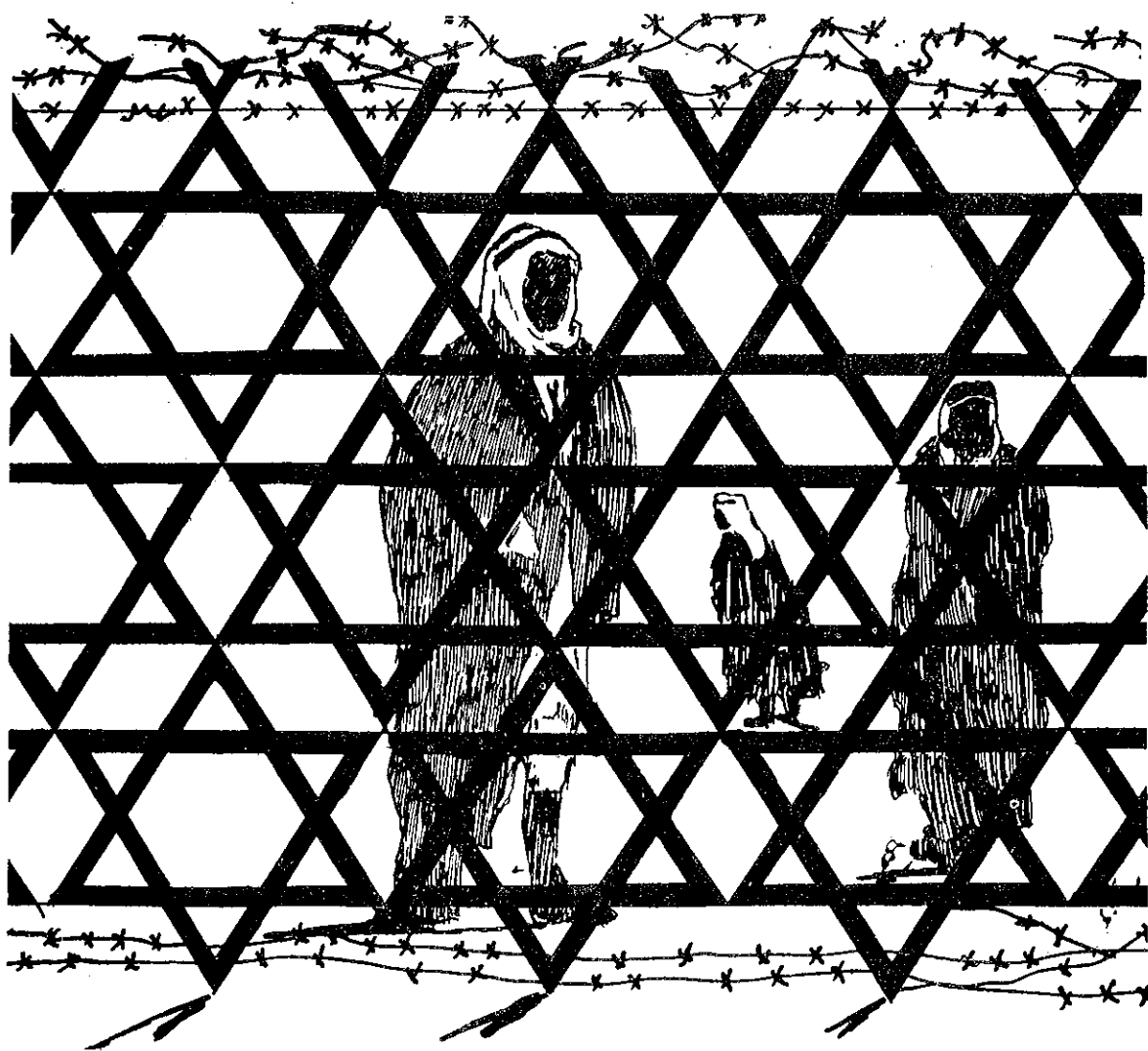


ON THE HISTORY OF TROTSKYISM IN PALESTINE



(The following interview was conducted in Haifa during August by John Bunze, who spoke to "Misha", one of the leaders of the "Israeli Socialist Organisation - Matzpen (Marxist)", a group of anti-Zionist revolutionists, both Jewish and Arab. The text appeared in the September 15th issue of Imprekkor. The translation from the German is by Intercontinental Press.

The ISO is commonly identified as Matzpen (the Hebrew word for compass), which is the name of its newspaper. Founded in 1962, Matzpen was the only active anti-Zionist organisation in Israel, uniting all those radicals considering themselves hostile to Zionism. In the course of time, several small groups split away from the ISO. Last February, after a process of political clarification, another split occurred. The present group has the perspective of building a Leninist party both in Israel and throughout the Arab East.)

Q. For how long has there been a Trotskyist group in Palestine?

A. Our Trotskyist group arose in the late 1930s and came out of three components.

First, during the 1930s there was a large immigration to Palestine from Germany. The exiles closely reflected the entire German political spectrum. Among them were a few comrades from the Brandler opposition in the Communist party, the majority of whom soon developed toward Trotskyist positions (1937-1938). They were, of course, politically relatively isolated from the general population, and these new comrades were active only on an individual basis in economic struggles. Naturally, the group tried to make alliances, but this was made difficult by their limited experience and lack of familiarity with their new circumstances.

The second component was a group of young people forming the so-called Chugim Marxistim (Marxist Circles), which was the youth group of one of the two wings of the "Left Poale Zion". At the time, this left wing was affiliated to the London Bureau.

The youth group developed under its own impetus toward Trotskyist conceptions, at first without overcoming completely its Zionist leanings. That happened very rapidly when the second world war broke out. About that time we (the German group) learned of the existence of this group, which in the meantime had left the "Marxist Circles" and had brought out a few issues of the newspaper "Kol Hamaamad" (Voice of the Class).

In the course of time various other elements, mostly from Hashomer Hatzair, the youth group of the left-Zionist kibbutz movement, came together with these two other tendencies.

All these elements united to form the Brit Kommunistim Mahapchanim (Revolutionary Communist Alliance), which at the beginning devoted itself both to theoretical and political work. (Independent of us, a group of German immigrants developed the notion that Trotskyists should not be active in Palestine; they restricted themselves purely to theoretical work.)

Q. What were your most important political positions?

A. From the very beginning we rejected Zionism in every respect. Zionism, we said, not only would be incapable of solving the problems of world Jewry, but would also create a new Jewish problem in the Arab East.

The Jewish problem under modern capitalism derives from the combination of the crisis-ridden development of capitalism itself and the fact that, because of the failure of the International revolution to spread after 1917 and because of the rise of Stalinism, the revolutionary socialist perspective on the Jewish question was never put into practice.

The principal effect of these factors was the fascist seizure of power in Germany, which eventually resulted in the physical annihilation of the greater part of European Jewry. The Jewish question was - and is - a symptom of the impasse in which contemporary capitalism finds itself and can be answered only by the socialist revolution. We rejected the formation of a Jewish state, because such a state could only be part of this decaying system and could only exacerbate the Jewish problem.

From its inception the Zionist colonization was by nature inevitably linked to the interests of imperialism, against which the native population of Palestine was moving. The Zionist colonization could succeed only if it functioned in close harmony with the interests of, and thereby received the aid of, one or another great power. This is demonstrated by the whole history of Zionism.

In Palestine, Zionism built up a second socio-economic structure, one from which the Arab population was excluded as strictly as possible.

The Zionists kept Arab workers out of the Jewish economic sector and barred Arab goods from Jewish markets, thus creating their own purely Jewish-capitalist sector as a forerunner of a Zionist state. Through this process the Jewish workers were isolated from the Arab population, and the Arab economic sector was deprived of any possibility of development. The Zionist so-called trade union, the Histadrut, was instrumental in both aspects of the process.

Q. How did you, as revolutionary internationalists, respond to all this?

A. At the outset we saw that the only way to overcome the socio-economic backwardness of the region was through a general anti-imperialist struggle for a United Socialist Arab East. (This analysis still holds for our current position on the Palestinian resistance movement.)

We saw - and see - as our task propagandising and organising toward this end among both Jewish and Arab masses in order to construct a united revolutionary socialist party in the region, which the Stalinists, whose policies always dovetailed with Kremlin diplomacy, were unable to do. In addition, the perspective of a united socialist Arab East was the only one in which we saw the possibility of integrating the Jewish workers into the anti-imperialist and socialist struggle in the region.

Q. Retrospectively, how would you evaluate the significance of your group?

A. During the second world war, our political and organisational situation was extremely difficult. We fought (and illegally) against three enemies - Zionists, British imperialists, and Stalinists. At the time, the latter were perfectly willing to turn us over to the British police.

Essentially, we concentrated on working out our

programmatic positions and propagandising for them with Kol Hamaamad. We also put out material in Arabic, German and English. We had contacts with some Trotskyists in the British army, and they helped us establish contact with Trotskyist groups in Cairo and Alexandria. Our international ties were mainly with the Revolutionary Communist party, then the British section of the Fourth International, and in part with the Socialist Workers party of the United States. We made contact with the Fourth International's European International Secretariat only after the war.

We frequently intervened with leaflets into workers' struggles in the British military installations, in the railway system, in the oil refineries, etc., concentrating on those areas in which both Jewish and Arab workers were exploited by imperialist capital.

After the war, we decided to continue working in these areas. But our intention, with which our international contacts agreed, could scarcely be realised. After the foundation of the Zionist state, very few Arab workers were 'tolerated' in the Zionist enterprises.

Q. What was your position on the founding of the Israeli state?

A. Even before the second world war, during the great political strikes and struggles of the Arab people, the British raised the idea of dividing the country into Jewish and Arab states. With the crush of wartime hostilities, this plan was pushed into the background. But at the end of the war, the future of the British mandate over Palestine was posed in a sharper form than ever before, for the following reasons:

First, British Imperialism had been greatly weakened by the war. Secondly, US Imperialism was beginning to take over in the British colonial areas. Third, the Arab national revolutionary movement was beginning to take hold throughout the Arab East. And fourth, Zionism used the desperate situation of the Jewish survivors in Europe to foster its own aims in Palestine.

Naturally, our most intense activity was directed against the November 29th 1947, decision of the United Nations General Assembly - a decision made with both US and Soviet support - that Palestine be divided into two states, one Arab, one Jewish. The consequence of this division was that about 80% of the Arab population was driven off its land and the Jewish state became a de facto outpost of US Imperialism, without whose economic and political support Israel could not exist. It is important to mention here that the founding of the Zionist state was also supported, both politically and militarily, by the Soviet Union.

During this period, we essentially limited ourselves to propaganda against the expulsion, oppression and expropriation of the Palestinians by the Zionist state and the conversion of the latter into an instrument in the service of US Imperialism's struggle against the developing Arab national revolutionary movement.

For starters we advanced - and still do - the following programme: the right of return and compensation for all Palestinian refugees, political integration of the Israeli working class into the region, and, as I mentioned before, realisation of both objectives through the struggle for a united socialist Arab East.

Q. What developments led to the formation of Matzpen?

A. After the war, and especially after the founding of the Zionist state, a good number of comrades left the country and others withdrew from political activity. Only a handful remained and, after 1951, were able to carry on some activity. During the 1950s I was, as a Trotskyist, completely isolated and was able to link up with only a few sympathising comrades in the Arab CP and a few Jewish comrades.

During this period I worked in the shop committee of one of the country's biggest factories. There, some

members of the CP, a few Mapam members and I worked together in a "left cell".

In 1951 there was a big seamen's strike. I was the liaison between our factory committee and the sailors' strike committee and helped build a mass solidarity meeting. This strike was particularly significant in establishing the character of the Histadrut. The sailors' strike was not purely economic, but raised the possibility of allowing for the creation of trade union formations independent of the Histadrut, which can in no way be considered a trade union. The state apparatus - the police, army and so on - was mobilised in a life-and-death campaign to protect the Histadrut leadership from the workers, that is, to prevent the formation of a real trade union.

Apart from activity in the shop committee, we carried out Trotskyist propaganda in the left cell among a few CP members. But for ideological, as well as objective and subjective reasons, this work could not be brought to organisational-political expression.

In the late 1950s a significant section of the young intelligentsia began to develop a critical attitude toward Zionism and its state, mainly under the impact of the development of the Arab revolution in Iraq. I came in contact with groups like Avner's Peula Hashemiti (Semitic Action) and Moked's Hasmol Hashedash (New Left).

Nevertheless, it was only with the formation of the group that published the newspaper Matzpen that the revival of revolutionary socialist organisation took place. Matzpen was significant not only for its rejection of Zionism, but also as a part of the worldwide breakup of the Stalinist monolith.

The group arose during the period of the Sino-Soviet polemics. A few young Communist party members in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem advanced the demand that the Chinese documents, instead of just the Soviet ones, should be published. They saw this as a demand for democratisation of the CP. Four members of the CP, even before they were expelled (1962), worked with sympathisers outside the party to publish Matzpen. At the end of 1962, the Arab comrades, this group, and came together and the ISO was founded.

Q. How would you evaluate the development of Matzpen up to the recent split?

A. As I mentioned, the opposition of the comrades in the Communist party was based originally on the CP's lack of democracy. But their political conceptions were very heterogeneous and unclear. They took no clear stand on the Sino-Soviet conflict. One of the comrades expelled from the CP considered Pietro Nenni's party a model.

The participation of both of us in the new organisation occasioned definite conflicts and crisis in the young group. Nevertheless, the discussion that ensued led to a clearer understanding of Zionism and the Arab revolution; that is, they partially accepted our position.

But in their general political conceptions - and above all in international and organisational questions - they rejected Trotskyism, although a few of them only partially.

Their perspective was to unite all the "non-Zionist" and even all the "almost-non-Zionist" elements. This made the organisation still more heterogeneous than it was originally. They grabbed onto all sorts of elements, from anarchists to "left" non-socialists. This led to a quantitative strengthening of the organisation, but at the same time to a lowering of its qualitative level.

In spite of all its serious weaknesses, the great positive value of the Matzpen group lay in the fact that it began to organise a general Jewish-Arab anti-imperialist struggle independent of the Stalinists, that it demonstrated to the Palestinian movement the possibility of mobilising revolutionary socialist forces in Israel,

that within the International leftist movement it popularised the idea of revolutionary anti-Zionist Arab/Israeli cooperation, and that it laid the basis for a new development of Trotskyism in Israel.

Q. What differences led the Lambertists and Maoists to split from the ISO?

A. After the June 1967 war and the consequent Israeli occupation of the Arab territories, the chauvinist and expansionist character of the Zionist regime became even cruder, and this was reflected by the division in Matzpen.

The position of the Lambertists in the ISO corresponded to the general positions taken by this sect. They denied the specific character of the Zionist state, viewing it as a "normal" bourgeois state fundamentally not different from the Arab states. Consequently, they refused to consider the peculiar position of the Israeli working class.

The Maoist position is harder to define, since it was less clear and more fluid than the Lambertist stand. On the one hand they viewed the Palestinian resistance movement as the sole embodiment of all revolutionary practice in the region, and on the other hand, they recommended that our work be confined exclusively to the Israeli working class. But that was not their final position; they constantly alter it as the need arises.

Q. What is Matzpen's situation after the splits?

A. The departure of these two groups had at least one positive result. Revolutionary Marxists on one side and a conglomeration of anarchists and spontaneists on the other now stand clearly counterposed.

Before the split, the lack of a united political organisational perspective made progress in our general work impossible. Through fraction work, we revolutionary Marxists had begun to train cadres. To facilitate this we based ourselves on the principles of democratic centralism in order to hold back all sorts of organisational and political individualism. In practice, this meant that activity in all areas devolved on our fraction.

In keeping with the revolutionary socialist perspective, we defended the old Trotskyist position of building a united revolutionary Marxist party in the region in order to bring about the united socialist Arab East. We also adopted other established Trotskyist positions.

In this, and on many other questions as well, insurmountable contradictions developed.

Even before the split, we tried to set the general work of the organisation on the basis of a programme. This programme consisted merely of the elementary fundamentals of revolutionary Marxism. But the anarchists and spontaneists strenuously resisted every programmatic position, even if they only opposed it on the vaguest general level.

While our organisation was trying to overcome the initial problems of cadre-building, they tried to conduct a hidden wrecking operation through slander.

Q. What is the main axis of your activity today?

A. In the first period of the ISO-Matzpen (Marxist) we still had to deal with some spontaneist weaknesses. Now our main activity is centred among the youth, who are only slightly corrupted by Zionism and are beginning to stir against Zionism's most murderous and repressive manifestations. We concentrate mostly on revolutionary Marxist building activities aimed at training cadres who will be capable, when conditions are ripe, of carrying out work in the working class in order to integrate the anti-imperialist and socialist struggle in the region.

We publish our Matzpen regularly. A little while

ago we began putting out some theoretical writings, partly in Arabic.

In the near future we intend to start publishing a regular theoretical journal and an Arabic-language newspaper. (Up to now, such newspapers have been banned by government censorship.)

We intervene in all the essential political struggles as the vanguard of the movement as, for example, in the current fight of the refugees from the Arab villages of Biram and Ikrit (*) to return to their homes. We are constantly strengthening our ties with the Fourth International, which gives us organisational, theoretical, political and material aid. This strong bond is necessary if we are to realise our main strategic task on a proletarian internationalist basis - the building of a revolutionary party in the region.

(* The people of these two villages in Northern Palestine, Arabs belonging to a Christian sect, had left them for a brief period during the fighting of 1948. Consequently they came under the various Acts which the Israeli parliament enacted in the late 1940s and early 1950s, enabling the Israeli state to expropriate them.

The villagers (who were actually sympathetic to the Zionist state and hostile to Arab nationalism) repeatedly petitioned the Government to be allowed to return. For many years they were told that the land was in a military zone and could not be occupied by any civilians.

After 1967 the land was reclassified and ceased to be a special security zone. Once again the villagers petitioned the Government. Not long ago they were told that they could move back. Advance parties arrived to start rebuilding the Churches. But then the decision was reversed: the Government now considered that even the resettling of these friendly villages constituted a threat to its racist strategy and would create a dangerous precedent for the millions of others whose homes and property were now comfortably settled by refugees from Western European suburbia and the U.S.A.

Despite fairly widespread agitation in Israel on behalf of the villagers the latest decision still stands, and a brief scuffle around the village churches ended in the arrest of a dozen or so people. Ed.)