'Zionism, Nationalism and Revolutionary Socialism: The Radical Left and the Colonial Model in Israel/Palestine'.

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Zionism, Nationalism and Revolutionary Socialism:  
The Radical Left and the Colonial Model in Israel/Palestine  
(draft, April 2008)

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Introduction

Seventy years ago, a young Palestine-born Jewish activist, writing under the pseudonym L. Rock, published two articles on British Policy and the Jewish-Arab conflict.1 He evaluated the relations between British imperialism, the Arab national movement and the Zionist movement, arguing that the British policy on Palestine was based on “a system of divide and rule”. The British government incited “national hatreds between the two peoples in the country in order to assure itself the position of arbitrator”. The feudal Arab leadership and the Zionist movement benefited from this policy, as it strengthened the support of the masses for nationalist leaders and hampered efforts “to bring about an understanding between the workers of both peoples”. The basic needs of Jewish workers – for immigration and settlement on the land – did not contradict “the real necessities of the Arab masses”, but due to British provocations the Arabs were “made to see their national oppressors in the Jews”. Their national feelings were channelled against Jews, in support of feudal leaders, rather than against the real enemy – the British.2

In a follow-up article, Rock went on to argue that “feudal elements” among the Palestinian-Arab population feared “the modernisation of Palestinian society by the Jews”, which would lead to their own destruction, while the Arab capitalist elements took part in the struggle because of “their exclusive tendencies and their competition with the Jews”.3 The Arab masses themselves faced “a basic conflict” between their interests in national and social emancipation and British rule. Their national opposition to Zionism was “absolutely progressive”, due to Zionism’s exclusivist tendencies (boycott of Arab labour and produce), but in following the lead of the feudal leadership they played into the hands of the Zionist movement. Only an internationalist leadership could separate the progressive Arab nationalist sentiments from the reactionary anti-Jewish form they tended to take, as well as fight the Zionist chauvinist tendencies among Jews.

Zionism itself was “a nationalist reactionary conception” because its policy of Conquest of Labour (using only Jewish workers in Jewish-owned enterprises) led to national competition between workers at the expense of class solidarity. The Zionist movement was opposed to the independence of Palestine and to other forms of political democracy, as long as Jews were a minority in the country. In that, it allied itself with imperialism. The Jewish masses themselves were not inherent allies of imperialism, however. Unlike whites in South Africa, they were “no thin, privileged stratum representing the exploiting interests of the Motherland”. In other words, they could be won to a progressive cause if the right policies were adopted.

Rock outlined several differences between Jewish workers in Palestine and white workers in South Africa: Jews made up more than half of the entire working class of Palestine, whereas in South Africa whites were only 20% of the working population. Jews were skilled and unskilled, as were Arabs, while in South Africa white workers were for the most part skilled and “natives” were common labourers. Whites in South Africa were “a thin ‘aristocratic’ upper crust”, paid
five times as much as natives, while in Palestine the Jewish workers were a class. South African whites enjoyed democratic political rights and the natives were “suppressed colonial slaves”. In Palestine “both Jews and Arabs are oppressed by an alien government and are deprived of any kind of democratic rights”. Unlike white South Africans, Jews were not privileged in matters of budget expenditures, municipal administration, and labour legislation.

In comparison to other settler groups living under colonial conditions, the Palestine Jewish community presented a unique case. On the one hand, its existence did not depend “upon the exploitation and oppression of the Arab masses”. This created a potential for solidarity with the indigenous population. However, unlike ‘normal’ immigrant communities it aspired to become a majority and establish its own state in the new country. This nationalist quest put it in opposition to democracy and independence for Palestine, and set it against the wishes of the Arab population. Jewish-Arab relations thus became a conflict between two mutually exclusive national movements. Under these conditions, the only solution possible was “on the basis of the struggle against Zionism, against Arab national exclusivism and anti-Jewish actions, against imperialism, for the democratisation of the country and its political independence.”

Rock’s analysis was critical of Zionism and British imperialism, but it had one crucial feature that set it apart from other left-wing perspectives. It looked at the Jewish community and its relations with the Arab population in national terms, and did not regard the conflict between the two groups as colonial in nature. It thus refrained from depicting the Jewish settlement project as illegitimate in its entirety, though many of its specific practices were opposed. This approach – and particularly the contrast with South Africa drawn in the articles – gave rise to a critical response from some South African activists.

These activists, using the name Workers Party of South Africa (Fourth International), and writing in their magazine *The Spark*, focused on the “fundamental” issue of “the progressive revolutionary struggle of a colonial people against imperialism”. In their view, Zionism and colonial rule were inseparable: “British imperialism took up the Zionist cause and Zionism became a servant of British imperialism”. Zionist settlement “must be at the expense of the native Arab population” (italics in the original), since “any colonial development under imperialism means the enslavement, oppression and exploitation of the native population.” It was not different in essence from white colonial settlement in South Africa: it was motivated by the same quest for “cheap native labour”, the same policy of “grabbing, of squeezing out the native population from the land, and so the production of a landless peasantry as a reservoir of cheap labour”, the same “greed for more territory”, the same “white, civilized labour policy”.

Given that Palestine Jews seemed united behind Zionism, there was little wonder that “the Arabs should come to the conclusion that all Jews in Palestine are Zionists and therefore their enemies”. Only when Jewish workers “first break with their chauvinistic leaders, who have chained them to the chariot of Zionism-imperialism”, would Arab workers be able to “free themselves from the influence and leadership of the equally chauvinistic effendis and mullahs”. In this conflict, the moral and political burden was on the Jewish community, to prove that it did not oppose the Arab quest for national liberation. It was not a matter of two national communities with equally legitimate but competing claims – as Rock argued – but of a colonial-type conflict, in which an indigenous Arab group struggled to free itself from British colonial rule that was buttressed by an immigrant Jewish settler group.

In his rejoinder, Rock agreed that the Palestinian Arab national movement was “essentially an anti-imperialist movement”, but asserted that Palestine could not become independent unless “a
unification of the Arab and Jewish masses takes place”. However, Jews would not take part in the struggle if the Arab camp remained unified. Separating the Arab masses from the feudal and bourgeois anti-Jewish leadership was crucial. A genuine liberation struggle had to be waged against the British, not the Jews. Progressive elements within the Jewish population could be won to the anti-imperialist cause, as Jewish workers represented “by their objective interests, an integral part of the general working class”; they were not a thin aristocratic layer aligned to the ruling class like white South African workers. The toiling masses of both groups had to be liberated from the influence of nationally exclusionary leaderships: “Internationalist socialism in Palestine is the only force that can…eliminate Jewish and Arabian antagonism, and link the national liberation movement of the Arabs with the struggle of the Jewish masses for the right to their existence in the country and their growth through immigration.”

The equation between the two national movements made by Rock was the heart of the debate. The Spark group rejected that: Arabs alone were leading a progressive anti-imperialist struggle; Jews were openly reactionary in their opposition to independence and democratization, and were interested only in establishing their own state. Socialists had to support the Arab national movement in its quest for independence. Jews could gain a place for themselves only by abandoning Zionism and supporting the Arab struggle (though that was unlikely to happen). For Rock, in contrast, Jews and Arabs were internally diverse groups (not wholly progressive or reactionary), and the way forward was to incorporate legitimate demands of progressive elements within each group, and remove the reactionary leaderships of both.

Although neither side to the debate discussed South Africa in detail, it is clear that they held very different ideas about its relevance. For The Spark, the Palestine condition was essentially the same as that of South Africa, and all other colonial situations. The solution was the same for both: unconditional support for the native movement as a force fighting colonial oppression and no concession to settler political demands. For Rock, Palestine was different and unique. With both national groups being oppressed by the imperial power, they were potentially in solidarity with one another. Jews were not essentially an ally of imperialism and capitalist rule as whites were in South Africa. Hence, rather than being vilified they should be recruited to the struggle – at the cost of meeting some of their demands, such as free immigration to the country.

In various ways, this debate continues to rage today, although the historical circumstances have changed. Beyond the specificity of the South African situation, whether the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is best seen in colonial or national terms is a key question for the left in Israel/Palestine. Whether there is a ‘model’ indeed that can serve as a guide in analyzing and resolving the conflict is another such question. In the following sections I discuss various positions regarding these issues with a focus on two distinct but related historical cases: The Palestinian Communist Party during the British mandate period, and the Matzpen movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

In neither of these cases does South Africa feature directly, but they frequently refer to relevant theoretical issues: the nature of Zionist settlement, the class and national character of the Jewish community in Israel/Palestine, the social and political relations between the settler and indigenous communities, what ‘model’ of colonial rule is applicable to the case, and how does it compare with other cases (including but not restricted to South Africa), what kind of solutions to the conflict are possible, and so on. Because the discussion is more historical in nature, most of it deals with a period when South Africa was not central to debates about colonialism and national conflict. It was only with the demise of other blatant forms of racial and colonial rule, in the late 1970s, that South Africa and apartheid came to epitomise such rule, by which time most of the development discussed here had taken place already.
Having spent its entire existence in the shadow of the Zionist-Arab conflict over the political future of the country, the Palestinian Communist Party was shaped by the same forces that shaped the conflict itself: British imperial policies, Zionist ideology in the Eastern European Diaspora and settlement practices in Palestine, Arab nationalism, and the relations between all these. In particular, at various intensified conflict periods it found itself torn apart by the pressures of competing nationalist movements. At the same time, like all Soviet-aligned parties, its policies were also shaped by the turns and shifts of the international Communist movement and the factional struggles within the Russian political leadership. Both local and international forces need to be taken into account when discussing the Party’s evolution during the period.

In its early stages, the Party attempted to reconcile lingering attachment to its roots in the Zionist labour movement with its wish to join the Communist International (Comintern). Operating under the name of Socialist Workers Party – MPS in Hebrew – its members believed they could maintain a link with the left wing of the *Poalei Zion* movement, while becoming members of the Comintern.7 This proved impossible. The left-wing of Poalei Zion was torn between the national focus of labour Zionism and the anti-colonial focus of international communism, with the injunction of “supporting every liberation movement in the colonies”. Although Lenin’s “draft theses on national and colonial questions”, submitted to the second congress of the Comintern in 1920 contained no reference to Zionism or Palestine, the revised version included the following: “The Zionists’ Palestine affair can be characterised as a gross example of the deception of the working classes of that oppressed nation by Entente imperialism and the bourgeoisie of the country in question pooling their efforts (in the same way that Zionism in general actually delivers the Arab working population of Palestine, where Jewish workers only form a minority, to exploitation by England, under the cloak of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine).”8

Of interest here is that the addition of this clause was due to the intervention of Esther Frumkina, a representative of the Bund, an organization that opposed Zionism but supported Jewish cultural autonomy within the broader socialist movement. Competing with Zionists over the allegiance of the Jewish masses, it was threatened by attempts to encourage its constituency to leave its Eastern European homeland. The Palestine settlement project itself was attacked for seeking to impose Jewish minority rule over the indigenous Arab population, but this aspect seemed less crucial to the criticism than Zionism’s potential impact on the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe.9

In response, Cohn-Eber, a representative of the left-wing of Poalei Zion, protested that his organization merely demanded an opportunity for Jews “to emigrate and to colonise this country as long as it is in the hands of the British or any other bourgeoisie... in order to regulate the emigration and the colonising activity of the Jewish and every other proletariat...in the framework of the rational use of the natural resources in the lightly populated colonial countries”. He went on to argue that the MPS was “the only proletarian communist group that fights British imperialism...and has the task of leading the working masses of the Arabian Orient in this struggle”. This leading role is due to the fact that “just as the Jewish bourgeoisie was the first to introduce modern capitalist economic forms of exploitation into the country...so too the Jewish immigrant workers are the only modern, truly property-less proletariat which is for that reason filled with class consciousness and inspired by the revolutionary will to fight.” The semi-proletarian Arab masses need a “natural champion” to “draw them into the revolutionary struggle and fill them with proletarian consciousness”.10
There is little need here to comment on the many problematic assumptions hidden in this text, except to note that they both reflect Eurocentric prejudices common at the time, even among socialists, and attempt to use these to appeal to gullible comrades in order to deflect criticism. But to no avail: no distinction between ‘bad’ bourgeois and ‘good’ proletarian Zionism was allowed in the document. The aspirations of Jewish immigrants might have been noble, but what mattered was that they operated under the auspices of the British Empire, the enemy of all socialist forces in the Comintern’s eyes. As asserted a few weeks later the Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East, Britain was “acting for the benefit of Anglo-Jewish capitalists”, and it “drove Arabs from the land in order to give the latter to Jewish settlers”. It then incited Arabs “against these same Jewish settlers, sowing discord, enmity and hatred between all the communities, weakening both in order that it may itself rule and command.”

In light of these positions, when the MPS applied for membership of the Comintern, its representative Yaakov Meirson took care to distance it from other organizations: “Our party draws a line separating it from all other parties operating in Palestine, in that it is a territorially-based party which sees no place for national socialist parties”. By relying on the Comintern, the Party could “distinguish itself more clearly from all the other Jewish and Arab parties that are socialist in name but nationalist in spirit”. In contrast to the ethnically-based Poalei Zion, the MPS saw itself as open to both Jews and Arabs who live in the territory, though in practice it had Jewish members only. For tactical reasons it retained the name Poalei Zion, and worked with forces within that movement, but aspired to shed its Jewish identity and to sever its remaining links with the Zionist movement. While the Comintern welcomed the Party’s application, it did not accept it for full membership because of those links. Only four years later, in 1924, after several name changes and splits, did the Party manage to be admitted to the International, using the Yiddish name Palestinische Kommunistische Partei (PKP).

Yishuvism

The Party’s work among Arabs was hampered by lack of familiarity with local culture and language, and above all by the foreign origins of its members: the vast majority owed their presence in the country to Zionism, even if they had renounced it after having arrived there. Most of them joined the Histadrut – without which it was difficult to find jobs and receive social protection – and were part of the organized Jewish community (Yishuv), which remained their main constituency until the mid-1930s. Since Jewish immigration was the main concern for the Arab national movement, the Party faced a critical dilemma. To oppose immigration and settlement would have undermined the position of its Jewish members and its own existence. To accept them as Jewish national rights would have alienated it from the Arab movement. The basic contradiction facing the Party was that it was an anti-imperialist force, drawing support from a community which existed and grew thanks to the same imperial force the Party regarded as its main enemy.

The way out of the dilemma was the approach that became known as Yishuvism, developed by the Party’s foremost leader in the 1920s, Wolf Averbuch. It rejected Zionism as a nationalist ideology and political movement that called for a Jewish state; at the same time, it accepted the Yishuv as a legitimate community, which would continue to grow and develop due to immigration. The practical implications of that was a strategic combination of participation in some Yishuv activities (elections to representative institutions, cultural events, union membership and cooperative life), while fighting exclusionary Zionist labour and land policies. The goal of the strategy was to radicalize Jewish immigrants and push them beyond Zionism, while demonstrating to Arabs that dissident Jews could become allies rather than enemies. This was supposed to serve as a basis for joint Jewish-Arab struggle against British imperial rule.
The rationale behind this approach was that Jewish immigration was driven by large historical forces that made Jewish social existence in Eastern Europe insecure. Palestine was merely one destination for the impoverished masses, most of whom were motivated by survival needs rather than by nationalism. There was no need to encourage or oppose immigration or emigration, but simply regard them as given. The movement of people and capital into the country contributed to its modernization and development along capitalist lines, but Zionist ideology put a break on such development due to its exclusionary practices. It was therefore in the interest of various class forces (workers, capitalists, farmers – both Jewish and Arab) to collaborate across ethnic-national boundaries, and jointly fight foreign rule and its local allies – the Zionist movement and Arab feudalists. That one national group was indigenous to the country and the other arrived there as part of a settlement project (and very recently so), did not seem to play a major role in the analysis. L. Rock [Tony Cliff] may not necessarily have borrowed directly from this theory in his debate with the Spark group of South Africa more than a decade later, but his position is remarkably similar.

The strategy of Yishuvism – which List refers to as ‘anti-Zionist Zionism’ or ‘Zionism without Zionism’ – and the Party’s predominantly Jewish membership and leadership – increasingly were at odds with the overall thrust of the Comintern line. That line focused on support for “any national revolutionary movement against imperialism”, and on mobilizing the colonial peasant and working masses in an “anti-imperialist united front” for national liberation. Communists of European origins were supposed to assist the local proletariat to organize, without forming their own ethnic-based parties. How this injunction should have applied to Jews in Palestine, who were neither native to the country nor citizens of the colonial power, was not obvious. They did not enjoy privileged political status or social rights, and did not control the indigenous population. They differed thus from equivalent groups in ‘normal’ cases of colonial rule, such as Algeria or South Africa, which informed the Comintern policy.

For Arab nationalists, though, this distinction was immaterial: all Jewish immigrants were foreign to the country, and they arrived there through a colonial settlement process aimed at establishing a ‘National Home’ in Palestine for the Jewish people; they had no legitimate political rights in the country, which was Arab in essence. The Party had actively to change its image, and radically distance itself from the Yishuv, if it wished to gain more support and members from the Palestinian-Arab community. That was the foundation for the debate over the contentious policy of indigenization, known in the local context as Arabization.

The Comintern and indigenization

Since its earliest days the Party was made acutely aware of the discrepancy between its anti-colonial approach, and its settler origins and membership. All its leading Jewish members came from Eastern Europe, with its vibrant labour movement and familiarity with socialist theory and practice. Some of them took part in the Russian Revolution and were seasoned activists. It was natural for them to assume they could play a leading political role both in relation to the indigenous Palestinian-Arab population and the broad Arab masses of the Middle East. No other group of experienced socialist cadres was to be found in the entire region. And yet, they were new to the place, did not speak Arabic, and were regarded as aliens. Although they tried to make up for some of these deficiencies by studying the language and history of the region, and made big strides quickly, they were still outsiders.

All immigrants in Palestine, regardless of their political views and affiliations, were considered to be part of the colonial settlement enterprise. A change in the demographic composition of membership and leadership alike was thus essential. The first ECCI resolution on Palestine, in
1923, started with a positive mention of the Party’s activity among Arab workers, highlighting its work “in circumstances of a backward, semi-feudal country, subject to unique form of Zionist colonization, promoted by imperialism”, which allowed the Arab national movement to unite the indigenous population behind it. It called on the Party to play an active role in the movement, in order to “expose mercilessly the traitorous role of the feudal, land owning elements, who seek to compromise with British imperialism”, and support the “nationalist elements of the urban and rural bourgeoisie” who take part in the struggle, but also expose their inherent “lack of consistency and hesitation”. The first practical task outlined by the Comintern was “to intensify its activity among the Urban Arab proletariat and peasantry”, and help them organize and become effective in the fight against Zionism and imperialism. This did not mean neglecting Jewish workers, however, and specific tasks regarding class organization were outlined for them, though not national liberation tasks. Participation in the Histadrut, despite its very active Zionist role, was considered as essential in order to reach the Jewish working masses.

The Party, for its part, made repeated assurances regarding its efforts to recruit Arab workers, but recognized progress was slow and difficult: “Arab workers are divided and dispersed in settlements and are mostly illiterate and under the influence of Muslim traditional leaders, who encourage among them fatalism and resignation to their difficult conditions, passivity and apathy. Jewish workers fall under the influence of the national-chauvinists [labour Zionists] and are exceptionally rigid and conservative.” This statement was accompanied by claims about the Party’s success in becoming “a real territorial Communist center in the country, attracting and binding to itself all the honest and revolutionary forces from among the toilers of the country’s peoples”. It is clear that both sides to this correspondence regarded national liberation as essential part of the anti-imperialist struggle, and Jewish workers had a role in it (albeit not a leading one), regardless of their recent immigrant origins.

Reporting on the progress made in working with and among the Arab movement and recruiting Arab members became an essential component of all the Party’s communication with the Comintern. A 1926 ECCI resolution opened with the notion that “the center of gravity of the PKP’s activity must be among the Arab toiling masses.” At the same time, though, the PKP “must help increase the discontent of the toiling Jewish population [with British policy]. It must pay particular attention to increasing its ideological and organizational influence among the Palestinian proletariat and link its struggle with that of the Arab people, against imperialist oppression”. Views put forward on various occasions by internal opposition groups, to the effect that a consistent anti-Zionist and anti-colonial approach required leaving the Histadrut and even leaving the country altogether, remained dissident minority positions. In fact, the task of turning immigrant workers against their leaders, by working with them and their organizations, was repeatedly re-asserted as central to the Party’s efforts.

Working with and within Zionist structures was not the same as being Zionist, and it would be wrong to ignore the crucial gap between the Party and the rest of the Jewish labour camp. Even Gdud Ha-Avodah (Labour Battalion), a national commune of urban and rural workers who moved towards communism in the mid-late 1920s, were opposed to the anti-Zionist position. They regarded the historical process of Jewish workers’ immigration to Palestine as progressive in essence, and wished to use it in order to industrialize and revolutionize the country. But, they rejected the PKP’s position as too uncritically supportive of Arab nationalism, and too negative regarding the potential of the Jewish working population in Palestine, as “a real political force that must be taken into consideration in the struggle against British imperialism”. That was a self-defeating attitude: “as long as the PKP upholds its position regarding the Jewish national question in Palestine, not only it cannot expect to become a mass party enjoying the support of
Jewish workers, but on the contrary, it would be seen by the vast majority of Jewish workers as a hostile party”, dooming it to isolation from the masses.24

The Party rejected this criticism as reflecting the residual legacy of colonial Zionist attitudes, but could not itself escape from criticism that its own practices also reflected just such a legacy. Oppositional forces from within raised the concern that the Party deviated from the official line by failing to condemn Zionism outright. In their view, “Zionism was a special type of imperialism”, and Zionists were occupiers and colonizers of the country. There was no sense in which their immigration into the country and settlement in it might play a progressive role. Participation in institutions such as the Histadrut and taking part in elections to Jewish communal institutions compromised the Party’s position and aligned it with the Zionist colonization process.25 In response, the Party said that this criticism amounted to a loss of class perspective, by regarding all Jews as counter-revolutionary and all Arabs as revolutionary. Motivated by despair, the Party’s representative argued, the opposition effectively lost all hope in working among the Jewish masses, who continued to be the bulk of the working class in the country, and it was dismissive of the Party’s ability to work among Arabs, offering no way forward except for narrow sectarianism.26

Although the opposition did not gain the support of the Moscow Center, by the late 1920s the notion that the Party needed to transform itself had become more persistent. The Comintern kept noting that the Party continued to suffer from ‘hypertrophy’ in directing its energy to Jewish workers and ‘atrophy’ in its work among Arab workers and peasants. Its territorial bi-national character was on paper only; in practice, it remained predominantly Jewish. It had to shift its focus radically to penetrate the Arab masses, by participating actively in the struggle for national liberation and collaborating with left-wing elements within the Arab national movement in order to radicalise it.

In theoretical terms, this did not mean abandoning Yishuvism altogether and giving up on the revolutionary potential of Jewish workers – the Comintern explicitly rejected such calls as defeatist. However, it argued that the PKP “underestimates the importance of Zionism as an instrument of the imperialist subjugation of Palestine, with the support of the masses of Jewish working masses”. It urged a course that involved “linking the interests of the daily struggle of the Arab toilers with the interests of the daily struggle of the Jewish proletariat, while waging a systematic campaign against Arab and Jewish chauvinism and pooling Jewish and Arab workers into a joint organized fight against the class enemy”.27 The anti-Zionist struggle aimed at “removing the best elements in the Histadrut from the influence of Zionism”, and “transforming the Histadrut into a true class-based trade union”; that is, making it into “an organization whose doors are open to all proletarians, and particularly Arab workers”. Strengthening the existing Arab unions must also be carried out through “uncompromising struggle against Arab nationalists” and their influence among Arab workers.28

This formulation, variations of which guided the Party for its first decade of existence, adopted an overall anti-Zionist position and yet maintained a careful balance between potential Jewish and Arab constituencies. It was not neutral between Zionism and Arab nationalism, clearly siding with the latter against the former and prioritising the fight against British rule. But, it sought to do so without abandoning the quest for an independent position. Working with left Arab nationalist elements, and at the same time with progressive Jewish workers and within their organizations, was seen as a way of combining an anti-colonial agenda with a socialist class perspective. The two were seen as theoretically compatible, even if in practice the party frequently experienced difficulties in reconciling them.
Going back to the South African analogy discussed earlier, both the Party and the Comintern regarded the Zionist movement – including its labour wing – as political allies of British colonial rule and thus an obstacle to the liberation of the country. In this sense Zionism was similar to settler-colonial movements and institutions in South Africa and in colonial outposts in Africa and elsewhere. But there was also a crucial difference between these situations. White workers in South Africa directly benefited from the exploitation of black labourers, as employers themselves (of domestic labour), as holders of skilled supervisory positions in the process of production, and as citizens with privileged access to social and political rights. Their class interests were therefore incompatible with those of their indigenous black counterparts. In Palestine, on the other hand, Jewish workers did not exploit Arab labour directly, nor did they occupy a privileged social and political position either in the work place or in the society and polity at large. Potentially, they could be allies, if only they would be liberated from the impact of exclusionary nationalist ideologies. This potential basis for inter-communal cooperation was the foundation for the strategy of Yishuvism, and for the Comintern’s continued faith in the prospects of recruiting progressive Jewish workers to the anti-colonial cause.

The 1929 riots and Arabization

But faith alone was not enough. The delicate balancing act which sought to reconcile the ideological rejection of Zionism with political work within some of its institutions and adherents could not be maintained for long. It had collapsed by the end of the decade, as events in Palestine, combined with shifts within the world communist movement, forced the Party to abandon its position. Increasing tensions between the organized Jewish and Arab communities over access to and control over the holy places, resulted in the outbreak of country-wide violent clashes in August 1929, in which hundreds of civilians were killed. The Party was caught unawares by these events, which exposed its isolation from the growing nationalist sentiments among the masses of both groups. The Comintern, which was experiencing the fervour of the ‘Third Period’ with its expectation of revolutionary insurrections in the colonial world, used that opportunity to push forward Arabization in a decisive manner. The relatively civil debate over strategies gave way to more acrimonious struggles, accusation and splits during the 1930s.

In line with its policy of making a distinction between the Zionist movement and the Jewish population, the PKP rejected all armed attacks against civilians. This was especially the case as most Jews attacked and killed in the 1929 riots – primarily in Hebron, Safed and Jerusalem – belonged to the ‘old Yishuv’, which predated Zionism and was not part of the new settlement project. That the Party leadership, together with a high-ranking visiting Comintern official, had to be evacuated from its secret headquarters near Jerusalem for fear for their lives, and that the events came as a “total surprise”, may also have played a role in its response.

Its initial response was to condemn the killings and point to the tacit collaboration between the British, Zionist and Arab forces, which was aimed at diverting the masses from the anti-imperialist struggle into bloody inter-communal fighting. Although the Party recognized the social needs of impoverished rural people, which were behind the riots, it criticized the ‘terrible savagery’ of the massacres and ‘pogroms’, and attributed them to the incitement by ‘dark reactionary forces’ of ‘ uncontrollable peasant-bedouin’ masses. The task of the working class, Jews and Arabs alike, led by the Party itself, was to transform the movement into a progressive agrarian revolutionary campaign, whose goal is independence and the formation of a workers-peasants government, representative of the toiling people of the country. Blind religious and nationalist fanaticism on all sides was an obstacle to achieving this goal, and served to distract the masses from their just demands. Jewish and Arab workers must unite and resolve all the national and social questions together in a new true anti-imperialist rebellion, free of pogroms.
This position was in line with the standard approach of the Party, but the Comintern rejected it as reflecting a right-wing deviation, which in turn was a result of failure to implement Arabization as demanded all along by the ECCI. It was expressed in “an underestimation of revolutionary possibilities, open or hidden resistance to Arabization of the party, pessimism and passivity with regard to work among the Arab masses, fatalism and passivity on the peasant question, failure to understand the role of Jewish comrades as assistants but not as leaders of the Arab movement, exaggeration of the influence of the reactionary bourgeoisie, large landlords, and clergy on the Arab masses, a conciliatory attitude to opportunist errors, failure to understand the need for courageous and vigorous self-criticism of the mistakes committed by the party, a tendency to emigrate without the permission of the CC [Central Committee], that is, to desert, resistance to the slogan of a workers’ and peasants’ government. The evaluation of the uprising as a ‘pogrom’, and hidden resistance to Arabization, are manifestations of Zionist and imperialist influence on the communists.”

There was also a ‘leftist’ deviation at work, expressed in the dismissal of the potential role of Jewish workers, though that was of lesser importance.

Nothing in the text above constitutes a radical change in the Comintern’s approach. Most of its elements had appeared before in letters and resolutions and indeed in the Party’s own literature. And yet, their overall thrust amounted to a clear change of direction. It was not so much the instruction to Arabize the party from top to bottom without delay; adjusting the Party’s leadership and membership to the demographic realities of the country made sense as a strategy, even if the removal of the entire leadership was a drastic step. It was the underlying rationale for it that was controversial; the implicit notion that the Arab masses were inexorably moving towards the revolution, regardless of their current leadership and its direction, and that Jews were second-class members regardless of their personal record.

Further, the direct anti-imperialist content of the riots was weak while the anti-Zionist (and anti-Jewish) component was prominent; they largely bypassed the new urban centres where the working class was located. Under these circumstances, calling on the Party to join the uprising amounted to a shift from opposing Zionism as an ally of imperialism to seeing it as the main colonial force in the country. Many members regarded this shift as an uncritical capitulation to Arab nationalism, and left the Party or were expelled in the aftermath of the 1929 events. Indeed, if the centre of political resistance moved to the illiterate rural masses, who regarded Zionism and the old and new Yishuv as all part of the same enemy, there was no space for urban Jewish working class activists in that struggle, nor was Yishuvism relevant any longer.

A year later, a secret letter sent by the ECCI to all Party members reasserted these points, that the “Jewish bourgeoisie is the main agent of British imperialism in Palestine”, and that “counter-revolutionary Zionism is the main system of British imperialism in the country”. Imperialism made “the Jewish national minority, which immigrated into the country, into an instrument of oppression of the indigenous Arab population. Zionism, resting on British imperial spears, positioned the Jewish national minority, as a privileged layer, against the Arabs. Zionism thus exposed its true nature as an expression of the Jewish bourgeoisie’s desires for exploitation, expansionist nationalism and oppression”. The PKP failed to understand the national question and its deep agrarian nature. It focused instead on the Jewish working class, which is “a proletariat of a privileged minority” that needs to “separate itself firmly and resolutely from its bourgeoisie, which is playing an oppressive and murderous role, move closer to the Arab toiling masses and assist them in their struggle for national liberation from colonial slavery”.

The letter went on to call for “a consistent and uncompromising revolutionary struggle of Jewish and Arab workers, for the national independence of Palestine as an Arab country, a struggle
against imperialism, Zionism and their Arab allies, a brotherhood of the Arab and Jewish toiling masses." Only on the basis of an anti-imperialist and agrarian revolution "can the victory of the Arab masses, as well as the rights of the Jewish national minority in Palestine, be guaranteed." While the Jewish nationalist deviation was the main enemy in the current stage, there was a need to be alert to the danger of an Arab nationalist deviation as well. Arabization of the Party was the central task, but it must not lead to a reduction of work among the Jewish workers. There was a need for a "united front from below" of Arab and Jewish proletarians, "over the heads of the traitorous Histadrut and the bourgeois nationalist Arab leaders".

Historians regard Arabization as a crucial turning-point for the Party as indeed it was (and felt so at the time): the majority of Jewish members and the entire leadership left or were expelled, or emigrated and eventually were ‘purged’ in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. At the same time, a new element was introduced into the Party’s discourse, which proved even more important in retrospect. Together with the renewed focus on Zionism as a colonial force, Jews in Palestine were recognized as a ‘national minority’ for the first time. We do not know what prompted the use of this term. The Jewish community was growing in numbers and consistently acquiring more ‘national’ characteristics, but 1929-30 was not an obvious turning point. Perhaps the logical corollary of having defined the country as Arab was seeing Jews primarily in national terms. This created a lingering tension between regarding the Jewish community as an intruder, in line with the Arab nationalist view, and regarding it as a legitimate minority to be recruited for the struggle, in line with an internationalist view. Musa Budeiri concludes that with the 1930 Congress, the Party abandoned the goal of “socialist proletarian revolution” and replaced it by "a recognition of the national character of the struggle", elevating the task of “national liberation” above “social emancipation”. This claim seems exaggerated, though, as the party continued to juggle the two imperatives, albeit with less room in which to manoeuvre effectively.

The December 1930 Party congress emphasized the colonial aspect of the conflict. It offered a sharp criticism of the former leadership as having lived in a ‘Jewish ghetto’, and as a result having failed to define the Jews in Palestine as a ‘special dominant minority’. It overestimated the role of the Jewish minority as a progressive and anti-colonial force and underestimated revolutionary developments among Arabs, whose national struggle acquired ‘a special form’. The Party had to “expose the true aims of the Jewish [Zionist] bourgeoisie and its being, together with the Jewish national minority in Palestine that fell under its influence, the main instrument of oppression wielded by the English occupiers against the indigenous Arab population”. National minorities which side with colonialism can expect destruction, and the Party had to explain to Jewish workers that unless they changed course, they would also suffer the same fate. Only by participating in the struggle against colonialism and Zionism, alongside Arab workers, can Jewish workers expect a positive resolution of the Jewish national problem, realization of their rights as a national minority in Palestine, and the revival of their national cultural heritage.

The 1930s saw a decisive shift in orientation towards the Arab population, though the majority of Party members remained Jewish. Even the new leadership, which took over after 1934 and was in control until 1943, had a Jewish majority, though its Jewish members were indigenous to the country, fluent in Arabic, and committed to Arabization. All members with roots in the Zionist labour movement of Eastern Europe had been removed from positions of power. At the same time, the intensification of national conflict in the country, in particular the Arab Revolt of 1936-39, gave rise to growing tensions among members, leading to the formation of a “Jewish section” in 1937, which maintained tense relations with the Party leadership. The Comintern’s shift from Third Period to Popular Front policies (that is, from grassroots insurrection to anti-fascist alliances between communists and the progressive national bourgeoisie), accentuated this
In a country divided between two hostile groups, each with its own ‘national bourgeoisie’, the Popular Front was bound to lead to different cross-class alliances and to thus to inevitable divisions within the Party.

The Arab Revolt was the most sustained campaign of resistance against British rule and Zionist settlement during the entire Mandate period. Combining civil disobedience, boycotts, political protests and armed struggle, it was waged around the central demands of the national movement: an end to Jewish immigration, an end to land sales to Jews, and the formation of a representative legislative council as a stage towards full independence for the country. The campaign made the Jewish and Arab communities, already distant following the 1929 riots, even more remote from each other politically and socially. The conditions of growing effective segregation between towns, villages and neighbourhoods within mixed cities, could not but have an effect on the ability of the Party to operate, as the only mixed political organization in the country during the entire period. Physical communication became almost impossible, movement between different areas was restricted, and intensified nationalist feelings made internationalism very difficult to sustain in practice, even among Party members.

Nationalism contested

Tensions within the Party had little to do with theory – the definition of the Zionist movement as colonial and an ally of imperialism, and the support for national liberation were not contested – but with the practical implications of these positions. The Party programme could lead in two different and increasingly contradictory directions. On the one hand, the leadership, supported by most Arab members, saw its role as that of taking an active part in the national struggle, even when it took an armed form and was directed against Jews (not only Zionist institutions). On the other hand, many members used the notion of Jews as a national minority to denounce attacks on civilians and settlements, and began to advocate minority national rights within an independent country. The Comintern’s focus on anti-fascist alliances also emboldened Jewish members in their criticism of the Party’s support for the Arab national movement, whose leadership saw the advance of the Axis powers as a positive counter-weight to British rule.

It is important to understand the context for these events. Globally, the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany pushed the Soviet Union to seek alliances with Britain and France and reduce the emphasis on the anti-colonial struggle. The brutal anti-Jewish policies of the Nazis increased support for Zionism among Jews and the international community. The arrival of 200,000 Jews in Palestine in the 1930s, mostly from Germany and neighbouring countries, had a critical effect on the country. It strengthened the Yishuv, which doubled in size, and increased its ‘national’ character. German arrivals were educated, skilled and relatively well-off, and thus made an enormous contribution to the Jewish community’s resource base and organizational capacity. At the same time, the Arab movement saw this development with growing alarm, and regarded the time as its last chance to change the course of events. Thus, from both national perspectives the mid-1930s were decisive in entrenching the presence of Jews in the country, not only as individuals but also as a national group. This also meant, for left-wing activists subject to the pressures of competing nationalisms, that it became ever more difficult not to choose sides. Moscow could not provide guidance, as its attention was directed to Europe, it was undergoing a period of acute internal turmoil (the great purges), and its ability to keep in touch with events in Palestine was radically reduced. Left to their own devices, Party members moved in opposite directions: some focused efforts on fighting Zionism and the Yishuv as the enemy, while others reasserted the distinction between Zionism and Jews, increasingly seeing the latter as a normal internally-differentiated national minority rather than as a homogenous colonial implant. That this debate took the form of a national split within the membership was not really surprising.
The growing distance between Jews and Arabs in the society at large (reflected in the rift within the Party) gave rise to the idea of partitioning the country into two states. The Party rejected partition but could not ignore the national consolidation of the Jewish community. Regardless of its settler origins, it could no longer be regarded as a colonial appendage that would disappear with the demise of British rule, or become absorbed into a general Palestinian-Arab citizenship, or lose its distinct identity. Jews would not accept any political arrangement that would deny their rights as a national minority. Only by working with progressive working class elements within that population, on the basis of shared interests with their Arab counterparts, could the country achieve its independence without a bloody confrontation. The Party leadership recognized in a self-critical ‘confession’ that it has been wrong to support the Arab nationalist forces that fell under fascist influence, and that as a result it lost much of its support among Jews in the country. It attributed its errors to the lack of contact with the Comintern since 1935, which made it fall prey to nationalist ‘deviations’. The Soviets, for their part, criticized the Party for having abandoned the class struggle due to failure to “position the national question” correctly, thus leading to confusion within its ranks. This was not the leadership’s fault though; it operated in isolation, in “complex political circumstances”, and under “conditions of sharp national struggle between Arab and Jewish nationalism” in the country.

With this self-criticism the Party effectively abandoned the colonial model. If the Jewish community was internally differentiated – regardless of its settler origins – and progressive elements within it could be drawn into the struggle for national independence and social equality, then it was not an oppressive minority in its entirety. If the Arab national movement contained fascist elements that should have been opposed, then it was not progressive in its entirety. If national groups fought each other for political control, and the way forward was an alliance of all progressive forces, then the conflict was no longer colonial in nature. That the British imposed restrictions on Jewish immigration and land transfers made it easier to focus on Arab-Jewish relations without invoking the colonial context. Fighting the British became less urgent in any event, once they and the Soviets became allies in the war against Germany.

This shift in approach alienated the large group of left-wing Arab intellectuals and activists who moved closer to the Party during the 1930s, when it supported the national struggle without reservations. Although many of them did not agree with the uncritical support granted to the movement’s leadership, they continued to see themselves as the vanguard of national liberation. They regarded the Party leadership headed by Radwan al-Hilu (Musa) as weak and indecisive, shifting between the two national communities. The result was a situation “where the Party was talking to each community in its own political language and appealing to it in terms of its national sentiments”. That began to be the case already with the rise of the Jewish section. National divisions within the ranks became sharper with the growing feeling that the World War would force a decision regarding the political status of the country. The 1942 Biltmore programme of the Zionist movement, which put forward the goal of a Jewish state for the first time in explicit terms, made contestation over the future of the country more acute than ever.

The Party split in 1943, saw the formation of the National Liberation League (NLL), an Arab left-wing party, alongside the Palestinian Communist Party which continued under a new Jewish leadership. Another Jewish faction subsequently formed a Hebrew Communist Party, with a positive attitude towards Zionism. The split in the movement remained in force until the end of the period, and “foreshadowed the coming partition of the country”.

The NLL sought to advance Arab national goals with a focus on grassroots mobilization and need for change in social relations within Palestinian-Arab society. While avoiding the use of the
term Communist, it had a clear pro-Soviet, socially progressive orientation. The League defined itself as the left wing of the national movement rather than as the Arab wing of the Communist movement. This was a subtle but important distinction, which allowed it to claim membership in the nationalist camp. It was also a way of distancing itself from the PKP, which continued to use the Communist label. That label, for the first time since 1919, helped the Party gain legitimacy in the Yishuv due to the leading role played by the Soviet Union in the war against Nazi Germany. The dissolution of the Comintern in May 1943 encouraged this shift by both sides towards growing identification with their respective national movements.

For the NLL, Palestine was an Arab country struggling for independence from foreign rule. Jews residing there deserved equal rights as a minority group, but had no collective political claim to the country. In line with the old approach of the PKP, the League distinguished between the Zionist movement and the Jewish community. While it regarded the former as colonial and reactionary, the latter was a community with internal class divisions and diverse interests, some of which could be reconciled with those of the Arab people. The fight was against the leadership of the community not the masses of people. An independent Palestine would allow all residents equal participation: Arabs were the majority but the country would be democratic and would not grant special rights to members of any ethnic or national group. Although this view clashed with that of the mainstream Arab nationalist position (which did not regard Jewish settlers as entitled to any rights in the country), the NLL did share the other practical demands of nationalism: an end to Jewish immigration and land transfers and independence to the country.

Whether Jews had national rights, in addition to civil rights, was not clear. On the one hand, the League argued in October 1945 that “in our approach to the problem we accept the responsibility of laying down plans to safeguard the National interests of the Arab people living in the country while guaranteeing at the same time, and not in contradiction, full civil rights and democratic freedom for the Jewish community now residing in Palestine.” This formulation seems to distinguish between the two groups’ rights. But, the statement continues, “We recognize the right of the Jewish community to develop whatever legitimate just national interests, Jews living under a democratic regime, would be eager to realize”. The content of these national interests and the form they might take was not specified, however.

Uniquely among Arab parties, the NLL understood the plight of European Jews, who were faced with anti-semitism and genocide. It argued that the national movement failed to realize the fears that drove Jews to immigrate to Palestine, and lumped all of them together as illegal settlers. It thus drove progressive Jews into the arms of the Zionist movement. Only by recognizing Jews as citizens in an independent country could the opposition to Zionism drive a wedge between the mass of ordinary people and their reactionary leadership. For both moral and practical reasons, a distinction between Jews and Zionists was essential. By effectively accepting the demographic consequences of Zionism (the right of immigrants to equal citizenship), the NLL moved towards abandoning the colonial model. It no longer regarded the Jewish community as foreign, though it did not recognize it as a full-fledged national minority with a right to self determination: “Zionist slogans for immigration and a Jewish state become non-feasible with the right of the people for self-determination and freedom from all reactionary fetters.”

The PKP, at the same time, was moving towards integration within the organized Jewish Yishuv, adopting similar positions to those advocated in the late 1930s by Tony Cliff, writing as L. Rock, which were discussed earlier in the article. While opposing partition and calling for an independent democratic state, it increasingly upheld a bi-nationalist vision, based on “the principle of equal right of Jews and Arabs for free national, economic and cultural development,
without artificial interruptions and in mutual cooperation and brotherhood of nations”.

Palestine was defined by Meir Vilner in the PKP Congress in 1946 as a bi-national country, in which Jews and Arabs live together and had no separate territorial basis; partition thus was not a viable option. On this basis, the PKP sought to re-unite with the NLL. Despite their differences regarding the national rights of Jews in the country, the two parties were not far from each other’s positions as they both rejected the Arab nationalist notion that Jews were an alien group and that a solution would require their departure from the territory. Opposing partition as unviable and reactionary, and at the same time maintaining separate national organizations, was an obvious contradiction that undermined the quest for a unified solution for the country.

But there was clear logic at work here. The emphasis on the separate national identity of Arabs and Jews was shared by all political trends in Palestine, and was recognized by all international forces. The debate was over the legitimacy of that state of affairs. Arab nationalists claimed it was the outcome of a colonial process that could and should be reversed. The NLL agreed about the colonial origins of the problem, but asserted that the process was irreversible and therefore Jews must be granted individual equality, without changing the nature of the country itself. The PKP took an additional step and accepted the legitimacy of the Jewish community, asserting that it must be accommodated as a national group. Thus, Arab nationalists and Jewish communists were consistent, whereas the NLL was having difficulties reconciling its contradictory political location, between nationalism and socialism.

While the PKP abandoned the colonial model, it did not thereby return to Yishuvism, contrary to Ben-Zaken’s assertion. The size of the Jewish community in the mid-late 1940s was almost triple that of the mid-1920s, and its economic and military capacity many times greater. It was no longer a small advanced section of the population, but rather a society in its own right, even if its autonomy was relative. It was operating from a position of force relative to Arabs, who were politically exhausted by the repression of the Great Revolt and the exile of their leadership. Jewish claims to statehood in Palestine, no longer disguised by the language of a ‘national home’, were morally reinforced by the Nazi Holocaust and the large number of displaced Jews who could not or would not be accommodated within their new/old countries in Europe.

With all their differences, both communist parties shared one important position: loyalty to the Soviet Union, which recognized for the first time in May 1947 “that the population of Palestine consists of two peoples, the Arabs and the Jews. Both have historical roots in Palestine. Palestine has become the homeland of both these peoples.” A just solution must address “the legitimate interests of both these peoples”, in the form of “an independent, dual, democratic, homogeneous Arab-Jewish State…based on equality of rights for the Jewish and the Arab populations”. However, “if this plan proved impossible to implement, in view of the deterioration in the relations between the Jews and the Arabs”, an alternative plan would be suitable, providing for “the partition of Palestine into two independent autonomous States, one Jewish and one Arab.” This would be the case only if relations between Jews and Arab “proved to be so bad that it would be impossible to reconcile them and to ensure the peaceful co-existence.”

Both plans meant discarding the colonial model. The option chosen, by US–Soviet agreement was that of partition. UN general assembly resolution 181 of 1947, and the subsequent creation of the State of Israel in 1948 accompanied by the Palestinian Nakba, saw the regrouping of all Communists who remained in the State of Israel as the Israeli Communist Party (Maki), overcoming initial resistance by some elements within the NLL. Others who ended up in the West Bank founded the Jordanian Communist Party. A new chapter in the history of the country, and of the left within it, opened with these dramatic changes, as discussed in the next section.
The Israeli Socialist Organization (Matzpen)

The creation of the State of Israel sounded the death knell for the colonial model. Palestinian-Arabs disappeared from the scene as political agents: they were dispersed as a people, and became Israeli and Jordanian citizens, or stateless persons residing in neighbouring countries. Their unified leadership was destroyed and it took a decade and a half before they started organizing independently again. In Israel itself their main political vehicle was the Israeli Communist Party (Maki), which was the only genuine Jewish-Arab political organization in the country. In contrast to the pre-1948 Mandatory period, though the Party no longer challenged Zionism directly. It addressed practical issues facing its Arab constituency, such as political harassment, land expropriation, and labour discrimination, but usually without confronting the ideological and systemic foundations of the new Jewish-dominated state and society. However, the radical anti-Zionist banner – and with it the colonial model – were taken over by a new movement, using the name of the Israeli Socialist Organization – ISO – and better known by the name of its monthly publication Matzpen (compass in Hebrew).

Having risen to political prominence in the aftermath of the 1967 war, five years after it had been formed, Matzpen epitomized the radical left critique of Zionist ideology and practices. Although its members were few in number, never exceeding a 100 at any time (with a periphery of sympathizers), its impact was huge. It was the clearest voice speaking against the 1967 occupation, and calling for the restoration of the rights of Palestinians in Israel, the occupied territories and the diaspora. Its voice was fresh and authentic, free of the cumbersome and outdated Soviet-style Marxist jargon. It was independent of the imperatives of Soviet policy, which made the Communist Party seem like an alien force in local politics. It thus represented a true alternative to the official ideology, especially as its rise coincided with the emergence of the New Left internationally, and it embodied the appealing spirit of the youth rebellion of the 1960s. Still, its support base remained very limited and it never managed to move beyond the political margins. While its membership always included Jews and Arabs – including among the latter Jabra Nicola, who played a key role in developing the organization’s theoretical approach – the majority of members remained Jewish.

In 1961, two of the future founders of Matzpen, Akiva Orr and Moshe Machover (members of Maki at the time), published a book in which they reiterated the position of the Party in favour of mutual recognition of the right to self-determination of the two peoples residing in the country (Israeli-Jews and Palestinian-Arabs). They also supported the right of the 1948 Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland and receive compensation for their land if they chose not to return. This position was upheld, even after they and a few other members were expelled from the Party in 1962 for violating internal discipline. In the first issue of their new journal, Matzpen, the front page editorial called for “recognition of the national rights of the two peoples of Eretz Israel – the Jewish and the Arab”. In announcing its position, the organization acknowledged that its views were similar to those of Maki and the Semitic Action (a liberal movement advocating reconciliation between the two peoples of the country), though it differed from them on other grounds (foreign orientation, attitudes towards democracy and socialism).

A few months later, A. Israeli (Orr and Machover) asserted that “The Question of Palestine” – the entire set of relations between Jews and Arabs in the Land of Israel – remained unresolved: “The focus of the problem is that Israel and Jordan divided between them the territory that belongs to the Arabs of Palestine. Both the private property of individuals and the homeland of an entire nation were forcibly taken away from them. But the nation itself did not disappear, and still exists.” They concluded that “only an Israeli policy that would dare to abolish immediately
the military government [over Arabs] in Israel, declare publicly that it is ready to return to the Arabs of Palestine what was taken away from them in 1948, recognize their rights as individuals and as a nation, help them acquire political independence and remove Hussein’s yoke [Jordanian rule] – only such a policy can save Israel from the threatening future”. A mutual agreement between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, they argued, would resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict and normalize Israel’s relations with Arab countries.63

Although these positions placed the organization at the extreme left of the Israeli political spectrum, they were not substantially different from those of the Communist Party, and did not amount to a challenge to the existence of the State of Israel as a colonial entity. Opposition to the military government and to discrimination against Arabs were not unusual, and were perceived usually as an internal critique of government policy. However, Matzpen did pose a fundamental challenge to the state in its rejection of Zionism and call for Israel to cease being a state for all Jews.64 Having said that, until 1967 this critique of Zionism seems to have taken a back seat to other issues, such as workers struggles in Israel, international conflicts (Vietnam, Cuba, the US civil rights movement) and questions facing the left globally (the Sino-Soviet conflict, Che Guevara’s revolutionary expeditions, the Chinese Cultural Revolution and so on).

The year of 1967 marked an obvious turning point. Growing tensions in the Middle East region, and the rise of the PLO and the Fatah movement, had redirected attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict even before that. With the countdown to war, the issue came to occupy the attention of the organization, and indeed of the entire political scene in Israel, as never before. The centrality that the conflict acquired during that period has not diminished since then. It continues to be the crucial fault-line in Israeli politics and culture, serving to divide the right from the left to such an extent that in common political discourse the term ‘left’ has lost its association with issues of social justice and class struggle. It is reserved for those advocating a restoration of Palestinian rights and opposing Israeli military and political domination to various degrees. Using this definition, no organization has been as far-left in Israeli history as Matzpen.

In a sense, in its early period Matzpen travelled in an opposite direction to the PKP. With the rise of the Jewish section in the late 1930s, the Party started moving away from the colonial model towards an analysis of the conflict between the two competing national movements. Matzpen started out with just such an analysis, but increasingly moved away from it towards a view of Zionism as a colonial movement.65 Before 1967 though, using the colonial model did not mean rejecting Israel as a state, if it became an inclusive democracy. This remaining ambiguity in Matzpen’s position may have reflected expectations that Israel could become a ‘normal’ country, with the demise of Ben Gurion, his replacement by Levi Eshkol as prime minister, the abolition of military government over Arabs and the dropping of the qualifying ‘Hebrew’ from the name of the Histadrut labour federation in 1966 (until then it officially represented ‘Hebrew Workers’, although open to Arab members since 1960).

By the time the June 1967 war broke out, Matzpen had sharpened its analysis of Zionism and its role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In a statement dating from May 1967, it argued that this was “not an ordinary conflict between two nations”, because “the state of Israel is the outcome of the colonization of Palestine by the Zionist movement, at the expense of the Arab people and under the auspices of imperialism.” The solution to the conflict involved the ‘de-Zionization of Israel’, meaning transformation of Israel into a state that represents all its residents. This would end the discrimination and oppression suffered by Arab citizens. In addition, Palestinian-Arab refugees who wished to return must be able to do so or receive compensation if they chose not to be repatriated. At the same time, “the recognition of the right of the Hebrew nation to self-
determination” was essential, because it was the only solution “consistent with the interests of both Arab and Israeli masses”. It would lead to the “integration of Israel as a unit in an economic and political union of the Middle East, on the basis of socialism.” Without the prospect of living as equals in the region, Israeli Jews would not free themselves from the impact of Zionism.\(^6^6\)

This formula, the de-Zionization of Israel and integration in a socialist union of the Middle East, became the foundation of the Matzpen approach. A third component, added shortly thereafter was of course the struggle against the occupation and its consequences. From Matzpen’s perspective, the June 1967 war and occupation served to confirm the nature of Israel and Zionism as “a colonizing movement of settlers… [whose] modus operandi has always been to create faits accomplis – if necessary, by force of arms – at the expense of the Arabs and against the Arabs”. To counter that tendency, Israel must “withdraw from all the occupied territories and from the attempt to impose a settlement by force. This demand is the test for every progressive group and person.”\(^6^7\) Ending the occupation was necessary but not sufficient. An overall solution would require “Israel’s withdrawal from the Zionist path and the integration of a socialist, non-Zionist Israel in the region”. Socialism was also the only way to Arab national unification that would end the Balkanization imposed by imperialism on the Arab world.

But the occupation did not come to an end, and it led to ongoing expansion, political oppression and popular resistance. Palestinians have become “entirely a conquered people… robbed not only of the most elementary political rights, but also of the very prospect for national and human existence”. Their response was natural, as “it is both the right and duty of every conquered and subjugated people to resist and to struggle for its freedom. The ways, means and methods necessary and appropriate for such struggle must be determined by the people itself and it would be hypocritical for strangers – especially if they belong to the oppressing nation – to preach to it, saying, ‘Thus shalt thou do, and thus shalt thou not do’.”\(^6^8\)

It is impossible to exaggerate the extent to which this statement violated the scared principles of the post-1967 national consensus, which sought to portray Israelis as a bizarre combination of righteous victims and military super-heroes. There was nothing that made Matzpen so distinct politically and reviled publicly as its unconditional support for the right of Palestinians to oppose the occupation. This was regarded as treason, even if the statement added that “we can support only such organizations which, in addition to resisting occupation, also recognize the right of the Israeli people for self-determination”, with a view to a joint struggle for a socialist future.

Unique among Israeli forces, Matzpen rejected the ‘enlightened occupation’ myth. It challenged the self-image of Israel as a liberal democracy practicing ‘purity of arms’. The Communist Party (Rakah\(^6^9\)) condemned the occupation, but Matzpen alone linked it to Zionist ideology. Israel had to be transformed “from a Zionist state, a tool for furthering Zionist colonization… into a state expressing the real interests of both Jewish and Arab masses…[requiring] a consistent struggle against a continued Israeli occupation of the Arab territories. Only through this struggle could the Jewish and Arab masses be mobilized for socialism.”\(^7^0\) Crucially, Matzpen never equated the rights of Israeli Jews with the State of Israel. Its support for self-determination went together with opposition to the existence of Israel as a Jewish-Zionist state, a product of colonial settlement. Matzpen thus drew a line that distinguished it clearly from the Zionist left.

In an article published in early 1970, Orr and Machover clarified the meaning of the key notion of ‘de-Zionization’: “the abolition of Jewish exclusivity (expressed for example in the Law of Return), according to which a Brooklyn Jew is granted more civil and political rights in Israel and to Israel than a Palestinian Arab born here (whether currently a refugee or a citizen).” From
a Zionist perspective, the State of Israel was not a final product but “an intermediary phase and an instrument for the realization of the full Zionist goal”. In the same way that a solution to the South African conflict between settlers and indigenous people required the abolition of the racist character of the South African state, which was not only the historical source of the conflict but also the factor that continued to reproduce it, abolishing the Zionist character of Israel was necessary to a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.\(^{71}\)

In contrast to the Zionist left, Matzpen rejected the notion that reconciliation between Jews and Arabs could be based on the prevailing distribution of population, land and resources. It regarded existing demographic and territorial relations as an outcome of colonization and dispossession processes; to accept these as given, meant ignoring the historical origins of the conflict. Possibly that is the most important feature of the colonial model: it encourages its adherents to look at the past not only in order to understand the present, but also as a guide to shaping the future. It was not enough to recognize the existence of two national collectives; the ways in which they came into being historically, and established relations of domination or exploitation between them, was important as well. That history could not be undone, but redressing its consequences was essential if a just solution were to be found.

However, Israel was not a ‘classic’ colonial society, as its “economic, social and political features are so unique that any attempt to analyse it through the application of theories or analogies evolved for different societies will be a caricature”.\(^{72}\) One of these unique features was the dominance of the Zionist labour movement in the colonization process, and its insistence on a Jewish labour policy, which acted to displace the indigenous population by settlers rather than exploit it. If the Jewish bourgeoisie had had its way, Palestine might have developed along the lines of ‘normal’ settler colonies such as Algeria, South Africa or Rhodesia, but instead Israel emerged as a state from which the majority of Arabs were removed. The 1967 occupation gave the Israeli bourgeoisie opportunities for exploiting Palestinian labour and captive markets, but also gave rise to militant resistance and its repression; it thus moved Israel closer to a South African model, with the occupied territories potentially playing the role of Bantustans.

Beyond few references to South Africa and apartheid, Matzpen rarely used this analogy. Its focus was on the exclusionary dynamics of Zionism that led to the dispossession/expulsion of indigenous Palestinians, and at the same time created a Jewish working class. Both aspects made the Israeli-Palestinian conflict different from South Africa and other settler colonies: indigenous people were displaced, and their struggle to return to their homeland was waged largely from outside the country. At the same time, the majority of workers were of settler origins. This meant that potentially they could become a force for change, but also that the focus for radical change would not come from internal class struggle. The overlap between national and class oppression in South Africa was not replicated in Israel/Palestine: “Israeli society, unlike white society in South Africa, can be revolutionized from within, provided that such a development is subordinated to revolutionary developments in the Arab world.”\(^{73}\) A revolutionary strategy would focus on fighting Zionist ideology and practices, recruiting marginal elements from within society (youth, Arabs), while working for regional socialist transformation.\(^{74}\)

By 1970, Matzpen’s theoretically elegant synthesis of opposition to Zionism combined with the struggle for socialism had started to fracture. It was attacked from two opposing angles: as not being sufficiently resolute in its support for the struggle waged by Palestinians (hence, not anti-colonial enough), and as not being sufficiently resolute in its support for class struggle (hence, not socialist enough). Both attacks came from within, and resulted in a split, and while neither rejected the original Matzpen formula outright, both stretched it in different directions.\(^{75}\)
Of greater impact was another split, in 1972, which saw Matzpen divided into two groups, equal in size, which claimed the same name and historical legacy. They became known by the location of their main branches, in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem respectively. Matzpen Tel Aviv (TA) retained the founding members of the group, and its orientation continued to reflect the spirit of the New Left. Matzpen Jerusalem adopted a tighter structure and theoretical framework, and eventually joined the Fourth International (led by Ernest Mandel). It adopted the name Matzpen Marxist for its journal shortly after the split, and changed the organization’s name to Revolutionary Communist League in 1975, but continued to lay claim to the legacy of Matzpen since 1962.

Initially, the two groups differed little in their approach to the national question and its relations to colonialism. Significantly, the most important compilation of analyses and documents about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that reflected Matzpen’s positions was prepared before the split but published after it, and was regarded by both groups as a crucial resource. Over time, the two groups started drifting apart, but the gap between them owed more to changes in Matzpen Marxist’s approach, which adopted a more resolute colonial model.

In its basic principles document, which dates from 1973 (re-affirmed in 1978 and not modified since), Matzpen TA reiterated most of the classical positions: it saw its field of operation as the struggle against the existing regime in Israel, and positioned itself in “irreconcilable contradiction with Zionism… a colonial enterprise that is being implemented at the expense of the Arab masses (primarily the Palestinian Arab people), under the protection of and in alliance with imperialism”. It regarded the State of Israel, “in its current Zionist form”, as the product of the Zionist enterprise and also an instrument for its expansion. The task was to topple the Zionist regime by abolishing the institutions, laws, and practices on which it was based. The ultimate goal was the “integration of the two peoples of the country – the Israeli-Jewish people and the Palestinian-Arab people – in a regional socialist union” on a basis of full equality.

While Matzpen TA maintained its critical attitude to Zionism and Israel, and support for Israeli Jews’ right to self-determination, Matzpen Marxist began to distance itself from that position. Much of its analysis revolved around the concept of the Arab Revolution, which had been used occasionally by Matzpen before the split. In the concluding chapter of The Other Israel, the leadership of Matzpen Marxist (Arie Bober, Eli Aminov and Michel Warschawski) referred to an Arab Revolution, which had “an objectively socialist tendency”, in that “it must destroy all the existing oppressive and exploitative structures in the Arab East” in order to succeed. The Zionist state would be defeated, and Israeli Jews would choose whether to “join the Arab masses in the struggle to overthrow it [the Zionist state, or]… permit themselves to remain a counter-revolutionary force that must be crushed by the Arab revolution”.

Noticeable in this document is the growing harshness of the rhetoric. This is not just a stylistic change – a real hardening of positions had taken place, and continued, possibly under the impact of contacts with activists from the region. Consistently with that position, within days after the October 1973 war started, the organization asserted its opposition to the war effort and called for the defeat of Israeli side: “we see Zionism as responsible for every drop of blood spilled in the region, by Jews and Arabs alike; the Arab masses who wish to regain their territories that are occupied by Israel, and restore the full rights of the Palestinians are not our enemies. Our enemies are the ruling classes in Israel and the Zionist state.” As long as Palestinians were denied their rights, and the Zionist state continued to exist, war was inevitable: “only a revolutionary leadership, which combines the struggle against Zionism with anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggle against all the privileged and propertied classes in the region, can lead the masses to victory”.
Between 1973 and 1975, much of the theoretical energy of the organization was invested in a document aimed to provide a broad programmatic overview of the ‘Arab Revolution’ and its implications for revolutionaries operating in Israel and the Middle East. Written in the name of “organizations belonging to the Fourth international in the Arab region”, it was written by Gilbert Achcar (of the Revolutionary Communist Group of Lebanon, using the alias Jaber) and Michel Warschawski (of Matzpen Marxist).

The *Arab Revolution* document identified the State of Israel as a combination of several elements: it was a product of a movement with “settler-colonial character”, carried out “at the expense of the original Arab inhabitants, most of whom were expelled.” The immigration process was “accompanied by the formation of a Jewish proletariat”, and “the very nature of the Zionist state – as expressed in its origins and continued reasons for existence, makes it a state that is of necessity directly linked to imperialism.” The central task of the Arab revolution was Arab national unity, but there were other national issues in the region (Berber, Kurdish and so on), which generally could be resolved through recognizing the right to self-determination.

So far, this formula reiterated the classical analysis of Matzpen. However, that right did not apply to the Israeli-Jewish case in the same way: “In the present state of Israel, the oppressor majority is Jewish and its oppression has been primarily based on expelling the original Arab inhabitants. In this sense, the only revolutionary attitude is to recognise the complete and unconditional right of the Palestinian Arabs to self determination, that is, their right to return to all the territories from which they have been expelled and to live free of all national oppression.” This presupposes “the destruction of the Zionist state, which rests on racist foundations incompatible with such a perspective. Only after the achievement of this necessary historical task of the Arab revolution, will it be possible to deal concretely and correctly with the question of the rights of the Jewish national minority in Palestine.”

As part of a successful revolutionary process, there is need to guarantee “full civil and cultural rights for the Jewish population, as well as complete equality between Jew and Arab… [and] recognising the right to self-administration of the Jewish workers in their regions, within the context of the political and economical centralism demanded by a workers state.” After the destruction of the Zionist state, “and only after this”, can the right to self-determination of Israeli Jews be recognized, including a right to form an independent state in part of Palestine. But this would be subject to the condition, “that the exercise of this right in no way affects the rights of other peoples”, and is “in harmony with the right of the Palestinian Arabs to self determination”.

There are two main differences between the standard Matzpen positions and those found in the Arab Revolution document. The first has to do with the attitude towards the State of Israel: instead of using relatively mild language (de-Zionization, abolition of discriminatory laws, transforming Israel in its current form, and so on), the task is now formulated bluntly as the ‘destruction of the Zionist state’. Coupled with the call for a military defeat of Israeli forces in war, this amounted to a clear rhetorical shift. The second difference has to do with self-determination for Israeli Jews. This right no longer stood on its own but was subordinated to the victory of the Arab Revolution (could only be recognized after the defeat of Israel), and to the prior right of Palestinians to restore their own self-determination.

In these respects, then, Matzpen Marxist moved away from its origins, while remaining within the colonial model. It took care to argue that it was not adopting an Arab or Palestinian nationalist approach: “one must distinguish very clearly between revolutionary national tasks and nationalist ideology with its essentially bourgeois character, which forms the greatest
obstacle to revolution because it delays the formation of a class consciousness for the working masses”. In its view, supporting national goals was essential step towards socialism, rather than a way of establishing the ‘credentials’ of Israeli activists for the Arab masses. In addition, for Matzpen Marxist the practical implication of the Arab Revolution framework was the need to coordinate work between Israeli and Arab activists, but without abandoning its organizational independence and class approach. These positions were reiterated on its 15th anniversary. It identified the programmatic bases of Matzpen as anti-Zionism, “opposition to the legitimacy of the Zionist state’s existence”, support for “equal co-existence of the two peoples of Palestine in their joint homeland”, and the need to mobilize the Israeli working class – on the basis of its contradictory interests – to the struggle against “Zionist colonialism”.

Both of the Matzpen factions continued to support a position that attempted to reconcile class analysis with national struggles, within the overall colonial model. The difference between them consisted in that Matzpen TA was more ‘diplomatic’ in its rhetoric while Matzpen Marxist adopted a blunt language that sounded more radical and ran the risk of moving too far in a Palestinian nationalist direction. Ultimately, though, despite their different styles, they retained much in common.

**Historical and political contexts**

As we approach the 1980s, it would be useful to provide a brief contextual analysis of the period during which the developments discussed so far had taken place. The 1960s saw the rise of the New Left and movements against the war in Vietnam, in support of racial equality in the USA and gender equality everywhere, against authoritarian regimes in the Soviet bloc and in favour of guerrilla campaigns for social change in Latin America.

The rise of the Palestinian resistance movement in the Middle East fit this pattern, by creating a popular grassroots alternative to the corrupt and inefficient Arab regimes. The prevailing sense of world-wide political and cultural transformation during that period, helped Matzpen grow by attracting young activists in Israel, and from among disillusioned left Zionist immigrants (from France and Latin America in particular). At the same time, this growth also opened activists to different ideas and resulted in internal divisions, which were later to cause organizational splits.

The following decade of the 1970s was different in many respects and presented a more mixed picture. The early years of the decade witnessed the American retreat from Southeast Asia, as well as the first serious military setback to Israel in 1973. The rise of third world forces continued with dispersed developments all over the globe: from the Ethiopian revolution of 1974 through the liberation of the Portuguese colonies in Africa in 1975 and the Soweto uprising of 1976, all the way to the victory of the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua, the Iranian revolution in 1979, and the liberation of Zimbabwe in 1980. Locally, the recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and Yasser Arafat’s 1974 speech at the UN general assembly, were significant in establishing the Palestinian national movement as a legitimate international player. This was accompanied by growing delegitimation of Israel: most African countries broke off diplomatic relations with it following its 1973 occupation of Egyptian territory, and in 1975 a landmark UN resolution defined Zionism as racism and a form of racial discrimination. The growth of resistance in the occupied territories and Israel, and especially the Day of the Land in 1976, provided an important impetus to all left-wing forces.

There were counter developments as well during the same period: Black September in 1970 Jordan, which forced the relocation of the Palestinian resistance to Lebanon, and the resulting
disastrous civil war in that latter country; the defeat of the armed left and the installation of military regimes in Southern Cone of the Americas. Above all, one development proved crucial for Israel/Palestine: the 1977 victory by Likud in the Israeli elections and the subsequent visit to Jerusalem by President Sadat of Egypt, leading to the Camp David accords in the following year. These provided the State of Israel with the most important diplomatic breakthrough in its history, and arguably allowed it to embark on the massive settlement enterprise that has dominated its policies in subsequent years. Internally, the Black Panthers protests early in the decade which, together with the Ashdod port workers of the same period, were the ‘great black hope’ of the left, promising the long-expected uprising of the Oriental Jewish proletariat against the state, had given way to massive support of the same oppressed population for the Begin government by the end of the decade. This trend grew even stronger in the 1980s and beyond.

Followed by the rise of the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the UK and USA, the anti-imperialist tide seems to have been halted and even reversed. The Sino-Vietnamese war, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the Iran-Iraq war sealed the fate of any remaining notion of a progressive alliance of forces opposed to US domination. Internally, opportunities that were opened up in the 1970s allowed for the growth of several left anti-Zionist organizations operating in Israel, though the Communist Party (Rakah) was its main beneficiary. This proved to have been a brief respite from the more important political dynamics, seen in retrospect: from the late 1970s onwards, Israel’s diplomatic fortunes began to improve, leading to the re-establishment of relations not only with the most important Arab country, but also eventually with most African countries, Eastern European countries, India, China and the Soviet Union.

In this environment, the call for ‘the destruction of the Zionist state’ began to look increasingly anachronistic. The regional opposition to Egyptian policy by the likes of the Saddam regime in Iraq and the Qaddafi regime in Lybia was a poor substitute for the fervour of the ‘Arab Revolution’ during the times of Nasser. The shift in the mainstream PLO towards acceptance of a compromise solution, which would see an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, reflected its recognition that not much could be expected from a marginalized rejectionist position. This reality could not have failed to have an impact on the anti-Zionist groups in Israel. With an Israeli-Jewish working class firmly aligned with right-wing forces, and showing no signs that its ‘objective’ proletarian status would ever lead it to develop a ‘subjective’ anti-Zionist class consciousness, and with the demise of the Arab Revolution and its Palestinian militant components, what was to be done?

The dilemmas facing the Israeli left were not unique to it, of course, and movements in other parts of the world had to deal with similar situations. In particular, the viability of an overall political and organizational framework, with set positions on all global and local issues, was in question. The model of a revolutionary party (or a nucleus of one seeking to develop into a full-fledged party), which was adopted by many groups, included a written programme (usually starting with grand Marxist theory and culminating in discussion of local concerns), regular publications, selling newspapers and handing out leaflets at universities, factories, and public gatherings, meetings of ‘cells’, and the issuing of position statements on current affairs. Organizations varied by the degree of formality and regularity of their activities, and by the extent to which they accommodated internal diversity or adhered instead to a strict centralist direction, but most followed this pattern. Each presented its own package and positioned itself as best it could to advance the inevitable revolutionary process.

By the beginning of the 1980s it had become clear that the model was problematic. It relied on the assumption of gradual and consistent expansion, with spurts of rapid growth when conditions
allowed. This was envisaged as the product of regular work by a small but dedicated group of activists. These activists would take advantage of the unfolding revolutionary process to extend their influence, and use that growing influence to extend the process further. But what happens when the process does not unfold fast enough or suffers a reversal? Only few ‘professional revolutionaries’ would sustain activities on a regular basis under such conditions. The rest would become disillusioned and retire, or seek a different mode of activism. A high turnover rate meant that organizations grew and shrank frequently, shifting between self-proclaimed ‘unprecedented growth’ and ‘deep crisis’, interspersed with periods of stability (or stagnation).

Within two decades of the emergence of the original Matzpen, most of its spin-off groupuscules had ceased to exist. Matzpen Marxist alone continued its mode of operation for another decade, but gradually shifted its energy into activities around the Alternative Information Center. The demise of these groups did not mean the demise of radical oppositional activity in Israel; they were replaced by a large number of groups and movements, with loose structures and a focus on specific issues. The Committee for Solidarity with Bir Zeit University, the Committee against the War in Lebanon, Yesh Gvul (soldiers refusing to serve in the occupied territories), Women in Black, the Committee against House Demolitions, the Committee against Torture, Physicians for Human Rights, Taayush, Anarchists against the Wall, and so on, are all examples of such movements. In addition, a focus on the dissemination of information has given rise to media agencies such as the Alternative Information Center, and numerous publications and forums for exchange and debate including News from Within, Between the Lines, Mahsom, Kedma, Haokets, Hagada Hasmalit, Challenge and others, many of which are also available online.

The new mode of activism has two main features that distinguish it from the preceding mode:

- It is much more focused and modest, mobilizing people around a specific issue that is of direct concern – war in Lebanon, torture, migrant workers’ rights, the ‘apartheid wall’ – instead of trying to cover all issues at the same time within an overall programme, and;
- It addresses the occupation and related issues from moral, political and human rights perspectives, without adopting an explicit socialist approach.

While some activists may regard themselves as socialist or Marxist, this remains a personal choice with no bearing on the goals and actions of their group. In other words, we no longer have left-wing revolutionary organizations (modelling themselves as miniature parties). Rather, these are single-issue movements (which may collaborate with each other), with a focus on the occupation and with no claims to be speaking for – or even about – the working class, or to be using Marxist theory to justify their positions. Abandoning socialism did not mean abandoning the quest for social justice, however; only discarding one specific and restrictive mode of analysis. Having said that, it is important to realize that we are not looking at a completely new set of activists; many of the new movements have benefited from the experience, initiative and ongoing involvement of former members of radical left organizations.

In their rhetoric, many of the new movements and media collectives frequently refer to apartheid and South Africa, both in negative (‘apartheid wall’) and positive (‘one-state solution’) terms. The older Matzpen operated in a context of other forms of oppression and struggle that seemed closer to its own cause. Only with the Soweto uprising of late 1970s, South Africa began to occupy a symbolic place in left-wing discourse internationally. The use of South African analogies increased with the first Palestinian Intifada of the late 1980s and with the last phase of the South African liberation struggle of the early 1990s, but by that time Matzpen had ceased to be an important player on the protest scene.
Conclusions

Two evaluations of the experience of the anti-Zionist left, written more than a decade apart, are instructive in examining its approach. In 1992, commemorating its 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, Matzpen TA admitted making mistakes (being too generous in the analysis of other ‘progressive’ forces). It attributed its inability to grow in size and influence, despite having been correct with most of its positions, to Soviet bureaucratic oppression, which indelibly tainted the struggle for socialism. In a more critical vein, reflecting on the reception of the documentary film *Matzpen: Anti Zionist Israelis* by Eran Torbiner (2003), the former leader of Matzpen Marxist noted two reasons for the failure of the left:

- The expectation that Zionism would be swept away by the rise of a progressive anti-colonial movement has proven false: instead of growing opposition to Zionism, it has gained support, and the anti-Zionist left was marginalized further as a result.
- The left’s conviction that revolution was always around the corner, if only the masses overcame their false consciousness, led it to focus on attacks on reformist and Stalinist leaderships, rather than on the need to prepare for real social and political challenges.

The fight against Zionism was not doomed, in Warschawski’s view. However, new methods must be used, drawing on the lessons of the global justice movement (associated with the fight against capitalist globalization and the World Social Forum), which is conducted by diverse independent forces, civil society organizations, media activists and so on.

With changing organizational modes of action, and the dropping of socialism and class struggle as guiding principles, what is left of the anti-Zionist agenda and the colonial model? There is no single programme, of course, but much of what unites radical activists today was captured in a 2004 statement known as the Olga Document. That the two most prominent members of Matzpen TA and Matzpen Marxist, Haim Hanegbi and Michel Warschawski respectively, are among the six authors is a testimony to the legacy of the ideas associated with the organization.

The document asserts that “the State of Israel was supposed to grant security to Jews” (but has created a death-trap instead; that “the State of Israel was supposed to tear down the walls of the ghetto” (but is now constructing the biggest ghetto in the entire history of the Jews); and that “the State of Israel was supposed to be a democracy” (but instead has set up a colonial structure, combining “elements of apartheid with the arbitrariness of brutal military occupation”). Hence, “we are living in a benighted colonial reality—in the heart of darkness”.

To counter that, there is a need for an alternative vision based on the principle of “coexistence of the peoples of this country, based on mutual recognition, equal partnership and implementation of historical justice.” Zionism is based “on refusal to acknowledge the indigenous people of this country and on denial of their rights, on dispossession of their lands, and on adoption of separation as a fundamental principle and way of life.” Against this “we are united in the recognition that this country belongs to all its sons and daughters—citizens and residents, both present and absentees (the uprooted Palestinian citizens of Israel in 48’)—with no discrimination on personal or communal grounds, irrespective of citizenship or nationality, religion, culture, ethnicity or gender.” Dissolving the Zionist character of Israel, and bringing the 1967 occupation to an end, are essential to the opening of a dialogue about the specific political arrangements to be put in place, in order to put behind us “the nightmare of apartheid, the burden of humiliation and the demons of destruction” that have plagued the country.
Written in 2004, the document can be read as a summary of the main positions consistently put forward by the anti-Zionist left since 1967. Socialism is not on the agenda any longer, nor is the building of a revolutionary party a task activists set for themselves today. Yet, the analysis has changed little, the colonial model continues to have a big impact, and the conditions that gave rise to it are still the central focus of debate among the left, and in Israeli and Palestinian societies in general.

A few years later, in 2007, another document, the Haifa Declaration, makes many of the same points as the Olga Document. Speaking in the name of “institutions and members of the Palestinian minority”, the Declaration asserts “their national identity, national rights, and their right to democracy and equal citizenship”. It defines the Zionist project as colonial-settler, and argues that the 1967 Israeli occupation in its subjugation and oppression of people is worse than apartheid South Africa. To counter that, the Declaration puts forward a vision of “historic reconciliation between the Jewish Israeli people and the Arab Palestinian people”, which requires Israel “to recognize the historical injustice that it committed against the Palestinian people through its establishment”, recognize the Right of Return, the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and an independent state, and the rights of Palestinians in Israel.

Palestinians and Arabs, in turn, must “recognize the right of the Israeli Jewish people to self-determination and to life in peace, dignity, and security with the Palestinian and the other peoples of the region”, in a “democratic state founded on equality between the two national groups”. Israel must change from “a Jewish state to a democratic state established on national and civil equality between the two national groups”, in which Palestinians enjoy “cultural autonomy”, as an expression of their right to “self-determination as a homeland minority”.

Both documents advance a common vision of reconciliation, democracy and equality, both use colonial and (limited) apartheid analogies, but they do that on a separate ethnic-national basis. The content is similar, and the proposed solution identical, but the power of national identity is too strong to allow for a programme that transcends nationalism altogether. It is this point above all that continues to frustrate any attempt to apply South African analogies to Israel/Palestine. As recognized already by Tony Cliff and the Jewish section of the PKP 70 years ago, Jews in Palestine were not a thin aristocratic layer that was an appendage of colonial rule. They became a full-fledged national group with a distinct identity; they could not be swept away or submerged as individuals in a broader political framework. Any solution would have to take their group identity into consideration.

The current debate over the one-state solution, which seeks to adopt a South African model of a unitary state that incorporates all its citizens equally as individuals, cannot become meaningful in Israel/Palestine without coming to terms with its deeply entrenched national identities. They cannot be wished away. At this point in time, the Olga document remains valid when it says: “It is pointless, now, to guess the material future form of the vision of life together: two states or one?! perhaps a confederation?! or maybe a federation?! and what about cantons?! In any case, the primary condition for advancing the vision of living together is self-evident, both as a supreme moral imperative and as a practical matter of the here and now: an immediate end to the state of occupation.” Only on that basis can decisions about the future be made.

Nationalism remains a reality that must be recognized. On the positive side, while the radical left has failed to give answers that would gain much public support, it posed all the crucial questions. Identifying the problems correctly is one step towards a solution, though the road ahead of us is still long.
Notes

1 His name was Ygael Gluckstein, and at the time he was an activist in radical socialist circles. He is better known by another pseudonym, Tony Cliff, which he used since he moved to the UK in the late 1940s to become a prominent leader and theoretician of the British radical left.


7 The Zionist socialist movement Poalei Zion was formed early in the 20th century, with national branches in various countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including one in Palestine. In 1920 it split over the issue of affiliation to the Comintern. Led by Yitzhak Ben-Zvi and David Ben-Gurion, the right-wing rejected the Comintern’s conditions of admission and remained focused on settlement in Palestine, while the left wing was divided over how to balance the competing imperatives of Zionism and communism. See Nahman List, “Tzadak Hakomintern...”, Part 3, Keshet, 22 (1964), pp 154-65 (in Hebrew); Shmuel Dotan, Reds: The Communist Party in Palestine (Shabna Hasofer, 1991), pp. 37-63 (in Hebrew); on various attempts to reconcile Zionism and Marxism see Israel Kollat, “Zionist Marxism”, pp. 227-70 in Varieties of Marxism, edited by Shlomo Avineri (Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).

8 Communist International, Theses on the National and Colonial Question, 28 July 1920, Point 11(f), in http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch05.htm


10 The protocol of the discussion regarding Zionism can be found in http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch05.htm


12 In Manifesto of the Congress to the Peoples of the East, 1 September 1920, in http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/baku/manifesto.htm


14 The use of Yiddish was in direct contrast to the Zionist emphasis on the use of Hebrew as the sole medium of communication, but it also reflected on-going attachment to the Jewish labour movement in Eastern Europe. It thus played a dual role – distancing the Party from the organized Zionist-led Jewish community in Palestine, at the same time that it intensified its Jewish character. Both languages were equally unintelligible to the Arab masses of course.

15 The main institution of labour Zionism, founded in 1920, which combined trade union, cooperative, and land settlement functions.


17 That the Party may have continued to some extent to be aligned ‘objectively’ with the settlement project – even when it explicitly rejected the policies driving it – is an inconceivable notion for mainstream Israeli scholars, who do not bother to disguise their hostile attitude to the Party. The seminal work of G.Z Israeli [Walter Laqueur], MPS-PKI-MAKI: The History of the Communist Party in Israel (Am Oved, 1953, in Hebrew) stands out in this respect. Large sections of it are reproduced in Walter Z. Laqueur, Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East (Praeger, 1956), pp. 73-119. Shmuel Dotan’s Reds (1991) is marred by a similar bias, and engages in bizarre speculations and conspiracy theories at times, but is a more serious historical work. A useful discussion of sources and research on the Party is in Alexander Flores, ‘The Palestine Communist Party during the Mandatory Period: An account of sources and recent research’, Peoples Méditerranéens / Mediterranean Peoples, 11, April-June 1980, pp. 57-84.


Nahman List reports how Averbuch always immersed himself at home in “thick tomes” written by English, French, Russian and Hungarian Orientalist scholars, addressing the need to learn about and transform the Middle East as a messianic task. He saw the historical role of the new Jewish proletariat in Palestine as that of raising the consciousness and mobilizing the Arab masses against imperialism. See “Tzadak Hakomintern…”, Part 4. A brief discussion of the problems with the role played by the PKP in the Arab East is found in Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 374-86; 1148-55; see also Suliman Bashear, *Communism in the Arab East, 1918-1928* (London, 1980). A selection of articles on various Middle Eastern issues written mostly by PKP leaders in the 1920s and early 1930s and translated into French can be found in “La Troisième Internationale, la Palestine et le Parti Communiste de Palestine – 1920-1932”, on [http://321ignition.free.fr/pag/fr/lin/pag_005/pag.htm](http://321ignition.free.fr/pag/fr/lin/pag_005/pag.htm). The role of PKP members in developing Soviet understanding of the Middle East is discussed in Walter Z. Laqueur, *The Soviet Union and the Middle East* (New York, 1959), pp. 76-104.


22 Abu-Ziam [W. Averbuch], “Memorandum by PKP Representative to the Comintern”, 7th February 1924, in Zehavi, *Apart or Together*, p. 47.


24 Letter to the ECCI by M. Elkind, “On Gdud Ha-Avodah (Left) in Palestine”, 13th September 1927, in Zehavi, *Apart or Together*, p. 117. Having become disillusioned with the prospects of building a communist society in Palestine, Elkind and many members of the left wing of the Gdud left Palestine, and moved to the Soviet Union shortly thereafter. Most of them perished in the Great Purges of the late 1930s, as did many of the leading members of the PKP from the time.

25 An unsigned internal document, “Our Disagreements”, April 1926, in Zehavi, *Apart or Together*, pp. 133-36; such disagreements were a constant feature of the Party’s life, but those pushing for a more resolutely anti-Zionist direction could not become dominant as long as they included only Jews. Jewish dissidents tended to leave the country to the Soviet Union, and could not sustain a campaign to change the Party’s composition and strategy.


27 Letter from ECCI to Central Committee of PKP, 16th June 1928, in Zehavi, *Apart or Together*, p. 144.

28 *ibid*, p. 146.


30 The call for ‘indigenizing’ Communist parties based among settler or immigrant populations was not restricted to Palestine of course. Two cases are discussed in Allison Drew, “Bolshevizing Communist Parties: The Algerian and South African Experiences”, *International Review of Social History*, 48 (2003), pp. 167-202. Ironically, the call for ‘bolshevization’ in Palestine came from Jewish members, who worried that Arabization on its own would lead to the rapid promotion of unqualified Arab candidates into positions of leadership. The Comintern regarded the slogan of ‘Arabization plus bolshevization’ as an attempt to avoid the necessary indigenization, and thus rejected it.

31 An insider perspective on the Party leadership and the 1929 riots was provided many years later by the sole surviving leader from that period, Yosef Barzilai [also known as Joseph Berger] in his “Jerusalem, August 1929”, *Keshet*, 29 (1965), pp. 122-37 [in Hebrew]; also in Yosef Berger-Barzilai, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Revolution* (Tel Aviv, 1968), pp. 90-106 [in Hebrew].


“Resolutions of the 7th Congress of the Palestinian Communist Party”, in Zehavi, Apart or Together, p. 259. Most of the resolutions of what became known as the Arabization Congress can be found in Zehavi’s book, pp. 251-76; some of them were included in a 1934 Soviet publication, ‘Documents of the Programs of the Communist Parties of the East’, reproduced in Ivar Spector, The Soviet Union and the Muslim World, 1917-1938 (University of Washington Press, 1959), pp. 111-80.

Radwan al-Hilu (better known as Musa), the General Secretary, was Arab, and he was supported by Simha Tzabar and Meir Slonim, both Arabic-speaking Jews.

On the Popular Front policy see the 1935 speech by Georgi Dimitrov, general secretary of the Comintern, in http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/unity.htm

See various Party statements and leaflets from the early stages of the Revolt (during the general strike of April to October 1936), in Zehavi, Apart or Together, pp. 367-83; also Budeiri, The Palestine Communist Party, pp. 88-99; Yehoshua Porath, “Revolution and Terrorism in the Policy of the Palestinian Communist Party (PKP), 1929-1939”, Hamizrah Hahadash, 18, 3 (1968), pp. 255-67 [in Hebrew]

On the exchanges between the Party leadership and the Jewish section see Budeiri, The Palestine Communist Party, pp. 109-15; Dotan, Reds, pp. 273-306. The Jewish section accused the Party leadership of following blindly the Arab movement and its reactionary leaders, surrendering to Arab chauvinism and thus seriously damaging the work among Jews. For several years the section maintained autonomous existence, verging on independence. A detailed memorandum was sent to the Comintern regarding these issues, but may not have reached its destination. Only in 1942, when the Party was temporarily re-united, a Soviet visiting delegation received these critical points. See “Letter to the Soviet Delegation to Palestine”, 28th September 1942, in Zehavi, Apart or Together, pp. 399-403.

“Report of the Soviet Delegation to Palestine”, 15th October 1942, in Zehavi, Apart or Together, pp. 403-08. This self-criticism was not made public at the time.

On the exchanges between the Party leadership and the Jewish section see Budeiri, The Palestine Communist Party, pp. 109-15; Dotan, Reds, pp. 273-306. The Jewish section accused the Party leadership of following blindly the Arab movement and its reactionary leaders, surrendering to Arab chauvinism and thus seriously damaging the work among Jews. For several years the section maintained autonomous existence, verging on independence. A detailed memorandum was sent to the Comintern regarding these issues, but may not have reached its destination. Only in 1942, when the Party was temporarily re-united, a Soviet visiting delegation received these critical points. See “Letter to the Soviet Delegation to Palestine”, 28th September 1942, in Zehavi, Apart or Together, pp. 399-403.

On the background to the split see ibid, pp. 153-64; Ben-Zaken, Communism as Cultural Imperialism, pp. 127-35. ibid, p. 153

The embarrassing neutral position of the Party during the early part of the war, adopted in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 1939 and lasting until the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, was conveniently forgotten.


In ibid, p. 56.

From PKP 9th congress, September 1945, in Ben-Zaken, Communism as Cultural Imperialism, p. 138.


Ben-Zaken, Communism as Cultural Imperialism, pp. 137-42.


On the debates, shifting alliances and eventual reunification between the PKP and NLL see Budieri, The Palestine Communist Party, pp. 231-42; Ben-Zaken, Communism as Cultural Imperialism, pp. 173-84. Budeiri concludes that “The appeal the two hostile communities made on their respective members proved stronger than the promise of an eventual realisation of a community of interests between Arabs and Jews”, p. 266.


Eretz Israel (Land of Israel) was a term commonly used to refer to the entire territory of Palestine in its British Mandate boundaries until 1948, in contrast to Israel, a term which refers specifically to the State of Israel. Using the term did not signify any particular ideological allegiance at the time, as it has after 1967.

63 E. Israeli, “Palestine”, Matzpen, 1, November 1962.

64 For example, in an article titled “Zionism or peace”, Matzpen, 26, October-November 1965, A. Israeli called for the creation of a front, together with the Communist Party, the Semitic Action, and the Arab movement al-Ard (The land), as an alternative to all Zionist parties on the basis of rejection of Zionism and recognition of the national rights of both peoples of the country.


68 “General Declaration by the ISO”, March 22, 1968

69 Maki split in 1965 into one faction that retained the original name, despite having only Jewish support, and a bigger faction representing the majority, mostly Arab, membership. The latter was forced to adopt a different name, New Communist List (with the acronym Rakah). Between 1965 and 1967 the Soviet Union maintained relations with both, but after 1967 regarded Rakah as the official Party.

70 “Down with the Occupation”, A statement by the ISO, 1st January 1969

71 A. Orr and M. Machover, “Against the Zionist Left”, leaflet by ISO, 1970


73 Ibid, p. 25

74 The similarity between this analysis and L. Rock’s arguments in the beginning of the article is obvious, despite the 40+ years separating the two. The analysis of Zionism as a form of exclusionary colonialism was influenced by two other works, which originally appeared in French in the late 1960s. Maxime Rodinson, Israel: A colonial-settler state? (Monad Press, 1973); Nathan Weinstock, Zionism: False messiah (Inklinks, 1979).

75 For these perspectives see Ran Greenstein, “Class analysis and national self-determination: The anti-Zionist left in Israel/Palestine”, in Jews and the Left, edited by August Grabski (Jewish Historical Institute, 2008).


78 http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/mideast/toi/chap4-conc.html


80 The document title is “The Arab Revolution: its character, present state and perspectives”. There are drafts in English and Hebrew, but no published version in English. It first appeared in Hebrew in an internal discussion bulletin (no. 6, October 1973), and large sections from it were replicated in “The Fourth round”, Matzpen Marxist, 71, December 1973. In 1975, a French version was published in Paris, listing “Quatrième Internationale” as author.

81 Tamara Nir, “15 years to Matzpen: Reflections on a birthday”, Matzpen Marxist, 100, January 1978

82 For the Alternative Information Center see http://www.alternativenews.org/

83 “30 years to Matzpen, have we been wrong?”, Introduction to a collection titled 30 years with Matzpen, http://www.matzpen.org/index.asp?p=30years


86 But in contrast to the anti-Zionist left, which always attempted to speak in the name of Jews and Arabs alike and address both groups, the Olga Document is written by Jews addressing other Jews (despite the fact that many of its signatories have been active with Palestinians in other forums and organizations)

87 www.mada-research.org/archive/haifaenglish.pdf

88 That some of the key people behind the Haifa Document were involved in regular friendly dialogues with Matzpen, as activists in Arab Students Committee at universities in the 1970s, may help account for that.

89 The model itself is an idealized version of the South African situation, in which racial identities continue to play a crucial role, not only socially but also politically and legally, but that’s a matter for a different discussion.