

Answer to a Letter

Ilya Ehrenburg

Introduction

A number of questions have repeatedly come up over the years as to why the Soviet Union in 1947 supported the partition of Palestine. Much of the analysis of this decision has been clouded by the traditions of Zionism and Palestinian nationalism. Internationalist positions have hardly come to the fore. The views of Gromyko given on partition at the United Nations are well known. (1) Here we publish the Pravda article of Ilya Ehrenburg on this question. There is now an added significance to the views expressed here as a recent collection of documents on Soviet-Israeli relations (2) has published a letter of Malenkov to Stalin, dated 18th September 1948, where it is recorded that Stalin had given instructions for an article to be published on the question of Israel. Accordingly, Malenkov, Kaganovich, Pospelov and Il'ichev had discussed the matter with Ehrenburg who agreed to write this, suggesting that the article should not carry a number of signatures. The article was proposed to be published in Pravda on the 21st of September 1948 subject to Stalin's concurrence. (3) The volume records that a noting on the document indicates that the article had the approval of Stalin (4) and was published on the projected date. It needs to be remembered that this article was published in particular circumstances. It is planned to publish further materials in the future on the question of Israel through which it is hoped to shed further light on the Soviet attitude to this complex question.

Vijay Singh

References

1. Andrei Gromyko, 'The Soviet Position in Palestine,' *Communist*, (Bombay), May 1948, pp. 450-56.
2. Sovetsko-Izrail'skie otnosheniia, Sbornik dokumentov, Tom 1 1941-1953, Kniga 1 1941 – mai 1949, 'Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia', Moscow, 2000, pp. 375-383. The archival source given for Malenkov's letter and the article of Ehrenburg is: AP RF, F. 3, Op. 65, D. 7, LL. 167-177. For the sake of convenience an existing translation has been utilised here.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 375.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 383.

I have received a letter from one Alexander R. in Munich. He writes:

'It may surprise you that I am writing to you, but I have read some of your books and I turn to you as a writer to help me solve what is to me a difficult problem. I am a

German Jew, a medical student, and of course, an anti-fascist. In 1938 I managed to get away to France. When the Nazis invaded France, I went into hiding, then fought for two years in the ranks of the Maquis, in the Gabriel Peri partisan detachment. I returned to Munich after the victory. I confess I was naïve – I thought that fascism had been wiped out. Now I am daily subjected to insults. When Hitler was in power, I believed it was a temporary eclipse, I regarded anti-Semitism as one of the features of the 'brown plague.' But why must I still read disgusting inscriptions on walls? Why must I listen to fellow-students telling me, 'Get out of here, go to Palestine'? Why was my friend not given a professorship, but was frankly told: 'There's no room for Jews here'? You cannot imagine how intolerable are these insults to one's dignity. I long for a most simple thing, for the right to live without a brand of shame. The Nazis made us wear a yellow patch on our breasts. Now everything is more subtle, but it is the same nevertheless. Under the protection of the Americans, the same Nazis are entrenched in all responsible positions. You probably know this, and I am not writing to complain or inform.

'I should like to know what is the attitude taken in the Soviet Union to the state of Israel. Can we see in it a solution to: the so-called Jewish question? To me, these are not abstract reflections, but a matter of life. In your novel, *The Storm*, I read gruesome descriptions of the murder of Jews at Oswiecim and other places. My entire family perished at the hand of the Nazis. What is to be done to prevent a repetition of those horrors? Yesterday I heard a colleague of mine say loudly: 'The Jews ought to be finished off.' I have never been a Zionist, but I am beginning to believe in the idea of a Jewish state. I am expecting an answer from you – for you are a writer of the country in which I believe with all my heart...'

I think the question posed by my unknown correspondent is of interest not only to him, and not even only to Jews, but to all people of intelligence and conscience. I have therefore decided to answer, not in a private letter, but in a newspaper article.

Alexander R. wants to know what is the attitude taken in the Soviet Union to the State of Israel. This question can be answered briefly: the Soviet government was the first to recognise the new state, it protested energetically against the aggressors, and when the armies of Israel fought to defend their land from the Arab Legionnaires commanded by British officers, the sympathies of our people were all for the wronged, not for the wrongdoers. This is as natural as the fact that the Soviet people sympathise with the patriots of Viet-Nam and not with the French suppressors, with the patriots of Indonesia and not with the Dutch punitive forces.

However, Alexander R.'s first question may be answered at greater length. The representatives of the Soviet Union in the United Nations have said that our people understand the feelings of the Jews who have experienced the greatest tragedy and have at last obtained the right to exist on their own land. Wishing the toilers of Israel success, Soviet people do not close their eyes to the trials in store for all honest people in the young state. In addition to the invasion of Anglo-Arab hordes, Israel is exposed to another invasion – not so conspicuous, but no less dangerous – namely, the invasion of Anglo-American capital. To the imperialists Palestine is, first and foremost, oil. The competition between marauders – Standard Oil on the one hand and the Anglo-Iranian Petroleum Company and Shell on the other – intrudes in the

life of the still frail state. Israel is threatened not only by King Abdullah's cutthroats, but by the interests of the Palestine Potash Company, the question of the Kirkuk-Haifa pipeline, American designs for concessions and military bases. The state of Israel is not headed by representatives of the working people. We have all seen how the bourgeoisie of European countries, with their longer traditions and older states, have sold out the national interests for the sake of dollars. Is there any reason why Soviet people should expect the bourgeoisie of Israel to have more scruples or display greater foresight than the bourgeoisie of France or Italy? Hardly. We trust the peoples. But the fact that the people in Israel are fighting, and that they are fighting bravely, does not mean that the people there are in power.

There are many workers, urban and rural, in the state of Israel. It is they who are bearing the brunt of the country's defence. Recently, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Israel, Mikunis, stated: 'We have no property tax, nor a tax on profits; it is a disgrace the way our manufacturers are piling up profits.' The workers thus have to fight not only against the invaders, but also against the greed of their own bourgeoisie to whom war is, just as to any other bourgeoisie, primarily a lucrative business.

I believe that the progressive men and women of Israel, its toilers, will find the right road amidst their extremely trying conditions. I am sure that socialism will triumph throughout the world, and it will triumph in Palestine too. But though I believe in the future of Israel, I must reply in the negative to my correspondent's second question—namely, whether the creation of that state provides a solution for the so-called 'Jewish question.'

I have always thought, and still think, that the 'Jewish question' can be solved everywhere only by general social and, hence, also intellectual progress. It can be solved, not by utopians, nor by diplomats, but by the workers of all countries. I admire the bravery of the soldiers of Israel in repelling the attacks of the British hirelings, but I know that the solution of the 'Jewish question' does not depend on military successes in Palestine but on the victory of socialism over capitalism, on the triumph of the lofty international principles inherent in the working class over nationalism, fascism and racism.

Obscurantists have since long ago invented fables designed to represent the Jews as some peculiar creatures different from the people around them. Obscurantists have maintained that the Jews live a separate life of their own, that they do not share the joys and sorrows of the peoples among whom they live; obscurantists have asserted that Jews have no sense of country, that they are eternal wanderers; obscurantists have affirmed that the Jews of various countries are a unit, held together by some mysterious ties. All these inventions found their extreme expression in Hitler's foul book, *Mein Kampf*, and were repeated by the SS-men who buried old Jews alive and flung Jewish infants down steep banks and into furnaces.

Yes, the Jews kept to themselves and lived their own separate life when they were compelled to do so. The ghetto was not invented by Jewish mystics, but by Catholic fanatics. In those times, when the eyes of people were blinded by the mist of religion, there were fanatics among the Jews just as there were fanatics among Catholics,

Protestants, Orthodox Christians and Moslems. But as soon as the gates of the ghetto opened, as soon as the mist of the night of the Middle Ages began to lift, the Jews of various countries joined the general life of the nations.

Yes, many Jews left their native lands and emigrated to America. But they emigrated not because they did not love their native land, but because violence and insults deprived them of that beloved land. And were the Jews alone in seeking salvation in other countries? That was also what Italians did, what Irishmen did, what Slavs from the countries oppressed by Turks and Germans did, what Armenians and Russian non-conformists did. Jewish toilers, like all others, are strongly attached to the land where they were born and where they grew up.

Jews live in different countries. Many of them live in lands in which their ancestors lived since time immemorial. The first Jewish memorials in Tunis, Georgia, Italy date back to ancient times. Obscurantists say that there exists some mystical bond between all the Jews of the world. However, there is very little in common between a Tunisian Jew and a Jew living in Chicago, who speaks American and thinks American. If there is a bond between them, it is anything but mystical; it is a bond created by anti-Semitism. If tomorrow a maniac appeared who proclaimed that all red-headed or snub-nosed people must be hounded and wiped out, we should see a natural solidarity of all red-headed or all snub-nosed people. The appalling atrocities of the German fascists, their proclaimed policy of wholesale extermination of Jews, a policy which they put into effect in many countries, racial propaganda insults followed by the furnaces of Maidanek – all that gave rise to a sense of a deep bond among the Jews of various countries. It was the solidarity of offended and indignant people.

The splendid Polish poet Julian Tuwim wrote an article during the war entitled: 'We Polish Jews.' He wrote of his patriotism: 'I am a Pole, because I was told this in Polish in my father's home; a Pole because I was fed on the Polish language from infancy, because my mother taught me Polish verse and Polish songs, because, when I was young, when I was shaken by the first tremor of poetry, it burst forth in Polish words. I am a Pole, because it was in Polish that I confessed the anxieties of my first love, and in Polish that I murmured of its happiness. I am a Pole also because I am fonder of the birch and the willow than of the palm and the cypress, and Mickiewicz and Chopin mean more to me than Shakespeare and Beethoven – for reasons which I cannot explain. I am a Pole because I was born and grew up in Poland, because I was happy and unhappy in Poland, because it is to Poland that I want to return from my exile, even if I were assured heavenly bliss elsewhere. I am a Pole because: I want Polish soil, and none other, to swallow me up when I am dead.' Julian Tuwim then went on to explain what bound him to the Jews: 'Blood exists in two forms: the blood that flows in the veins and the blood that flows out of the veins. The study of the first belongs to the realm of physiology. Those who, beside physiological characteristics, attribute to blood some other properties, some mysterious force, those, as we now see, reduce cities to ashes, massacre people, and, as we shall soon see, lead their own nation to ruin. The other blood is the one which the ringleader of international fascism is extracting from the veins of humanity in order to prove the triumph of his blood over my blood. It is the blood of millions

innocently slain, the blood of Jews, and not 'Jewish blood.' Why do I say, 'We Jews'? Because of blood.'

Of course, there are nationalists and mystics among the Jews. They produce the programme of Zionism. But it is not they who have settled Palestine with Jews. Jews went to Palestine: because: of the ideologists of misanthropy, the votaries of racism, the anti-Semites who drove people from their homes and made them migrate to distant lands in search – not of happiness so much as of the right to their human dignity. We all remember the epic of the Exodus, the ship which carried to Palestine refugees from Western Germany – people who by chance had escaped the furnaces of Oswiecim and Maidenek and then found themselves fired on by British soldiers. The state of Israel is something like that ship – an ark, a raft, holding people overtaken by the bloody flood of racism and fascism.

Why is my correspondent, Alexander R., ready to see salvation in Israel? Because the men who robbed him of his country are still holding sway in Bavaria, because the German racists enjoy the protection of racists from New Jersey and Alabama; because to a Bavarian Jew Hitlerism is not just a terrible memory; but something that is still alive, protected and cultivated. Perhaps there remains nothing for Alexander R. under those circumstances, but to circumvent the barriers put up by various 'observers' and make his way into Israel. But, while this may resolve Alexander R.'s personal drama, it cannot resolve the drama of Jews in the various countries where money, falsehood and prejudice dominate.

Eli Migniot, Communist Deputy of the French Parliament, writes in reply to the Zionist newspaper *Gazette of Israel*: 'It can only occur to reactionary Zionist circles that the State of Israel will attract the Jews of the entire world. French Jews are French citizens, they are fused with the French nation, having fought together and toiled together. To them, as to all Frenchmen, the future is in the victory over the survivals of fascism, over treason, injustice and exploitation.'

The United States of America has the largest Jewish population. When I was there I saw how the transatlantic racists outrage the sense of dignity of the Negroes, Chinese, Italians. It is obvious that the growing racism in the United States is a menace to the American Jews, and it is also obvious that the salvation of the American Jews lies not in the state of Israel, which could not accommodate even a small part of them, but in victory of progressive America over the America of the racists.

The Zionists say that the tragedy which overtook the European Jews in recent years was due, to the fact that the Jews lived scattered among other nationalities. Let us go back to the autumn of 1942. Hitler's hordes had then broken into Egypt and were not far from Palestine. Even if there had existed an independent Jewish state then, it could not have stopped Rommel's armoured divisions. What was it that saved the Jews of Palestine at that time? Stalingrad, the defeat inflicted on the fascists by Soviet people; for, instead of pushing on towards Jerusalem, Hitler had to turn his attention to the problem of defence.

In the fateful duel, the Soviet people smote down the enemy of all peoples – bloody German fascism. The Soviet people thereby saved Europe, and they also saved the

lives of millions of Jews. I was recently in Wroclaw. Jewish settlers there invited participants in the World Intellectual Congress to visit them. There were among us Polish scientists, Negro writers, Brazilians, Czechs. A little girl, a member of the Young Pioneers, addressed these words to the Soviet delegate: 'Tell the Soviet people that we, Jewish children of Wroclaw, bring flowers to your countrymen sleeping in the common grave. Tell the Soviet people that we know who saved us from death.'

Yes, there is only one solution for the 'Jewish question' – the victory of the progressive forces of mankind. Suppose for a moment that the most terrible thing happens – that world reaction triumphs. In that case it is quite certain that the state of Israel would become a new Oswiecim or Maidanek.

Before the war fascism was in the ascendant in various countries of Eastern Europe and Southeastern Europe. The Jews in those countries were persecuted – we need but recall the 'Iron Guard' or the pogroms in pre-war Poland. Then came the Nazis. They encouraged the marauders among the dregs of society and organized the wholesale murder of Jews. But under the pressure of the peoples, aided by the Soviet Army, the fascist rulers fell. The gentlemen who expected to revive the pre-war practices, the various semi-liberals and semi-pogromists, fled across the ocean. The toilers took power into their own hands. And I have seen with what zeal and patriotism the Jews in the people's democracies are rebuilding wrecked towns, working, studying, writing books, planting trees. In Poland, where before the war the Pilsudskyites harried Jews, there is now hardly a city, I think, without a street named in honour of the 'Heroes of the Ghetto'; for the heroic fight of the Warsaw Jews has become a matter of pride to the entire Polish people. When the fascist scum tried to engineer a pogrom in Kielce a few years ago, the people's government punished them as enemies of Poland. The Bulgarian people succeeded in preventing large numbers of Bulgarian Jews from being sent off to 'death camps.' After the 9th of September, the people's courts condemned the Bulgarian fascists whose hands were stained with Jewish blood. Today the Bulgarian Jews, among whom there are many former partisans, are working together with the entire Bulgarian people to build up their new democratic state. Their future is not overseas, but on the building sites of Sofia, in Plovdiv and Rusa.

In tsarist Russia, the government in order to divert the anger of the people from themselves, blamed the Jews for the country's poverty, for the strife and misgovernment. The 'Black Hundreds' organised bloody pogroms. Government dignitaries invented ever new restrictions. But the Russian nation was no party to these outrages. Maxim Gorki, in his article 'On anti-Semitism,' rightly noted that the common people of Russia had not been affected by the frightful contagion of anti-Semitism. The finest representatives of the Russian intelligentsia always raised their voices against anti-Semitism: we need but recall Leo Tolstoy's 'I Cannot Keep Silence!', Saltykov-Shchedrin's sarcasm, Pirogey's noble speech and Korolenko's hearty words. Maxim Gorki fought against anti-Semitism passionately and implacably. He called it 'a disgusting abomination.' The first bill providing for equal rights for Jews was introduced in the State Duma by the representatives of the working class of Russia.

The tsarist government artificially kept Jewish toilers separated from their Russian comrades. But labour, struggle, and the blood of strikers and demonstrators proved stronger than all prohibitions and all prejudices. Progressive Jewish intellectuals shared the life of all Russia, took part in the revolutionary movement, contributed to the country's cultural progress. Even in those bitter times the land of their birth was their country: they loved their native towns, verdant Byelorussia, the high waters of the Dnieper, our entire great and magnificent country.

The founder of our state, V. I. Lenin, castigated anti-Semitism in wrathful articles and speeches as a shameful thing. The October Revolution brought freedom and equality to all citizens of what is now the Soviet Union, the Jews included. Some of them regard Russian as their mother tongue, others Ukrainian, still others Jewish, but they all regard the Soviet Union as their country and are proud of being citizens of the land in which there is no longer any exploitation of man by man. In 1931, when the dreadful cloud began to form over Europe, two years before Hitler's accession to power, J. V. Stalin, foreseeing the crimes of the cannibals, said:

'National and racial chauvinism is a survival of the misanthropic customs characteristic of the period of cannibalism. Anti-Semitism, as an extreme form of racial chauvinism, is the most dangerous survival of cannibalism.'

When cannibalism set out to devour Europe, the Soviet people, led by Stalin, crushed the cannibals. Soviet Jews, along with the people of all other nationalities, self-sacrificingly defended the lofty ideals of our society, defended their native land. Girls, youths, old men escaped from the ghettos of Vilna and Minsk to join partisan detachments. The native land has become still dearer to every Soviet Jew: he remembers the death of the innocent victims of fascism; he remembers the severe battles and the fallen heroes; he is bound to all Soviet people by the ties of friendship in battle, and dear graves bind him to every inch of Soviet soil.

Let my correspondent, Alexander R. ponder over the events of the past decade, and he will realise that there is only one way to solve the 'Jewish question:' It is to abolish the 'Jewish question.'

We sympathise with the struggle of the toilers of Israel, they have the sympathies, not only of the Soviet Jews, but of all Soviet people – there are no admirers of Glubb-Pasha in our country. But every Soviet citizen is aware that a state is judged not only by its national character, but by its social system as well. A citizen of socialist society regards the people of any bourgeois country, and that means also the people of the State of Israel, as wanderers in a dark forest who have not yet found their way out. A citizen of socialist society can never envy the fate of people who carry the yoke of capitalist exploitation.

The future of the Jewish toilers of all countries is bound up with the future of progress, with the future of socialism. Soviet Jews, along with all Soviet people, are working to build up their socialist homeland. They are not looking to the Near East; they are looking towards the future. And I believe that the working people of the State of Israel, who do not share the mysticism of the Zionists, are now looking northward, to the Soviet Union, which is marching in the van of mankind towards a better future.

***Jewish Life* (New York, NY) June 1949**
Transcribed by George Gruenthal

Click [here](#) to return to the September 2006 index.

<https://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv12n2/ehrenburg.htm?fbclid=IwAR0I7IkIbi9mT-bK5YmLW0wawVO4FZZaEbqLxKgt-icJjYEtLwylLuQ-nzY>