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1970s, however, a group by the name of the Black Panthers came together in an attempt to overcome their own oppression at the hands of the Israeli state. The composition of this group was primarily young rebels who wore the term “black” as a badge of honor. They felt that they, as

Oriental Jews, were treated as outsider blacks (like blacks in the US) by the state of Israel. With this understanding something of a class consciousness began to emerge among those involved. This was smothered when many of the members of the group were offered integration into Israeli society.

#### IV

One may then ask him or herself: Why are you bringing these distinctions to the surface? In our mind, it only makes sense to do so. This conflict is as much based upon the policy of apartheid the Israeli state practices internally as it is based upon its external policy of bulldozing and dynamiting Palestinian dwellings, infrastructure and basic means of life. Oriental/Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews occupy separate spheres within Israeli society. Those who are working class and poor tend to be the Oriental/Sephardic Jews while those who wield positions of institutional authority tend to be Ashkenazi Jews. This is all based upon a mythologized identity which holds that a certain kind of Jew (Ashkenazi) is more connected with his or her ancestry than those Jews (Oriental/Sephardic) who might speak Arabic or exhibit traits associated with Arabic culture.

Not surprisingly, all of this has its mirror image in how capitalism has developed in the US and in Europe. In America the racism of the dispossessed tends not lodged in an unchangeable ideological straight jacket – rather such racism is frequently mired in fearful hostility, and contempt towards “foreigners” who are regarded as a drain on the economy (though it can’t be denied that ideological racism does in fact exist – and is reinforced through institutional levers).

Currently, the Russian Jews, who are being imported into Israel at an alarming rate, are being made use of for their labor. Their immigration into Israel is another lever upon which ethnic hostility is wielded by the Israeli state. Russian Jews’ ethnic origins are considered to be questionable, while simultaneously they are viewed as inferior to the “pure” Ashkenazi Jews who constitute the establishment. In Israel, and throughout America and Western Europe, these divisions are, in effect, sown because it is a way in which these democratic states can perhaps deal with social and economic crisis. With this, the intention is to stabilize such a crisis by having the citizenry rally around the cause of national unity.

*To begin with, we should put an end to the idea that human culture, as disseminated by textbooks, is the product of an orderly and predetermined activity, when it is constructed on the arbitrary and had to agree to follow the general route that routine accorded it. There is absolutely nothing inevitable about the fact that it has reached this or that level, because nothing in its very essence conflicted with its developing, if not freely, then at least under very different constraints. No determinism, valid within its own framework, justifies the aplomb of the majority of ideas that are transmitted from one era to another and onto which are grafted along the way a minimum of original ideas that refrain from transgressing against the earlier ones except in regard to certain details.*

**- Andre Breton, *Arcanum 17*, 1944**

If we are to believe the logic of Western conscience it is imperative for us to think that the Middle Eastern conflict has been blazing on and on since time immemorial. Nothing could be further from the truth. One can't look at the region without examining its past. What's more, one can't look at the hostility between "Jew" and "Arab" without touching mildly on their contacts through the ages.

The modern Middle East is a relatively recent creation. Like those who have largely accepted capitalism as having existed since time immemorial (capitalism is, in fact, only a few centuries old), we are encouraged to think that the hostilities between the two groups dates back to the beginning of time. But reality says something quite opposite.

It could be said that at the end of the First World War the Middle East started to change markedly as the Allied victors – primarily Britain and to a lesser extent France – sought to acquire control of the region in one way or another.<sup>17</sup> Britain had already, as early as 1917, signed a piece known as the Balfour Declaration which intended to support Zionism as a means to help weaken the power the Ottoman empire held over the Middle East. Since the Middle Ages the Ottoman Turks were in control of the countries we now refer to as Iraq and Iran as well as a large swath of territory in that region. Yet why did the Allies, particularly Britain, have their eyes set on this area? All capitalist states are driven to expand; acquiring more colonies, semi-colonies or recolonizing whole regions (as can be seen in Iraq today). Britain was determined to satiate her insatiable strategic ambitions even if that meant betraying the Arabs who were offered independence in 1915 if they agreed to cast off the yoke of Ottoman colonization. Misha Glenny notes in his gargantuan study of the Balkans that:

...the Ottoman Empire ...contained large reserves of oil, especially in the Mosul region (now in northern Iraq), and much territory which both the British and French considered strategically important. So significant were parts of the Empire, that it could not, unlike the territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, be handed over to the locals (who were also, of course, Asiatic and therefore presumed less able to look after themselves than the peoples of Central-and-south-eastern Europe). In order to guide these unschooled regions, the South African Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, helpfully conceived the idea of 'mandates,' whereby the League of Nations would assume sovereignty over a territory on behalf of its people and a specified great power would administer the region.<sup>18</sup>

As regards the idea that Arabs have always been pernicious nationalists hellbent on destroying everyone not like them, many reputable historians have repeatedly argued that Arab nationalism *only* entered the scene in full-force *after* the colonization of the region by the Allies at the conclusion of the First World War. There is something truly mythical (rather than historical), racist and colonialist in statements such as "the Arabic world has never known democracy and it is up to enlightened citizens of the western world to show them how to practice it." This is a particularly ungrounded statement given that the Western powers are directly responsible for the strife occurring in the Middle East at this very moment.

A politically conservative, but historically astute, man like S.D. Goitein, who did an extensive study of the Geniza documents (a trail of papers from the Middle Ages regarding contacts between Jews and Arabs), admits that:

Whatever may be said about the precursors of contemporary Arab nationalism, the fact remains that the present state of the Arab world was mainly created by external factors, beginning with the "Young Turk" revolution of 1908 and particularly aided by the liberation of Arab Asia by the Allied Armies in World War I.

Another consequence of World War I was that the proclamation of the principle of national autonomy by the victors gave the Arab peoples a clear-cut aim: the erection of autonomous national states. Thirdly, during the first global war oil came into prominence as the world's most important fuel, and as the Arab East proved to be a particularly rich oil deposit, political liberation was coupled with bright prospects of almost unlimited economic possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

If one can get past Goitein's illusion that the Arab people were somehow liberated by the Allies during the First World War and that the rich oil deposits would benefit "the people" who inhabited the region (in actuality the oil deposits have *only* been beneficial towards national and international capitalists as well as fat consumers in Western Europe and particularly America), his commentary confirms what we have tried to present.

But it is necessary to back up a bit. If the "Arab" world at the time of the Ottoman Empire had yet to establish their own independent nation-states then how is it even plausible that nationalism existed in the modern form we usually conceive of it? Naysayers always have a fondness for suggesting that Islam is a religion that is more bloodthirsty than Christianity and Judaism combined. As history proves all nationalisms' are inherently bloody, and establishing nation-states of whatever stripe means that heads are cracked and limbs blown off. In this instance, while the various European nation-states engaged in war with one another from 1914-1918, the Middle East hadn't yet been parceled out to the extent to which Europe had.

S.D. Goitein writes that:

Not a single independent state with Arabic as its official language was in existence before World War I. If asked about his affiliations, an inhabitant of Arab Asia of that time would have described himself as a Muslim or a Christian, as a member of such-and-such a tribe or clan, an inhabitant of this-or-that town or village, or as a subject of the Ottoman Sultan, but it would hardly have occurred to him to call himself an Arab.

How far the world at large was unaware of the existence of a potential Arab nation, may be gathered, for example, from Sir Mark Sykes' book dealing with the future of the Ottoman Empire called *The Caliphs' Last Heritage*, which appeared as late as 1915... The author found it necessary to explain in his introduction that Turkey was not as Turkish as Scotland was Scotland, but comprised many peoples such as Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, Jews, Arabs, Turkomans, etc.<sup>20</sup>

Here Goitein is generally correct in his assertions, but it can't be denied that Britain, from the first phases of the First World War, had plans to partition the Middle East between Britain, France and Russia.

From the sphere of tribal or clan relationships there arose modern nationalism. As a reaction against the British Mandate of 1921-22, which allowed for British trusteeship of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish National Home, the ground was firmly laid for national discord. To illustrate the extent of colonialism that took place in this venture, following World War I roughly 90-95 percent of Palestine was inhabited by Palestinian-Arabs. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, the capital flowing from Britain and Europe allowed Zionists to buy land through the Jewish National Fund which effectively displaced nearly 2000 Palestinian families from the land on which they lived and worked.

Given the weight and magnitude of the situation it comes as no surprise that Palestinians united together in nationalist struggle to rid themselves of the British and Zionist menace. But they weren't the only ones to unite with their "ethnic" brethren. Jewish settlers started to become enamored with the idea that capital and land would be best served by Jewish hands alone. Here we see the rise of a Zionism which was angry at the reprisals they experienced as a result of their colonization of the Palestinians. This wouldn't have happened without the push Zionist trade unions as well as the Histadrut – a trade union which preceded the creation of the State of Israel and it is now a state employer – exerted in helping to cement the idea among the Jewish working class that the Arabs were a burden on the economy which was rightfully theirs by writ of the fact that their Jewish brothers bought the land and provided the capital for investment. This whole affair came to loggerheads in 1936 when there was a Palestinian general strike which Jewish workers broke by acting as scab labor.

*He who says "the homeland is only land" is a traitor – the homeland's human.*  
**-Popular Palestinian Song**

The developments in the region followed the course of events logically. Arabs were labeled as uncivilized backward barbarians by the Jews while a virulent strain of anti-Semitism festered within

the Palestinian proletariat who regarded the Jews as tools of the British. Both sides came to lock themselves in the imprisoning shackles of nationalism. One side had the backing of the great imperial powers like Britain while the other was reliant on proven to be unreliable Arab sheikdoms. It is not surprising that the Jewish national movement has to this day been the winner in this conflict. The US, arguably the most powerful nation in the world, contributes a total of \$5.5 billion on an annual basis to help the Israeli state maintain its hegemonic role in the region as a buffer against angry Arabic nationalists who have been bred on a daily diet of hatred and animosity (a logical result of occupation). This desperation is a consequence of being subjected to an established state that is backed by a military, police force and a fair share of the world's nuclear weaponry. In the fenced in lands Palestinians reside in, as well as the suicide bombings that tear apart any hope of mutual co-existence, we see the seeds being sown for the completion of a garrison state that is built on fear of the other (the suicide bombings are a hopeless response to what many Palestinians [and those Arabic people residing in the surrounding area] have, not so surprisingly, come to see as a hopeless situation). Furthermore, as the Palestinian Authority comes to a friendly agreement with the state of Israel to act as the policemen of "their own" people in the occupied territories, it is easy to see that this fear of the other obscures the contradictions inherent in class societies. As far-fetched as it is to discuss the social relationships produced by class society when the whole nature of the conflict is centered on purity of "race," "ethnicity" and "religion," it will only come to an end when the exploited from the area unite on the basis of their own dispossession and oppression. This, by necessity, implies putting an end to the conditions which breed nationalism (capitalism and *all* national state entities). But given the current level of escalation by Israel, through propaganda, and violent action taken against those in the occupied territories (which also drives specific Palestinians to retaliate against innocent civilians), this is a pie-in-the-sky dream.

Taking all of this into account, it is more than plain to see from this brief historical survey that this conflict largely began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as the European powers and Zionist leaders and the founder of Zionism, Theodore Herzl, were fixed on establishing a Jewish National Home in Palestine. This home, according to Herzl and other leading Zionists, would model itself on the pattern of the Western European democracies. How this vision conformed to European imperialism can be readily understood by the storm with which the Zionist colonizers callously transferred with force, in 1948, approximately 700,000 Arabic inhabitants who were then absorbed into surrounding Arab states.<sup>21</sup> Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, of the Labor Party once asserted coldly that, "It was not as though there was Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist."<sup>22</sup>

The turning of the land and Palestinian houses into a hail of desolation and settlements that blight the land closely resembles the process whereby human beings are turned into slaves and exiles. Such a process can be acutely seen in the discovery of the Americas by the Spanish conquistador Christopher Columbus. Upon his arrival, natives were forced to labor for him and his mafia while the land was turned into a vast wasteland.

The cautious reader will ask him or herself: How can it be that *only* with the coming of European imperialism to the scene of the Middle East there suddenly arose "ethnic" animosity? The argument we are making here is not that there was always peace and harmony between Arab and Jew, but that with rise of modern capitalism and the democratic state in Palestine (and the outlying area) the stone was cast for nationalism. To say that the Middle East *was* a land of pristine beauty untouched by foul hands of any sort is like saying that the Balkans prior to the death of Tito was a lush verdant paradise. Both equally false notions take a part of reality and mistake it for the whole. As we will briefly attempt to show, the contacts made between Arab and Jew at various points in time were not static and changed with the shifts of various empires, states and rulers.

But what can generally be stated with a certain amount of assurance is that as the democratic state of Israel arose in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Palestine (and the Middle East itself) was transformed from a relatively primitive "unproductive" region to one that was placed within the orbit of capital accumulation. The ancient Palestinian communal order based on familial, tribal or clan bonds was severed to make way for the democratic state which in turn paved the way for the rise of the private

atomized individual. This necessitated either the dispersal of the Palestinians or pushing their hides into unrewarding jobs. The political architects of Israel chose to found the economic and political structure of their society on the inclusion of the Jews (a specific kind of Jew was, however, favored – the Ashkenazi Jew) and expulsion of those deemed as gentiles (in this case the Palestinians). These supposedly innate divisions were solidified to lunatic proportions and the result is nothing short of logical: mutually hostile groups battling it out with one another.

This development cannot be equated with the Middle East that existed before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## VI

If we turn our attention to the interactions and relations between Arab and Jew before the creation of the modern Middle East we can ascertain that these relations were built upon assimilation of certain value systems (creative symbiosis between the two groups), mutual influence derived from Hellenic culture, conversions from Judaism to Islam or vice versa, mixing with one another sexually (which had the effect of producing anything but a so-called “pure race”) and Roman as well as Persian penetration into these respective “ethnicities.” Not having expert or thorough knowledge of the period dating from the Assyrians to the Romans and Ottomans, we can only make broad generalizations about this time derived from the research we’ve managed to do. Even those who have spent their lives studying the region are not in agreement on the precise details. We make no claims that our account isn’t biased by our own principles and general world outlook.

There is the danger of overgeneralization but we will take that risk by saying that until the cementing of the Russian Empire in Eastern Europe and until the end of the Ottoman Empire following World War I, multiple ethnic groups with different religious persuasions co-existed. The clashes between all groups involved tended to occur during times of war as well as when that specific area was struck with a spate of economic, political or social downturn. In such periods the minority groups bore the brunt of violent death and ugly torture.

A textbook instance of this very conundrum would be the status of the Jews of Poland who were protected by the Polish kings for some time until the Czars had it in their mind that, for strategic reasons, allying with the Cossacks made sense to allow for Russian expansion. A Cossack revolt against the Kingdom of Poland in 1648 (which lasted through 1658) led to the deaths of countless Jews who were regarded by the Cossacks as lickspittles of the Polish feudal lords. Jews, as compensation for their protection by the kings, labored for the Catholic Polish lords.

In the Middle Eastern world, there were times in the Middle Ages when the population at large directed their venom at the rulers’ non-Muslim associates. In an attempt to cool the situation down, the non-Muslim official would face momentary dismissal by the Muslim ruler until hostilities ceased. This was the strategy employed during the reign of the Mamluk’s in Egypt and Syria (1250-1517).<sup>23</sup>

The communal organizations of Jews and Christians also played a role in maintaining something of a balance between the doctrines of the Muslim world, and Christians as well as Jews who didn’t adhere to Muslim religious practices. The synagogue and the church in many instances made sure that the protective contracts agreed upon by Muslim and non-Muslim were adhered to. Additionally, Jews and Christians in positions of authority put effort into supervising the maintenance of general stability between their respective group and the Muslim order.

But if we allow ourselves to go back further in the historical record, it can be highlighted that during (and after) the formation of the Islamic order (630s A.D.) many Muslims regarded Christians and Jews as “Peoples of the Book.” Mohammed, in his effort to knit together a “City of God,” made it known that the Infidels were the pagans – not those Christians or Jews who worshipped the One God. The idea of “Peoples of the Book” has steadily withered away through the years. After over a century of colonization of the Middle East by followers of Christianity and Judaism, it is no a real surprise that many Arabs have come to see devotees of either of these two religions as Godless infidels. The Zionist Ahad Ha’am – who retained a modicum of concern for the Palestinians until the end of his life in 1927 – remarked in a 1891 essay, “The Truth From Palestine” that:

One thing that we certainly should have learned from our past and present history...is not to create anger among the local population against us...We have to treat the local population with love and respect, justly and rightly. And what do our brethren in the Land of Israel do? Exactly the opposite!... They behave toward the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, infringe upon their boundaries, hit them shamefully without reason, and even brag about it. Our brethren are right when they say that the Arab honors only those who show valor and fortitude; but this is the case only when he feels that the other side has justice on his side. It is very different when the Arab thinks that his opponent’s actions are iniquitous and unlawful; in that case he may keep his anger to himself for a long time, but it will dwell in his heart and in the long run he will prove himself to be vengeful and full of retribution.<sup>24</sup>

A religious-humanist like Ahad Ha'am is concerned in this essay about the implications of treating the Palestinians as nonentities. Indeed, Ahad Ha'am implicated the Zionist colonists in an enterprise that, to him, was wholly out of line with the teachings of the prophets.

As Ilan Halevi reveals in his *A History of the Jews: Ancient and Modern* the influence of the prophets runs through the Islamic faith as well:

Between the Islamic state and Judaism, there was a sort of exchange, which went back to the idea held by Islam of its own relationship to the law of Moses and the impact of this idea on the behavior of the Jews themselves. It was a history in which the Israelites, an old Arab tribe, had the privilege of the first Revelation, laying the remote foundations of the City of God. It was the very manner in which the old aristocracies survived that made the abandonment of Judaism unthinkable, just as it was the survival of clanic modes of organization that made it useless...this wonderment (of amalgamation, editor's note) did not last long, and does not fully do justice to the ambiguous and complex relationship that came between Judaism and Arab Islam and between Muslims and Jews. When insecurity came, it would become possible, as under al-Hakim in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, to flee to Egypt and go and take refuge with Basil II in Byzantium. Yet it was under the decadent protection of the Ottomans that the Jews of the Arab world experienced the longest period of peace and security, if not of prosperity, in their history.<sup>25</sup>

The historical record is also telling in the realm of Hellenic influence on the elaboration of both Judaism and Islam. Far from being "unsullied" by the paganism inherent in those cultures of antiquity that worshipped nature (usually represented in nature gods who were assigned different functions) rather than the one God, Hellenism can be seen in the arts, philosophy and sciences that have come to define Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Plato's dream of the philosopher kings rule over society was made manifest by the rule of a theocratic priestly caste. The Romans became masters of this game.

It could be easily said that certain ethical notions that permeate the whole Judaic faith were developed as a response to a changing world. With the exile and years of persecution under the Babylonians and Assyrians, the religion tended to be transformed depending upon where Jewish refugees set foot. New worldly ideas were developed and synthesized as Jews came into contact with changing new conditions.

The German Social Democrat, Karl Kautsky, allows us to broadly conclude that the status of Jewish exile in antiquity was responsible for the development of intellectual and mathematical formulations. Ahistorical racists (both non-Jewish and Jewish alike) would like us to believe that the reason for Jewish ingenuity historically and in the here and now is because of different biology or genes. The historical trajectory of the Jews says something that contradicts racial notions of inferiority or superiority, "With the growth of trade there must have come a growth in the sharpness of their intelligence, of mathematical sense, of the capacity for reflection and abstraction."<sup>26</sup> Exile, according to Kautsky, forced many Jews to become involved in trade.

The Babylonians exerted a transparent hand in how Judaism emerged. Kautsky alleges:

The priesthood of Judea borrowed the pretensions of the Babylonian hierarchy, and also adopted many of their religious notions. A whole series of legends in the Bible are of Babylonian origin: for example, the creation of the world, Paradise, the Fall, the Tower of Babel, the Deluge.<sup>27</sup>

Societies can't be reduced to merely inert forces that are not subject to the whims of shifting empires, kingdoms, nation-states and capital expansion and contraction. Hegel's idea of history as unfolding and evolving in dialectical interaction – in which development, growth, synthesis and decay are seen as interconnected webs – is therefore useful for our purposes.

The worship of the Virgin Mary among Christians is said to stem from Egyptian sources. To quote Kautsky again:

Osiris was represented on earth by the bull Apis. Now as Osiris himself had been conceived by his mother without the assistance of a male god, so his earthly representative had to be born of a virgin heifer without the assistance of a bull. Herodotus tells us that the mother of Apis was impregnated by a sunray; according to Plutarch it was a moonray.<sup>28</sup>

Just as the Egyptian pharaohs hover over Christian mythology, Greek myths like those of Mount Olympus are drenched with Egyptian imagery and allegory.

Hegel, in addressing the Greek world in his *Philosophy of History*, spells out that in ancient Greece it was impossible to tell who precisely the “original” Greeks were. The multitude of tribes that came to the land surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea became virtually indistinguishable from one another. Of course, each tribe made different contributions to the elaboration of Greek society. But once these various nomadic tribes settled down and transformed their nomadic life into a sedentary one, they began to develop commerce and trade. In order to continue to survive as city-states it was necessary to erect borders and fortresses to protect surplus and property from “barbarian” invaders. And this, by implication, gave way to national identity.

To develop this argument further, there was, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a turn to the Orient among a fair amount of European Jews. The effects of this desire to get in touch with the East are revealing. We can see a pronounced Moorish/Jewish synthesis in the construction of Jewish synagogues. Indeed, the first Jewish prime minister in Britain, Benjamin Disraeli, was quite fond of integrating the mystery of the Orient into his novel, *Tancred*.

In summary, it would require a fuller study to do justice to the syncretism that permeated the ancient Near and Middle Eastern world. Suffice to say we have presented this cursory history in an effort to encourage the reader to think deeper about the problems produced by historical relativism – which is, in our mind, a debased and crude reading of the historical process.

## VII

*Every step we take on earth  
brings us to a new world.  
Every foot supported  
on a floating bridge.*

*And I know that there is no  
straight road in this world -  
only a giant labyrinth of intersecting crossroads*

*And steadily our feet  
keep walking & creating  
- like enormous fans -  
these roads in embryo.*

**-Federico Garcia Lorca, "Floating Bridges"**

In this essay we tried not only to examine the myths surrounding the conflict in the Middle East but we also made an effort to elaborate on a specific historical method. Whatever one might think of Hegel's queasy notion of the world spirit guiding human thought and activity toward historical unity, his *Philosophy of History* presents an important guidepost for a lucid interpretation of the Middle East (both ancient and modern) and the history of the world.

Contrary to Hegel, however, lived history is consciously created by human activity. The idea that the world spirit is responsible for human activity or inactivity can be used to justify anything, for better or worse. Such a road is not one we want to travel down. In the worst of cases such a Hegelian formulation has led to a pronounced wait-and-see approach among revolutionaries who are constantly waiting for the golden moment to do anything (it is as if all of the objective conditions need to be there before we can try to raise consciousness and discuss with others). In still a worse case scenario Hegel is induced during the course of struggles that are nakedly nationalist or reactionary because it is virtually believed that the world spirit will iron out the reactionary kinks in such situations (in other words, the world spirit will cast off lingering illusions in nationalism and the like). In any case, the best element we have found in Hegel's *Philosophy of History* is his focus on the *universal* history of humankind.

In our age there are number of historians and cultural critics who have replaced what is often referred to as a Western centered historical framework for an Oriental one, indigenous one or whatever methodology falls outside the pale of the "West." We have tried to avoid this false dualistic conundrum. On the contrary, we have posited that history is *universal* in that human beings from different societies were more often than not driven together by various circumstances which effected their own respective culture, for better or worse. When looked at in such a way it makes more sense to discuss a cross-cultural process whereby world history was shaped by syncretism, not by a singular entity – as multiculturalists and relativists would like us to believe.<sup>29</sup> As we already briefly made note of, from around the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 13<sup>th</sup> century cultural life in the Muslim world – which extended from Andalus to parts of the modern Middle East – flourished. This was in marked contrast to Europe which, at that time, was not nearly at such a level of cultural development. This factor alone provides a powerful counterpoint to those who suggest that Western Europe has always been at the center of the universe. What can't be forgotten is that the Ottoman Empire (which was a class society where the dominant religion was Islam) ruled large amounts of territory for a few hundred years.' After the First World War the Ottoman Empire was neutralized and Western Europe started to gain an upper hand in Middle Eastern politics.

Which brings us to how the past and present coalesce into a vast series of events that seem outside of our reach. We are accustomed to believing that humans have always been subject to the whims of despots and masters because such men write history. Their personal testimonies of battles, and the decorative medals, peoples as well as lands they've "won," are testaments to a historical-social time which is colored by their exploits.

But if we step back for a moment we can also see that the victors' history is not fixed into the genetic make up of humans. Humans are still capable of rebelling against their situation, and with that rebellion establishing a free society. There have been (and continue to be) ruptures, so to speak, which broke (and break) through the supposed rockhard stability of state and class rule. Tentative as the revolutions (and near revolutions) were which ended the First World War, such upheavals posed a threat because history would have been snatched from the sinister clutches of the bourgeoisie and grasped directly by humanity as a whole. From out of nowhere, in a society which was said to have attained a solidly stable standard of living, France was breathtakingly seized in May 1968 by 10 million workers (who, on this score, seized their own history for a moment). May '68 belied the myth that there is no discontent lying underneath consumer capitalism.

The idea that what is presented before on a daily basis is eternal and the final resting place for all human potential and possibility is part of what makes the current reality so much more pervasive and frozen in time. Revolution, quite to the contrary, bubbles to the surface at points only to be crushed while a few years down the road humanity breathes once again in an effort to grasp history for itself. The crossroads at which we have yet to cross are not inevitable pathways to a sane and rational world. We could as easily perish tomorrow in a nuclear holocaust but the important thing to remember is that history isn't predestined.

Because humanity is capable of inflicting wanton cruelty on itself, and amassing mountains of skulls on the landscape, does not imply that generous acts and deeds are nonexistent. Such generosity and reciprocity can be experienced in close friendships in which the self and other merge into a unity and bond – however temporary those moments may be. But if this relationship was extended to the broader world in the course of transforming that very world, new ways of being and relating could emerge. Such an emergence and flowering of potential would affect a whole new sensibility. A sensibility whereby cruelty and self-interest would integrate with love and reciprocity would thereby see the creation of full, developing human beings.

*There can be no question of a new humanism until the day when history, rewritten after discussion by all peoples and limited to just one version, will agree to make its subject all of mankind, as far as documentation permits, and to take account completely objectively of past deeds and gestures without any special regard for the land where so and so lives and for the language he speaks.*

**-Andre Breton, *Arcanum 17*, 1944**

The Middle Eastern conflict illustrates the fundamental argument we have taken pains to put forth. What differs is that in the Middle East fear and hatred of the other has reached a level of enmity that, by the looks of it, is impossible to redress. The window that opened up at the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 – whereby a number of Israeli citizens were outraged at what the state did in their alleged name – was tightly shut in a relatively short period of time.<sup>30</sup> Yet because that window closed violently does not mean that it is incapable of opening again. In Israel there have been a small, but growing, minority of refuseniks. Their courage in refusing to fight the state's war against the Palestinians should be commended and encouraged.

As the days go by the Middle East reads as a neverending apocalypse that scars the minds, bodies and landscape of the whole world. Unlike those storybooks of parable and fantasy we read as children – where truly anything seems possible – the apocalypse that certain Christian fundamentalists, Zionists and Islamic fundamentalists portend necessitates that we lock ourselves in the same roles, conventions and inactivity we have grown comfortable in maintaining. When we talk to one another based upon our common humanity – rather than in exclusive terms of what separates us from one another – and with our talk establish points of class solidarity, there might then be a basis for collective action. The cycle of inhumanity that has descended upon the Middle East like a plague

must be able to see and act beyond its whirlwind of death and destruction. But is it possible? No one truly knows. There are no reassuring guarantees that Arab and Jew will mend their differences. However, in light of it all, there is a cross-cultural human synthesis which can possibly act as a powerful catalyst for social transformation in the Middle East (and the broader world). We may never see such a transformation in the short glimpse of time we have on this earth, but the modest tracks on which we step can potentially influence future generations to continue the fight. A minimum of promise resides here, and if we succeeded in our short historical survey, we have shown that there is something of a continuum in human history that might impact the Middle East, and thereby contribute to reshaping it in a libertarian direction. As in a whole host of playful and imaginative folktales, the future depends upon our own ability to shed our resounding spell of normalcy, and henceforth relate to one another in stupendously new ways. Yet as Andre Breton noted in his powerful prose piece entitled *Arcanum 17*, "It is necessary to state that we see nothing dawning to announce this truce among all these unreasonable passions, a truce out of which less cruel times could emerge." We agree.

*Thanks to M.K. for the useful editorial suggestions and comments on this article.*

<sup>1</sup> The word Semitic has its origins in modern socio-biology. For instance, Ernest Renan – who was a scholar of some import – thought of “Semitic” peoples as inferior to Indo-Germanic peoples. Racialist notions such as this tell us absolutely *nothing* about how societies emerged, how they became altered with time and how some societies were even abandoned. In times of war and social crisis these ideas are helpful in that ruling institutions can liken existing social strife to “inferior” peoples with an “inferior” genetic make-up.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Arthur Koestler’s *The Thirteenth Tribe* (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> The reference in this passage is to Stinas’ agitation in 1920-1921 in the second largest city of Greece, Thessaloniki. Stinas was a dissident member of the Greek Communist Party and a socialist militant throughout Greece for the course of his life. Unfortunately, his *Memoirs* have yet to be published in book form in English. For those with internet access a rough English translation is available at: <<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/3909/stinas>>.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Novick’s *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999) is a distinguished (and controversial) examination of the role the Holocaust plays in US consciousness and world politics. The reader is also encouraged to read Gulie Ne’eman Aram’s searching, *America, its Jews and the Rise of Nazism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1963) pointedly appraises the trial of Eichmann and the reservations she has regarding its flawed proceedings, but she still believes in the ability of politics to hammer out the “right” verdict under different circumstances. We would argue that the Nuremberg trials, the Eichmann trial and the trial of Milosevic will not stop similar atrocities from happening again. In such “trials” the truth is used by one group of mass murderers in order to judge another group of mass murderers.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). A valuable demolition job on Goldhagen’s ill-conceived work is presented in Norman G. Finkelstein and Ruth Bettina Birn’s *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Raul Hillberg confirms this in his impeccably researched *The Destruction of European Jews* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985). The reader is also urged to examine Robert O. Paxton’s *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004). Paxton’s study is a careful and stimulating historical analysis of fascism. This book should be read by all serious revolutionaries.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, “A New Serbia...If you rebuild it,” *The New Republic*, May 17, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> *Wildcat*, “Yugoslavia: From Wage Cuts to War,” Summer 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Also consult D.M. Dunlop’s *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).

<sup>12</sup> Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Noam Chomsky’s *Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel and the Palestinians* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1983), pp. 122-123

<sup>16</sup> Shlomo Swirski, *Israel: The Oriental Majority* (London: Zed Books, 1989), pp. 54-55.

<sup>17</sup> For a provocative and thorough assessment of the “founding” of the modern Middle East, the reader is advised to consult David Fromkin’s *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Avon Books, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804-1999* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999), pp. 378-379.

<sup>19</sup> S.D. Goiten, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through the Ages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), pp. 215-216.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>21</sup> Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle*, p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1991), pp. 118-119. Hourani’s book is a sweeping account of the development of the Arabic world from the pre-Islamic period to the late 1980s. His book is a valuable general history.

<sup>24</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism* (New York: 1981), pp. 123-124. An engaging examination of the emergence of modern Zionism is in Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri’s *The Land of Promise: A Critique of Political Zionism* (New Brunswick: North American, 1977).

<sup>25</sup> Ilan Halevi, *A History of the Jews: Ancient and Modern* (London: Zed Books, 1987), pp. 76-77. Halevi’s history is what sparked the initial inspiration to write this article. His study is splendid. Another great history can be found in Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity* (New York: S.A. Russell, 1953), pp. 189-190. This is an important work that sheds much light on how Christianity and Judaism emerged from a multitude of sources.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>29</sup> Equally as worrying is the trend towards post-modernism, relativism and structuralism (and its corollary, post-structuralism) among radicals. The defining (and unifying) tableau that runs through the way most people (radicals included) think about the world is not how various parts relate to the whole, but how the parts are transitory and not *part* of any clearly definable whole. Discontinuity has been invoked in contrast to continuity; “random happenings” in history have replaced the historical process; and totality has been subjected to ill-reputed rejection in favor of particularity and “difference.” In the jargon popularized by post-modernism and relativism, power, in and of itself, is a barbed fence that no one should cross. The conclusion that can be drawn from such a notion – that is, to be sure, fuzzier than a cotton ball – is that all social struggles are struggles for power and because of this it should be avoided like the plague. The problem is not power *as such* but *who* has the social power. If one jettisons the necessity to retake our own power against the power of the bourgeoisie, one is merely accepting reality as it is.

<sup>30</sup> Novick’s remarks in *The Holocaust in American Life* in relation to the Lebanon War are worth quoting. According to Novick, Prime Minister Begin’s use of the Holocaust to legitimize the invasion “tended to discredit it. Israel’s previous wars had had the wholehearted backing of the Israeli population. In 1982 the country was deeply divided, and many Israelis thought Begin’s Holocaust obsession had led to an ill-fated venture. An article in the *Jerusalem Post* concluded by observing that the war’s epitaph would be “Here lies the international stature and moral integrity of a wonderful people. Died of a false analogy.” (p. 161).”