

Jews and the Left: The Rise and Fall of a Political Alliance

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Author: Philip Mendes

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Reviewer: Stan Nadel

Philip Mendes has provided us with a truly comprehensive study of the historical relationship between Jews and leftist politics. As an Australian he of course covers his own land, as well as the major countries of Jewish residence over the past two centuries, but he also covers nearly every country where Jews have lived, some 37 according to one count – and he does it in just under 300 pages of dense text. Compressing so much material into such a short book makes for hard going at some points, but his penetrating and fair analytical sections keep it from becoming just an outline of the subject despite an encyclopedic scope that makes it an essential reference work for anyone interested in the subject – and especially for anyone considering doing any research in the area. Indeed, for researchers the 40-page bibliography that follows the text is invaluable. The vast majority of the references are to English language works and Mendes has missed very little in this language. His bibliography also includes 11 items in French, nine in German, six in Russian, two in Dutch/Flemish, and one each in Yiddish and Hebrew. Clearly it leaves out a lot of material in these and other languages, but it is still an enormous achievement in and of itself. To put it clearly, anyone who wants to get a good overview of the subject without reading several hundred books can do so by reading this one.

One of the book's greatest strengths is that Mendes avoids one of the main pitfalls of works about the relationships between Jews and the Left. He is judicious and non-partisan with no ideological axe to grind. He doesn't set out to demonstrate that the Left has been essentially anti-Jewish from its origins to the present, as do some right wing and Zionist ideologues. Nor does he engage in leftist denial about anti-Jewish and Antisemitic strains in the relationship. Instead he provides clear and convincing analyses of why leftism appealed to so many Jews in different times and places and why that appeal has diminished in recent decades, along with explanations of what portion of Jews (and of what sort) supported leftist causes –generally minorities and often tiny minorities.

Before describing the book in further detail I need to add a minor caveat. When Mendes deals with some issues where I have particular expertise I have noted some problems. When dealing with the early history of the left in the US before the 1880s, for example, he misses the important contributions of Jewish left-wing activists who migrated to the United States from German speaking lands and who were often leaders of the first mass socialist movement in the United States. This is a relatively minor matter as far as the work as a whole is concerned, but it points to the weakness created by his need to rely on secondary sources that may sometimes be incomplete, misleading or simply wrong. Noting these problems in a few areas where I am

sufficiently expert, I have to suspect that there may be similar problems with other areas covered. Of course no single individual could possibly have a thorough expertise in all the areas covered by this comprehensive work, so this is not a criticism of Mendes.

Viewing all of this history from Down Under sometimes leads Mendes to see the big picture better than other analysts looking at it from Europe, North America, or Israel, and his conclusions are greatly enriched by this perspective. But sometimes his historical or geographic distance does lead to some misjudgments – as when he describes Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin as major leaders of the opposition to America's war in Vietnam when they were in fact mostly media figures with a great public presence, but only a tiny following. Again, this may indicate further problems of this sort, but that is inevitable in a work of this scope that deals with so many individuals and organizations in so many countries – and large numbers of both are included in this book.

Mendes begins with an introduction that carefully defines his use of the terms Jews and Left and provides a sophisticated discussion of the Jewishness of Jewish radicals that is exemplary. He also deals with the notion beloved by Antisemites and many Jewish leftists that most Jews were generally sympathetic to the Left, something he comes back to repeatedly throughout the book. He then goes on to a systematic treatment of the relationship between Jews and the Left.

He starts with a chapter on the 'beginnings of the Jewish attraction to the Left' that opens with Enlightenment calls for Jewish emancipation and continues through the Jewish involvement in early Russian radicalism. En route he covers the French Revolution, the revolutions of 1848 and liberal nationalists across Europe, early socialist movements, and developments in Russia from the Decembrists to the People's Will.

The next chapter covers the obverse, the attitudes to Jews of socialists. He deftly explores early socialist Antisemitism between 1843 and 1917 (including that of Marx, Lassalle, Bakunin, Fourier, and Proudhon), before going on to socialists' support for Jewish rights that predominated after 1900 (sometimes from the same people just dealt with as Antisemites – as with Marx it was possible to be prejudiced against Jews and still support their getting equal rights). What is particularly striking here is that Mendes provides a clear analytical distinction between leftist support for assimilation and opposition to Jewish nationalism (both Zionist and Bundist) on the one hand and Antisemitism on the other (a distinction that some other historians of the subject have sometimes missed) while providing something of a country by country overview. He goes on to discuss the same dynamics for social democrats and other non-Communist leftists between 1917 and 1967 as they became more focused on opposing Antisemitism when faced with fascist movements between the world wars and during the Second World War and the creation of Israel. Once again the country by country discussion and the detailed consideration of the politics of specific individuals as well as groups is exemplary. Mendes then does the same for the Communist Left in various countries and the Soviet Union from 1917–1991, covering the nuances and the twists and turns of Communist politics as Communists fluctuated between defending Jewish rights, utilizing Antisemitic themes, and playing the leading opponent of Nazi Antisemitism (except during 1938–41); between condemning Zionism, supporting the creation of Israel, and engaging in murderous purges to extirpate Zionism in Eastern Europe; and finally moving to a more or less open promotion of Antisemitism that led to the withdrawal of most of the remaining Jewish members from Communist parties outside the Soviet Bloc. Mendes follows this with another section on the non-Communist Left after 1967 tracing the increasing disenchantment with Israel and its policies that has grown into widespread anti-Israel and anti-Zionist sentiment on the non-Communist Left. Mendes argues that this is still generally not Antisemitic, but it has led to an increasing tendency to ignore Antisemitism and even to deny its existence as long as it is given a fig leaf as anti-Zionism. But he doesn't ignore the marginal Leftists who he demonstrates cross the line into real Antisemitism, instead he provides names and unmistakable examples. Indeed, he provides a penetrating discussion of when anti-Zionism becomes Antisemitism.

In the next chapter Mendes moves on to a similarly thorough discussion of the history of the relationship between socialism, Zionism and Israel, again distinguishing between Communist and non-Communist

groups and adding Trotskyism to the mix. He makes it clear that while early socialists, including Bundists and Communists all opposed Zionism it was on class based anti-nationalist grounds and not from hostility to Jews – and that their opposition softened after the large scale pogroms that followed the First World War. Even in the Soviet Union, where Zionism was suspect from early on, Poale Zion was allowed to operate until 1928, and it was only after 1929 that the Communists turned solidly against Zionism. Of course widespread Arab support for the Soviet Union's Nazi enemies while Jews were solidly anti-Nazi led to a reconsideration of this policy during the Popular Front and the wartime alliance with the West. Social democrats, especially younger ones, were often sympathetic to Zionism between the wars, and Poale Zion was admitted to the Socialist International. Mendes covers the Communist *volte face* over Israel in the 1940s and 1950s well, including national differences. The Antisemitic wave associated with the purges that included the Slansky trials and the Doctors' Plot was the main turning point in the Communists' deepening anti-Israel, anti-Zionist campaigns that extended with greater or lesser intensity from then until the present. But Mendes does show that even as they were increasingly hostile to 'Zionism', most Communist parties before 1967 still stood behind Israel's right to exist. Mendes also traces the increasing opposition to Israel as Third Worldism took hold on the non-Communist Left. He follows this with a fine analysis of Trotsky's changing views and the development of Trotskyism's anti-Zionism after Trotsky's murder, providing something of a country by country analysis. He finishes the chapter with an analysis of changing trends and increasing opposition to Israeli policies since 1967 and the ways in which opposition to Israeli policies has tended to slide into opposition to Israel tout court – and why that has happened.

In chapter four Mendes examines the history of Jewish involvement in the Left since 1890 with detailed country by country analyses that discuss the proportions of Jews in leftist organizations vs the proportions of Jews supporting leftist movements (both Communist and non- or anti-Communist), looking at why that was the case and why it changed over different times and places. One of the great strengths of this work is that he ranges far beyond the usual examples and includes South Africa, half-a-dozen Latin American countries, several Arab and North African countries, Iran and even some Asian leftist movements. The analysis is penetrating and I'm afraid my major criticism here is that it is too short at a mere 90 pages.

In a volume devoted to the relationship between Jews and the Left it isn't unreasonable to include an analysis of the Antisemitic myth of 'Judeo-Communism'. Mendes devotes an entire chapter to the subject with his usual clarity of analysis. This is followed by a chapter analyzing the decline of the Jewish Left alliance, another on the continuing prominence of left-wing Jews since the Second World War, which continues into the present even as the broader Jewish-Leftist alliance has declined. And then Mendes devotes a last chapter before his conclusions to the issue of left-wing Jewish critics of Zionism and Israel ranging from early theoretical opposition to Zionism to contemporary Jewish anti-Israel activism.

The last point I would make is that at £65/US\$95 this book is regrettably rather expensive and will be beyond the budget of many of those who would appreciate it. At the very least there should be a copy in every university library so that it will be available for as many potential readers as possible.

The author is pleased to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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