

## Why Am I a Zionist? Part II

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 6, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

There are many lessons to be drawn from the history of the twentieth century. One of the most obvious is this: There is a moral authority to Jewish alarm. Jews drew an additional lesson from the miserable history of the last century, a lesson that is more uncomfortable for us Americans to acknowledge: When it mattered most, time and again, the great Western democracies were weighed in the balance and found wanting. When the Nuremburg laws were passed, the West objected only with words. After Kristallnacht, again, nothing but words. In the Holocaust museum here in Washington, there is a quote from a U.S. military official saying that it would not be feasible to bomb the death camps; The quote is superimposed over a picture of one of those camps, taken on the same day, from a U.S. warplane. As difficult as the challenge of forging a Jewish State would prove, once forged, at least Jews would have the chance to defend themselves. Those who speak breezily about the security concerns of the State of Israel, as if they were a mere smokescreen for otherwise pernicious policies, must remember this history, which is not ancient history.

It is one of the hallmarks of Zionism that it never had significant political power, nor economic power, nor any of the usual levers of influence within world politics until the creation of the State of Israel. The only thing Zionism had was moral suasion. This worked at times, producing the Balfour Declaration, but after World War I ended, and the British government reached different calculations of its interests, Whitehall was not hesitant to shut down Jewish immigration into Palestine. Even after the devastation of the Shoah became widely known, it did not result in an immediate uptick in support for Zionism in the halls of power in the victorious capitals of Moscow, London and Washington. Indeed, the immediate need for a place in which the long-suffering Jews of Eastern Europe could find refuge no longer existed because most of those Jews no longer existed. They were dead.

It is not hard to sympathize with those Arabs who lived in Palestine who found them displaced by the creation of the state of Israel. But, the conclusions of wars often entail such displacements. At the end of World War II, millions of Poles were forcibly relocated from lands being gobbled up by the Soviet Union. To compensate Poland, millions of Germans were expelled from Pomerania, Silesia and East Prussia and these lands were given to Poland. This was all accepted as a necessary fact, the necessity derived from somewhat understandable Soviet demands for a more secure border. No such acceptance has attended the creation of the State of Israel.

The moral calculus in the West started to change after a well-known incident. The ship *Exodus 1947* attempted to bring a group of Jews, mostly Holocaust survivors, to Israel. The British government refused entry and sent the ship back. Eventually, because most of the passengers were originally of German origin, the ship was forced to disembark them in Hamburg. In 1947, sending Jews back to Germany, was grasped not by the State Department, not by Whitehall, but by the average person, as a moral enormity. Negotiations for a division of Palestine continued. Britain announced it would no longer administer the region under the mandate. The United Nations finally voted on a plan to divide the land between Jews and Arabs. Jews greeted the decision with an outburst of joy. The Arabs greeted the decision with a promise of violence. It was a promise they kept.

Yesterday, we saw that clashes between Jews and Arabs in what is now Israel had begun in the 1920s with the Jaffa riots. In 1929, there was an especially vicious set of riots that began when the soccer ball with which a few Jews were playing fell into the vegetable garden of an adjacent Arab farmer. One of the Jews was stabbed. The event unleashed further rioting. In Hebron, sixty Jews were killed. In Safed, forty-five were killed or wounded. Even the British high commissioner, who was no particular friend of Zionists, concluded that the mufti's party was behind the attacks. The mufti, who would go on to make friends with Hitler, was a thoroughly pernicious character. In the event, the 1929 riots had ill effects on both the Jewish and Arab communities. Some Jews formed terrorist cells. The mufti competed with other Arab parties to fan the flames of religious extremism, out-doing one another in zeal. Hopes for a peaceful solution began to vanish.

Perhaps, those hopes could never have come to fruition. Colonel Kisch was a sober British officer at the time. He acknowledged both that the Zionist leaders sought a peaceful settlement with the Arabs and that there was a large body of moderate Arab opinion that sought such a settlement. "I have no doubt whatever," he concluded, "that had it not been for the mufti's abuse of his immense powers and the toleration of that abuse by the [British] government over a period of fifteen years, an Arab-Jewish understanding within the framework of the mandate would long since have been reached." He wrote those words in 1938.

There is no excusing the early Zionists who had also turned to violence, impatient with the strategy of seeking a political settlement. The Irgun was a group of Jewish terrorists who blew up the King David Hotel. The Stern gang assassinated Lord Moyne, British Minister of State in the region. In 1948, the Irgun brought a ship, the *Altalena*, carrying badly needed weapons to Israel. The new government of Israel knew it needed the weapons but it knew, too, that if it permitted them ashore, they would be strengthening Jewish terrorists. The order was given to sink the ship. The world has waited some sixty years for the political leaders of the Arab world to have such a moment.

So, we come to the second reason I am a Zionist. The violence of the inter-war years in Palestine made any kind of peaceful co-existence within a single political entity impossible. In situations where two different peoples claim the same land, the only solution is some kind of division. That division was accepted by the Zionists, but rejected by the Arabs. And, after the West and the world had repeatedly failed to defend the Jews of Europe, the Jewish claim to a state in which they could defend themselves possessed an overwhelming moral weight. The fact that Israel was born with an act of decency, the sinking of the *Altalena*, does not cancel the acts of brutality, on all sides, that accompanied the war for independence in 1948, but it told the world something important about Zionism, something good about Zionism, something the critics of Zionism should never forget: Located in a part of the world where politics is particularly brutal, the Jewish state would seek to embody the very same values we in the West hold dear. Ben-Gurion and the other founders of the Jewish state were political kin.

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