

Mike Banda and Zionism

Rod Quinn

A READER of 'A Letter to Liborio Justo' (*What Next?* No.26) could be surprised that Mike Banda was comfortable with its publication a decade after it was written. It could be considered that his focus on the Israel/Palestine conflict would be blurred if the violent events of the past ten years and the wealth of scholarship arising from them were ignored. The reader must assume, though, that he holds to his core arguments. Calling "for a new synthesis of class, culture and ethnicity", the letter asserts that, because of Marx's "obsession with the class struggle and economic determinism", he and his followers "failed to grasp the centrality of the Jewish problem in Europe".

The national myth or imagined community is nowhere more fragile than in settler-colonial states such as Australasia, pre-ANC South Africa and Israel. Israel's national legitimacy, for example, is undermined by the degradation of the native inhabitants. Mike Banda's partisan stance on the Israel/Palestine conflict adds little to the sharpening debate initiated by scholars in Israel itself. Their work has subjected many of Zionism's key tenets to critical analysis.

Masquerading as a critique of a "Marxism" which has degenerated into an "apocalyptic fantasy", Banda's letter is, in essence, an apologia for Zionism. The chosen subject for Banda's assault on those he describes as apocalyptic fantasists is nationalism in general and Jewish nationalism in particular. Focusing on and clearly identifying with a mainstay of Zionist ideology, he asserts that "there could be no peaceful cohabitation of two nations and two incompatible cultures in one country"; he buttresses his generalisation with a quote from Rousseau who maintains that Jewish customs and laws and ceremonies will continue to survive "despite the hatred and persecution on the part of the rest of the human race". The Zionist mainstay that anti-Semitism is intrinsic to the gentile make-up is made even clearer by the pioneer Zionist Leo Pinsker: "Anti-Semitism is a disease; and, as a congenital disease, it is incurable." According to Banda, Lenin too was infected by a variant strain of the disorder. He "suffered from the same assimilationist cancer that affected everyone from the time of the Enlightenment". Millions

living in comparative security in the Jewish "Diaspora" have rejected Pinsker's (and Banda's) pseudo-scientific nonsense, a nonsense still woven into the fabric of the Israeli national myth.

Writing of the heroism of Hanna Senesz and her place on the Zionist pantheon, Judith Tydor Baumel asks:

"What makes myths come to life, how do they continue to exist, what makes them die? The plethora of myths enumerated above may be explained by a multitude of reasons. Among them, each Generation's desire for its own symbolic figure, and the changing needs of the divergent segments composing Israeli society at various times. Almost without exception, heroic symbols listed above were placed within a Zionist process which attached its martyrs to an ancient historical narrative, one which began with Massada and Bar Kochba, skipping nineteen hundred years of Diaspora Jewish history to pick up again in the Yishuv."

In much of the world, national myths, products of invention or the creative interpretation of some past event, provide the theme for celebrating patriotic calendar days. Israel's national myths provide the theme for behaviour of a qualitatively different and deadlier nature. Driven by its mono-ethnic fantasies, the Zionist state depicts the "alien" or "other" by the generic term, "Arab". Golda Meir, in an interview with the London *Times* even claimed that there were no such people as Palestinians. The fantasy decrees that the "Arabs" (read Palestinians) are interlopers in the land God gave to the Jews. Their transfer or removal, their ethnic cleansing (defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the mass expulsion or extermination of people from opposing ethnic or religious groups within a certain area"), has always been intrinsic to Zionist theory and practice. Banda identifies with this view in his prophecy that:

"With the recrudescence of anti-Semitism throughout the world – I advisedly include Argentina here – the exodus will increase dramatically. What then? There will be massive demographic changes and, in all probability, a new Palestine will emerge – in Jordan, which was Palestine before

the British annexed it.”

In his article ‘Could this happen again?’ in the *Guardian* of 3 October 2002, the Israeli historian Benny Morris exposes this key tenet at the core of the Zionist project in his quote from Herzl’s 1895 Diaries: “We shall try to spirit the penniless [Arab] population across the border by procuring employment for it in transit countries, denying it any employment in our country.” From the founding father of Zionism to Ben Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, the message was the same: “The compulsory transfer of the Arabs from the valleys of the proposed Jewish state (following partition) could give us something which we never had ... during the days of the First and Second Temple.”

Banda’s “massive demographic changes” are indeed occurring but they will not arise from a large influx of Jews into Israel/Palestine. In his *Israel and Palestine*, Bernard Wasserstein refers to “Professor Sergio DellaPergola of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, perhaps the leading Israeli demographer, [who] reckons that on medium projections of likely rates of natural increase and migration, Israel, even if it withdrew from all the occupied territories, would still have such a large non-Jewish population within fifty years that the likely result would be severe internal political conflict and possible partition of what remained of Israel.”

If Banda’s exodus of Jews from Argentina were to occur, it would be impelled by economic considerations not anti-Semitism. As with most migrating Russian Jews, their destination of choice would be western Europe or America, not Israel.

Conflating the Holocaust with the existence of Israel is a relatively recent ploy adopted by the Zionists and their fellow-travellers. Peter Novick in his *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* wrote that “Individuals from every point of view on the political compass can find the lessons they wish in the Holocaust; it has become a moral and ideological Rorschach test”. Previously, the disaster was seen as a vehicle for the strengthening of the Zionist project but also as something which threatened it. In Ben Gurion’s view, only certain survivors should be encouraged to migrate to Palestine. The others he described as “people who would not have survived if they had not been what they were – hard, evil and selfish people, and what they underwent there served to destroy what good qualities they had left”. Commemoration of the Holocaust also provided Zionists with the problem that monuments could result in the Jews being thought of as defenceless victims. Three attempts – in 1946, 1947 and 1948 – to create a Holocaust memorial in New York were rejected by that city’s leading Jewish organisations.

To subject Banda and the Zionists to Novick’s Rorschach test leaves us with some disturbing discoveries. In blaming the West as much as the

Nazis for the genocidal slaughter, he tells us that “Hitler’s aim was to expel the Jews. The Nazis even collaborated with the Zionists in transporting Jews to Palestine”. He claims that it was the allied imperialists, “fearing a stampede of Jews out of Europe”, who used their quota system to block a Jewish exodus and to stifle all news of the Holocaust. While his claims of allied imperialist cruelty and utter irresponsibility are true, he makes no reference to Zionist assistance to the Nazis. He fails to note that it was the Zionists who broke the Jewish call for a world-wide boycott of German goods and commerce. He also fails to note the Zionist agreement with the Nazis to conceal information of the approaching mass-murder of Hungarian Jewry from its ultimate victims. He has, for all his verbal commitment to Zionist ideology, overlooked what they say of themselves. Ben Gurion delegated the work for rescue of European Jewry to Yitzhak Gruenbaum who said, when it was proposed that money be taken from the Jewish National Fund devoted to the purchase of Palestinian land:

“They will say I am anti-Semitic, that I don’t want to save the Exile, that I don’t have a varm Yiddish harz.... Let them say what they want. I will not demand that the Jewish Agency allocate a sum of 300,000 or 100,000 pounds sterling to help European Jewry. And I think whoever demands such things is performing an anti-Zionist act.”

The Holocaust was also used to label those opposed to the Zionist project as anti-Semites; Jewish opponents of Zionist ideology were labelled as “self-haters”. A recent fairly restricted poll of European attitudes to Israel led to Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder of the Wiesenthal Centre, claiming that the results of the poll showed that “anti-Semitism is deeply embedded in European society”. Of the 7,500 who were asked which of 15 countries represented a threat to world peace, 59% named Israel.

Banda’s dismissal of other narratives including non-Marxist ones allows him to shrug off the rigour of the “scientific world outlook” he demands of others. By dismissing his “Marxists” as headless chickens “without hindsight, foresight or any kind of comprehensive vision” and claiming that “there has not been one noteworthy analysis of the cause and course of the Holocaust by a single Marxist up to this day”, he dismisses any opposition to his standpoint. To an extent, in fact, the monstrous course of the Holocaust is widely known; the complexities behind the *cause* are not. What *is* known is that the Zionist view of the Holocaust is one of gross opportunism.

Banda strives to demonstrate that Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and the whole of the “liberal and Marxist Left” underestimated the power of nationalism, particularly that of the Jews. His references, torn from time and context, could distract the reader

from the nub of the question: is all nationalist ideology anathema to those Banda's pillories as the "liberal and Marxist Left"? Would Banda's "regenerated communist movement" revise Zimmerwald and its denunciation of nationalism? Comprehensive rejection of nationalist ideology has always distinguished revolutionary socialists from their multifarious reformist cousins but why has Mike Banda selected Israel as evidence for his assertion of the power of nationalism? Could his judgements apply to any other situation? Would he suggest that millions of people fleeing from their increasingly impoverished homelands could never settle peacefully within another national or cultural entity? In the interests of all involved parties, should the Palestinians simply go away and make a country somewhere else while Israel prospers in its theocratic land of milk and honey?

A distinguished role-model for the legion of sectarians who have plagued the British left for at least a century was Henry Mayers Hyndman; it was he who probably coined the term "marxist". As a direct descendant in a long line of sectarians, Banda too uses the term to vilify the objects of his ideological ire. The term "marxist" suggests a doctrine, dogma or quasi-religious blueprint for political guidance. Hyndman then used it as a pejorative reference to the political tendency embracing the gasworkers' leader Will Thorne, Edward Aveling, Engels and Eleanor Marx. Banda's scatter-gun polemics leave us with a chronologically-frozen view of those he condemns as anti-semites. One "marxist", Eleanor, identified herself as Jewish, collaborated artistically with the Zionist author Israel Zangwill and was obviously at one with Amy Levy whose novel *Reuben Sacks* cocked a snook at Zangwill's and George Eliot's Zionism. Eleanor's identity with Jewish history, culture and the struggle against anti-semitism transcended the intellectual suffocation wrought by nationalist belief. Particularly as the anti-semitic clamour grew, Trotsky too sought to identify sympathetically with the Jews. He regretted the fact that he had not learned Yiddish and even thought that perhaps, as a temporary means of Jewish survival, some sort of autonomy or independent Jewish republic could prevail. He always, though, renounced Zionism as having a *utopian and reactionary character*.

The problem is not that the left have underestimated the power of nationalism – it is that they have often been tardy in opposing it. In British mandate Palestine the inchoate Jewish/Palestinian workers' movement was destroyed by nationalist obsessions. This movement not only embraced the early communist movement but included sections of the working class and their unions. Perhaps one of the greatest crimes of Stalinism was its Janus-headed approach to nationalism. In the early 1950s, precisely when Moscow was making preparations for a new anti-semitic pogrom, its

foreign representatives were producing their own versions of cultural chauvinism. Ostensibly as a counterweight to the culture of American imperialism, the various communist parties succeeded in dredging up cultural artifacts and symbols which provided them with some imagined patriotic legitimacy.

Banda asserts that the "chief foundation of political legitimacy in our time" is "the common cultural identity expressed in nationality". In fact mass deprivation created by capitalist "globalisation" has set millions on a world-wide quest for economic survival; for them, national identity is far from a major preoccupation.

Rejecting Banda's and his co-thinkers' advocacy of ethnic cleansing, some argue for a so-called "two-state solution" to the Israel/Palestine conflict. Sharon's "facts on the ground" have rendered that solution obsolete. The only conceivable outcome from this course would be a series of Palestinian bantustans or reservations in the midst of modern settlements peopled by a lumpen array of religious fanatics and economic migrants. It is significant that, before the collapse of South African settler-colonialism, at least one West Bank settlement "twinned" with a white South African town. It is clear that the only long-term course is for Jews and Palestinians to share, as equals, the same piece of land. To achieve such a rational end would involve confrontation with hugely daunting problems, many of which lie within each community. Divisions rending both national entities would be exposed once a common foe were removed. Class, religion and cultural identity could conceivably transcend the confines of imagined nationality.

A clue to Banda's own "absence of hindsight, foresight and comprehensive vision" is his statement that, as a child, "I believed instinctively that the Jews were a nation. But then I joined the Trotskyist movement". In common with many whose identity with revolutionary socialism was *instinctual*, absorption into a political sect came naturally. Natural too was his irrational identity with those who claimed that the only guarantee against another Holocaust was the Zionist state. When his WRP mentors decreed that "Zionism or any Jewish nationalism was unnatural, reactionary and an expression of imperialist influence and manipulation", he was torn between his opposition to the Holocaust and his instinctual support for the "efforts of the Jews to escape from another holocaust by setting up a state of their own in their ancestral homeland". Did he also have an instinctual belief in the dubious view (even in theocratic terms) that Israel was an "ancestral homeland" for Jews but not for its long-time occupants, the Palestinians? The reader can only hope that Mike Banda's commendable activities in support of the Kurds include some condemnation of Turkey's major regional ally, Israel. ■