

Books
Life&Arts

‘To live responsibly, inside history’

Essay | Three challenging books address the intricate, complex ties of anti-Semitism with the health of democracy, the changing politics of the left and the way the world views Israel. By *David Feldman*

From the beginning, Judaism has dwelt on the relationship between singularity and universality. In its account of the origins of the world, humankind and its divisions, the first 11 chapters of the Book of Genesis set out the universal background to Jewish particularity. The rub comes in chapter 12: “Now the Lord said to Abraham. . . I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” Anti-Semites have not taken this well.

Today there are 14.5m Jews in the world, of whom 6.5m live in Israel. The Jewish populations of Europe and the US are increasingly fearful of anti-Semitism. At the same time, much of the international left is enraged by Israel, “the Nation State of the Jewish People”. The interwoven relationships between anti-Semitism and the health of democratic societies, between the left and Zionism, and between Israel and the Jewish people are addressed by the authors of three challenging books.

In *Being Jewish Today*, Tony Bayfield, a theologian and former head of the Movement for Reform Judaism, reflects on the universal dimension of Judaism and those parts concerned with Jewish identity. He refers to the Book of Esther, set in the Persian empire in the 3rd century BCE, in which the eponymous heroine saves the Jewish people from a genocidal plan hatched by the king’s vice-roy, Haman. Each year Jews celebrate their deliverance in the festival of Purim. Every generation has its Haman, is the customary lesson. For Bayfield, however, the message is more multi-cultural: not give up on your beliefs and your “distinctive identity”.

Both interpretations resonate today when peopledom and anti-Semitism supply the ideas and experiences that drive Jewish politics and identity. Bayfield proposes that after the Holocaust traditional teaching should be reordered; that the trio of God, Torah and Israel should be reversed. In proposing “People and Land” should come first, Bayfield is in tune with most British Jews. In 2015 a survey of attitudes to Israel among British Jews, carried out by London’s City University, found that for all but 7 per cent, Israel forms a part of their identity as Jews and that 84 per cent take pride in Israel’s achievements.

When European Jews emerged from their ghettos in the 19th century, they grappled with the problem of how to maintain their distinct identity while acquitting themselves as citizens. For anti-Semites, these twin identities of Jew and citizen have been a malign hoax. Jews, they say, masquerade as patriots but in truth conspire to promote their own goals. Zionism emerged as an answer to the strains of citizenship and the problems of anti-Semitism.

Today, in the US and most of western Europe, systematic anti-Semitism is restricted to small pockets of opinion. That’s the good news. The bad news is that ideologically driven anti-Semitism is becoming bolder and casual prejudice against Jews remains widespread. A survey conducted by ComRes in 2018 found that almost one in five Europeans believe anti-Semitism is a response to the everyday behaviour of Jewish people. In many countries, recorded anti-Semitic abuse is rising and there have been murderous attacks by jihadis in Europe and the far-right in the US.

The left responds unevenly to these developments. Progressives are quick to condemn anti-Semitism when it stems from the alt-right. However, anti-Semitism also manifests itself within the left, often in the context of criticism of Israel, and among minorities who are



A swastika painted on a grave at a Jewish cemetery in Quatzenheim, France, on a day of national marches against anti-Semitic attacks, February 2019
Maxppp/PA Images/
Jean-Marc Loos

themselves victims of institutional prejudice. In some cases, instead of addressing the problem, leftists complain that anti-Semitism has been “weaponised” by the right, by centrists and Zionists. Of course it has at times, but it doesn’t follow that the accusations are fictions. The left’s failure to confront anti-Semitism effectively is a gift to its enemies.

It was not always like this. For much of the 20th century, it was the political right that appeared hospitable to anti-Semitism. Before the Nazis murdered two out of every three Jews in Europe, Jews on the continent were numerous and mostly poor. A clutch of movements aimed to combine socialism with Jewish peopledom. Labour Zionism was one: it envisioned a socialist future in a Jewish national home in Palestine. In the early decades of the cold war, after the creation of Israel in 1948, social democrats and trade unionists vaunted the new state as a model of non-Soviet democratic socialism. For the most part, they disavowed the displacement and injustices endured by Palestinians.

In *The Lions’ Den*, Susie Linfield, a professor of journalism at New York University, asks how it is that “Zionist” has now become a dirty word among the international left. She testifies to the brutal consequences of Israel’s dominion in the Occupied Territories and she mourns that Israel has “come to deny the national rights of a neighbouring people”. But this does not fully account for the idea, widespread in the radical left, that it would be correct and possible to remove Israel from the map and replace it with a single secular state in which Jews become a minority. To understand this, Linfield asks us to consider not only how Israel has changed but the left too.

From the Algerian and Tunisian revolutions in the 1950s, anti-imperialism began to replace anti-fascism as the primary principle driving the international left. This shift, which began well before the occupation, underpins what Linfield sees as the left’s departure from reality regarding Israel. Notwithstanding Zionism’s sometimes antagonistic relation-

ship to British imperialism, and the fact that *Mizrahim* (Jews whose origins lie in the Middle East) comprise around half of Israel’s Jewish population, Israel is taken to represent the last bastion of white, settler colonialism.

Linfield explores her theme through the writing of a galaxy of intellectuals. Not all of her subjects advocate a single state, but she convicts most of them of either naivety or dishonesty in how they assess the willingness of the Arab states and the Palestinian people to accept Israel’s existence. Linfield’s heroes are the Tunisian Jew Albert Memmi and the Irish-born academic Fred Halliday, whom she commends for their attempts

Of course Israel’s critics are not necessarily anti-Semitic, Linfield says – it is just that sometimes they are

to combine what is ethically defensible with a determination “to live responsibly, inside history”. Both were advocates of partition and two states, and neither nurtured fantasies about Jews and Arabs living together harmoniously.

Linfield is critical of both Israel’s intransigence and Palestinian irredentism, while admitting that the symmetry is unequal – “Israelis have attained a state” – and scorning the settlers’ belief that the boundaries of a sovereign state are flexible, “like an accordion”.

But it is at this point that Linfield’s ethical realism falters. What does it mean to live responsibly within history in Israel and Palestine today? When do facts on the ground constitute a new and irreversible reality? She makes a valiant case for the viability of partition and a two-state solution but is not optimistic.

Linfield deals with anti-Semitism briskly. Of course Israel’s critics are not necessarily anti-Semitic, she says; it is just that sometimes they are. For Bari Weiss, however, anti-Semitism is a growing danger to Jews and to the US.

A New York Times journalist, she has written her new book as a wake-up call.

Born in Pittsburgh, Weiss was shaken by the deadly attack on the city’s Tree of Life synagogue in 2018. She is revolted by white supremacists at Charlottesville chanting “Jews will not replace us”, appalled by leftists who characterise Israel as the last bastion of colonialism and alarmed by the danger posed to Jews and liberal values by radical Islam.

How to Fight Anti-Semitism is peppered with insights. Weiss is strong on how rightwing anti-Semitism functions, and she scores some hits in her attacks on the left and radical Islam. But sometimes she misses the target. Her writing about anti-Semitism among Muslims is a case in point. It is because of the growing Muslim presence, Weiss claims, that “it is dangerous to be a Jew in Europe.” In fact, so far as we can tell, most anti-Semitism in Britain stems from white men who are nominally Christian.

Undeniably, there is a problem of anti-Semitism among Muslim minorities – but Weiss takes a pick’n’mix approach to evidence, leaving to one side whatever does not suit her taste. Attitudes among Europe’s Muslims are more complex than her picture allows. For instance, a study carried out in 2016 by the German Institute for Employment Research found that attitudes to democracy and the role of religion in politics among Muslim refugees in Germany are similar to those of the population as a whole.

Like many others, Weiss proposes that when it comes to racism and threats to democracy, Jews are like the canary in the coal mine: that “what starts with the Jews never ends with them”. This idea seems plausible because of what everyone knows about the Nazis and the Third Reich. But often persecution has operated differently. The pogroms in Russia in 1881-82 and in Kishinev in 1903 began with the Jews but ended with them too. The Dreyfus Affair galvanised French politics but was not part of a general persecutory malaise.

The canary in the coal mine idea, by setting out from the presumption that

anti-Semitism is a danger to everyone, obscures the important point that in reality Jews need to work to build alliances, win friends and forge a common cause. Accounts such as Weiss’s, of politics and culture among Muslims, are not only crude, they also get in the way of building trust, to the detriment of both Jews and Muslims.

Jews’ growing insecurity in the face of anti-Semitism strengthens their attachment to Israel. The paradox is that criticism of Israel now divides Jews and leaves many feeling more vulnerable. Although Linfield and Weiss focus on the radical left, what is most striking is the way Israel has fallen from favour with sectors of centrist opinion. It is not the far-left but lawyers and civil servants in the EU who want to label the products of Israeli settlements so that consumers have the option of a boycott. These figures don’t seek to wipe Israel from the map but, in the opinion of the advocate-general advising the European Court of Justice, it is “hardly surprising” that some consumers regard Israel’s “manifest breach of international law as an ethical consideration”.

It is Israel’s illiberal practices, not its existence, that create a rift between successive Israeli governments and a significant portion of Jews in the diaspora, and between Israel and some of its potential allies. When prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently announced his intention to annex one-third of the occupied West Bank, he faced strong criticism, not least from liberal Jewish organisations in the US and Britain.

Most Jews outside Israel feel attached to the Jewish state but they also thrive where liberal freedoms win out. To the extent that Israel’s policies and practices deny core liberal principles and values, they present diaspora Jews and their friends with a challenge. The resulting tension becomes more severe with each passing year.

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The tyranny of strongmen

A timely and enjoyable look at the personality of dictators – and the need to defend democracy. By *Tony Barber*

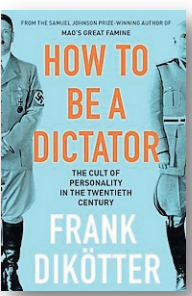
Democracy is on the defensive. Civic freedoms and the rule of law are being eroded in many countries. Parliaments, free elections, political pluralism and independent media are under assault from strongmen rulers and illiberal populists. Nonetheless, as Frank Dikötter reminds us in *How to Be a Dictator*, his *tour d’horizon* of modern tyrannies, much of the world was in an even darker place only a few generations ago.

“Even a modicum of historical perspective indicates that today dictatorship is on the decline compared to the twentieth century,” writes Dikötter, a Dutch-born, Hong Kong-based historian.

Author of a much-praised three-volume history of China under Mao Zedong, the communist despot responsible for the deaths of tens of millions between 1949 and 1976, Dikötter includes Mao and seven other dictators in his shrewd, fast-paced survey. These are Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, North Korea’s Kim Il Sung, François “Papa Doc” Duvalier of Haiti, Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania and Ethiopia’s Mengistu Haile Mariam.

Each chapter offers a potted history of its subject’s career, and adds value by concentrating on a feature that was common to all of them – the cult of personality. This phrase will be forever associated with Nikita Khrushchev, who used it in 1956 to denounce Stalin in his “secret speech” to the 20th congress of the Soviet Communist party.

Dikötter shows that cults of personality – less conspicuous in our times – lay “at the very heart of tyranny” in the previous century. So what are the major ele-



How to Be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century
by Frank Dikötter
Bloomsbury £25
304 pages

ments of a modern personality cult? Dictators tend to portray themselves as humbly born sons of the people, endowed with special talents and working tirelessly for the nation. Not unlike Vladimir Putin of Russia, Mussolini arranged publicity photographs of himself “racing cars, toying with lion cubs, addressing a crowd, threshing wheat or playing a violin. He appeared as fencer, yachtsman, swimmer and pilot.”

Dictators like to found or update official ideologies to reflect their self-

image as profound thinkers and wise rulers. Kim’s gift to North Korea was *Juche* thought, usually rendered in English as “self-reliance”. Duvalier, who once remarked that “when one is a leader, one must have a doctrine”, was awarded the title of Grand Master of Haitian Thought for his collected works, which state radio said elevated him to the level of Plato, St Augustine, Rudyard Kipling and Charles de Gaulle.

Mao “posed as a renaissance man, a philosopher, sage and poet wrapped in one, a calligrapher immersed in the literary traditions of his country”. No other dictator matched him for catchphrases. “Revolution is not a dinner party”, “imperialism is a paper tiger” and “power comes from the barrel of a gun” were all coined by Mao.

Over time, dictators become isolated from the people and suspicious of everyone. “Tyrants trust no one, least of all their allies,” Dikötter writes. He cites the example of Ceausescu and his “dour,

uncultured but ambitious” wife Elena: “Detached from reality . . . surrounded by the sycophants and liars they had promoted over the years, they had come to believe in their own cult.”

Dikötter is especially interesting on the attitudes to dictators of ordinary hard-pressed citizens and gullible foreigners. The masses learn to put on an act and fake consent, he says. When Kim died in 1994, North Korean mourners strove to outdo each other in outpourings of grief, “waving their fists at the sky in feigned rage”.

At the same time, people in a dictatorship often blame the leader’s evil advisers, not the genius himself, when things go wrong. Of course, this is partly because the dictator lies to the public on a grand scale. Mussolini went to great lengths to conceal from people the atrocities his regime committed in Libya and Ethiopia.

Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin also all conned visiting foreign intellectuals

and politicians into regarding them as reasonable men, not as the warmongers and organisers of domestic repression they actually were. Each was undoubtedly popular, even revered, for a while. But as the German diarist Victor Klemperer said of Hitler and the Nazis: “Who can judge the mood of 80m people, with the press bound and everyone afraid of opening their mouth?”

Dikötter slips up, however when he lists inflation in Germany in the early 1930s as one cause of Hitler’s rise to power. The real problem was economic depression and deflation.

Still, *How to Be a Dictator* is a timely book and enjoyable to read. It is strangely comforting to be reminded that many of the dictators in Dikötter’s book came to an ignominious end. But that is no excuse for underestimating the need to protect democracy today.

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