

# CAMPUS WAR, 1977

## The Year that Jewish Societies were Banned

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When does anti-Israel political campaigning become antisemitic? This short question lies at the heart of contemporary disputes about antisemitism, anti-Zionism, free speech and the impact of public discourse about Israel on diaspora Jewish life. As much as this is a current issue, though, it is certainly not new. In the 1970s Jewish students fought a series of political battles on British university campuses against radical groups who sought to restrict, or even completely outlaw, their right to organize any pro-Israel or Zionist activities. This article will examine these campus battles and identify what they can teach us about the relationship — practical as much as theoretical — between anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

### THE NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS

Since the late 1960s student political factions in Britain have consisted, in the main, of the student wings of various left wing and far left political parties. By the mid-1970s, most of the factions operating within the National Union of Students (NUS) divided into two political coalitions. The Broad Left included the National Organisation of Labour Students (NOLS — the student wing of the Labour Party), student activists from the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Union of Liberal Students or Young Liberals (part of the Liberal Party),<sup>1</sup> and others who sympathized with a general left wing politics. Further to the left — often described as ‘ultra-left’ to distinguish them from the ‘far left’ Communist students — sat the Trotskyite National Organisation of International Socialist Students (NOISS) — the student wing of the International Socialists (IS) — and the Socialist Students Alliance

(SSA), controlled by the International Marxist Group (IMG). In addition to these political factions there were, and still are, several single-issue groups active within student politics, both locally in individual students unions and on a national level within NUS. The most relevant of these are the Union of Jewish Students (UJS), formed in 1974; and the UK branch of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), an international Palestinian student organization politically aligned, and at times organizationally linked, to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and within that to Fatah.<sup>2</sup> Islamist groups which supported the Muslim Brotherhood or the South Asian Jamaat-e-Islami, familiar on contemporary campuses, were almost entirely absent at that time, although Iranian pro-Khomeini activity appeared at the end of the 1970s.

Few of the factions active in student politics showed much interest in the Israel/Palestine conflict at the start of the 1970s. The energy they put into international issues was mainly focused on supporting liberation struggles in South Africa; other African countries such as Mozambique and Angola; Chile after the 1973 coup; and, closer to home, Greece and Portugal. All this took place within a general Cold War opposition to America and NATO, although the far left was far from uniformly pro-Moscow.

As the years passed after 1967 with Israel still in possession of the territories conquered in the Six Day War and starting in earnest to build settlements there, pressure grew within NUS to adopt a policy that would place support for the Palestinians alongside student support for other national liberation struggles. In May 1973 three representatives of NUS attended an International Conference of European and Arab Youth in Tripoli, Libya, organized and fully paid for by the Revolutionary Council of the Libyan Arab Republic. There were over 200 delegates from 55 countries at the conference, including a host of liberation movements. The PLO was present in large numbers; the ANC from South Africa; the South Vietnamese NLF; the Namibian SWAPO; the MPLA from Angola and others. Certain consistent themes emerged during the conference: that Zionism was a racist system, allied to imperialism; that Israel, the West Bank and Gaza should be replaced by a single state, which would give equal rights to all its citizens, irrespective of religion or ethnicity; that armed struggle is the only way to achieve this; that Zionism is distinct from Judaism, and Jews should be encouraged to campaign against Zionism; and that there should be no relations with Zionism or Israel. The NUS delegation held a side meeting with the leader of the GUPS delegation, Nabil Oulailat, to discuss ways to develop a policy for NUS on "the Palestinian question."<sup>3</sup>

## FREE PALESTINE AND THE YOUNG LIBERALS

The NUS officials were among a party of over 20 British delegates at the conference from a range of organizations. According to the NUS report, "The British delegation was organized and led by 'Free Palestine' which is the official organ of the PLO in Britain."<sup>4</sup> *Free Palestine* was a monthly newspaper which had been launched in 1968 by a group of Palestinians and other Arab supporters in London. It followed the PLO line closely, although it tended to support Fatah rather than any of the smaller Palestinian factions, but NUS overstated the case in calling it an official organ of the PLO. Rather, its role in organizing the British end of the Libyan-funded conference hints at a wider, and less reliable, range of financial backers, including various individual supporters and Arab governments. Although only a small-circulation newspaper, its target audience was firmly mainstream: it had little contact with the far left, focussing its efforts on influencing MPs, journalists and other mainstream opinion formers. *Free Palestine's* efforts to court NUS fit perfectly within this strategy of targeting mainstream opinion. Louis Eaks, the editor of the newspaper, followed up the contacts made for the Libyan conference by arranging for *Free Palestine* to have a stall at the national NUS conference that autumn.

Eaks had been chairman of the Young Liberals (YL or 'the YLs') from 1969 to 1970, and he continued to be active in the Liberal Party while editing *Free Palestine*. Peter Hain, chairman of the YLs from 1971 to 1973 before later joining the Labour Party, where he would serve in the governments of both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, was an occasional contributor to *Free Palestine*, as was Peter Hellyer, the YL International vice-chairman from 1968 to 1970. All three of the *Free Palestine* delegates at the International Youth Conference in Libya in 1973 were former Young Liberal activists.<sup>5</sup> This connection between the YLs and pro-Palestinian activism was not a coincidence. In a far cry from the Zionism of David Lloyd George, the YLs were the first organization on the British left to take up the Palestinian cause, and the first to call for Zionists to be excluded from mainstream political structures.

The Liberal Party at all levels was intimately involved in campaigning against South African apartheid, which opened doors to a world of national liberation movements and Third World post-colonial leaders. The first contacts between the YLs and the PLO were at an Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organisation conference in Cairo in January 1969 which Peter Hellyer attended, although the YLs' interest in the issue predated that trip. For Hellyer, support for the Palestinians was a natural extension of his anti-apartheid activities.

While opposition to South African apartheid was a core value for the YLs and not remotely controversial within the party, the relentless promotion of anti-Zionism by Eaks and his followers was very divisive, both within the YLs and with the party leadership. Their connections to Libya were an open secret and put off many of their colleagues. However, a pro-Palestinian position was formally adopted as policy at the YLs national conference in Skegness in March 1970, where Eaks had invited a member of Fatah as a guest speaker. The policy was rather confused: it supported Fatah's call for a single state of Palestine, but also called for ceasefire lines to be respected and the belligerent nations to enter negotiations. But most significant for the purposes of this essay, the new policy:

...called for the Israeli Young Liberals and Independent Young Liberals of Israel to be expelled from the Liberal International and the World Federation of Liberal and Radical Youth unless they accepted the principle of a secular Palestinian state.<sup>6</sup>

### WHITHER THE LEFT?

By the early 1970s it was generally accepted across the far left that Zionism was a racist ideology and that Israel was comparable to apartheid South Africa, but the issue was a low priority compared to Vietnam or South Africa and was not featured regularly on the pages of far left newspapers. This started to change in October 1973 when war broke out between Israel, Egypt and Syria (which were aided by troops from several other Arab countries.) The signing of a peace treaty ending the Vietnam War in January 1973 had left a campaigning vacuum which the Middle East could conveniently fill.

The approach of the far left, however, limited its ability to gain support amongst Palestinians and other Arabs in Britain. Calls for unity between the Israeli and Palestinian working classes, grounded in Marxist ideology, bore little relation to the facts on the ground and did not appeal to the majority of Palestinians, who viewed their cause as a simple national liberation struggle. For pressure groups like *Free Palestine*, the doctrinaire sects of the far left were a sideshow to the main strategy of influencing mainstream opinion in Parliament and elsewhere. In addition, the ultra-left considered many of the Arab students and other activists, often quite correctly, to be bourgeois and capitalist; in return, Arab students viewed the ultra-left with suspicion, again correctly, as opportunistic. According to Peter Hellyer, "the difference between analysing the issue as one of 'national liberation' and as one where a Marxist class struggle analysis was required was pretty fundamental."<sup>7</sup>

## NO PLATFORM FOR RACISTS AND FASCISTS

In April 1974, at their national conference, NUS voted to deny access to any individual or organization deemed to be racist or fascist. What became known as the 'No Platform' policy, though amended several times since, had two main planks: "to refuse any assistance (financial or otherwise) to openly racist or fascist organisations . . . and to deny them a platform," and "to prevent any member of these organisations, or individuals known to espouse similar views from speaking in colleges by whatever means are necessary (including disruption of the meeting)."<sup>8</sup>

The new policy instantly caused an uproar and condemnation poured down on NUS from all sides, including from within the student movement. What outraged so many was not just the restriction on free speech, but the implicit threat of violence in the promise to enforce it "by whatever means are necessary." NUS president John Randall explained, "We are not going to send round a heavy squad to break up meetings. . . . What we intend to do is to deny platforms to the apostles of racial hatred,"<sup>9</sup> but few were listening. Groups on the ultra-left, using as broad a definition of 'racist' as possible, took the new policy as a mandate to disrupt meetings on campus of a wide range of speakers whom they disliked, including Conservative MPs associated with the Monday Club.

These disruptions only increased the pressure on NUS to change the policy and the union called an emergency conference in London in June to review their new position. In a highly-charged debate the No Platform policy was retained, but without the mandate to disrupt "by whatever means are necessary" racist or fascist activity on campus. A further clarification from the NUS executive was accepted: "As a point of principle students' unions should not allow a platform to members of organised fascist, racialist groupings on its campus."<sup>10</sup>

Even before the No Platform policy was passed, there had been signs that anti-Zionist students sought to restrict campus Zionist activities on the grounds that they were racist. In 1973, Birmingham Polytechnic Students Union discussed — and rejected — a motion "to prevent Jewish societies from functioning on campus."<sup>11</sup> In February 1974, North London Polytechnic had passed a motion calling for the NUS Executive to "campaign against any Zionist societies or propaganda on campus" and for Students Unions to "prevent Zionists advertising in their publications."<sup>12</sup> An almost identical motion was submitted to the NUS Technical Colleges Conference the same year. In time, opposition to the No Platform policy within the

student movement subsided and it was adopted widely by individual Students Unions. There was disagreement amongst pro-Palestinian campaigners over whether it should be applied to Zionists, but those who argued that Zionism's underlying premise was racist could now cite the NUS policy as grounds for exclusion. In February 1975, Coventry Polytechnic passed a motion which resolved "To sever all connections existing between the N.U.S. and Zionist groups and organisations."<sup>13</sup>

At the NUS national conference in April 1975, the Union of Jewish Students, which had been formed the previous year, applied to join NUS as a "recognised student organisation." The then NUS president Charles Clarke, later to become Home Secretary under Tony Blair:

...explained that in the Executive's view, certain clauses of the constitution of the Union of Jewish Students in the United Kingdom and Eire, who had applied to join, were contrary to the aims of NUS.<sup>14</sup>

UJS were separately told that they could not join NUS as they were "racially exclusive." This was apparently based on the misconception that only Jews could join UJS, which, it was thought, contradicted the obligations of NUS to act "without regard to race, religion or creed."<sup>15</sup> When the matter was put to a vote UJS gained a majority, but not the two-thirds majority needed for admission. Sue Slipman, then a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and part of the Broad Left in NUS, was on the NUS Executive at that time. She remembers the Executive being divided over the question of admitting UJS, but feels that "nobody saw where excluding UJS from national conference would lead, in terms of setting an example for individual Students Unions."<sup>16</sup>

If the No Platform policy is one half of the story of how some Jewish Societies came to be banned at British universities, the other half came at the end of 1975 when the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 3379, "that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination."<sup>17</sup> The UN vote brought political coherence to a general anti-Israel position, which was, by then, widespread within student politics, and lent respectability to the idea that Zionism was a form of racism that should be banned. The only catch was that the student organizations supporting Zionism were Jewish societies. The theoretical distinction that anti-Zionists tried to observe between Zionists and Jews did not reflect the reality on most campuses. Slipman saw this as "a most peculiar Alice in Wonderland kind of time," which came about "more by accident than design." Combining the No Platform policy with the UN vote to justify banning Jewish societies was perfectly logical, but "no one got the irony that banning Jewish societies is in itself a racist act."<sup>18</sup>

## A RABBI IS BANNED IN SALFORD

The beginning of 1977 saw a rash of motions at Students Unions around the country equating Zionism with racism. Many of these did not explicitly call for Zionist activities on campus to be banned, but that was a logical implication that could not be ignored. Still, the idea that a ban on Zionist activities meant restrictions being placed on Jewish societies would not have occurred to everybody. Students Union politics were often the preserve of a small number of political hacks and rarely engaged the interest of the wider student body. Many Jewish societies were not involved in political activities and had no mention of Israel or Zionism in their constitution, even though most of their members would have considered themselves Zionists. Therefore Students Union activists, from within their political bubble, may not have realized the potential for Jewish societies to fall victim to a ban on Zionism. On the other hand, Jewish societies and UJS were keenly sensitive to the possibility that a policy equating Zionism with racism opened the door to exactly that consequence.

Many of the motions in the early part of 1977 were the result of 'Palestine Week' events which were held on several campuses, often featuring an exhibit and speakers provided by a relatively new group, the British Anti-Zionist Organisation (BAZO). With a strong presence in Scotland and supporters elsewhere around the country, BAZO's approach was very much targeted at the rebuttal of pro-Israel views and suppression of Zionist activity. University campuses were a key part of BAZO's strategy. An article written in October 1976 for use in student newspapers made it clear that the plan was not just to present the Palestinian case, but to remove the Zionist argument entirely from the stage:

Continuous national exposure of Zionist ideology has reduced its base among the student population to the point where its (few) spokesmen are demoralised, dwindling in number and hardly visible on the campuses.... We must reach into the other sectors and classes in our society if we are to ensure the complete elimination of an effective Zionist base in Britain.<sup>19</sup>

Jewish anti-Zionists were prominent in BAZO and they frequently promoted Jewish and Israeli anti-Zionist speakers, including Akiva Orr, Moshe Machover and Alfred Lilienthal. They also worked closely with GUPS, whose president, Mohammed Abu-Koash, spoke alongside Orr and BAZO Chairman Norman Temple at several BAZO-organized events in the early part of 1977.



In March, Jewish students at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) were granted a high court writ against the proposers of a motion equating Zionism with racism, put forward by the Palestinian Society, on the basis that the UMIST constitution included a clause preventing discussion of “political and sectarian matters.”<sup>20</sup> Soon after, UJS’s worst fears were realized at nearby Salford University, which had passed a policy equating Zionism with racism the previous October. A Palestine Week had recently been held at which Louis Eaks and Akiva Orr had spoken. The Jewish Society applied to hold an Israel Week, but was told that it could not include any political activities. After a failed appeal to the High Court by the Jewish Society, the Students Union announced that the Israel Week could go ahead as a cultural event. However, after hearing the first speaker, an Israeli diplomat, address a meeting of 250 people without any disruption, the Students Union promptly banned a meeting planned for the following day at which a local rabbi was due to give a talk on Judaism and Zionism. It would be alright for him to talk about the differences between Judaism and Zionism, UJS was told, but not the links between them. The Jewish Society was also prevented from setting up a bookstall to distribute Zionist leaflets. A Students Union meeting subsequently reaffirmed Salford’s ‘Zionism equals racism’ policy, despite the presence of NUS president Charles Clarke, who warned that NUS opposed any restrictions being placed on Jewish societies. NUS, though, did not have the power to enforce its policies on individual Students Unions, which often jealously guarded their autonomy against perceived interference from the national union with which they were affiliated.

By this stage the issue had reached the attention of the national media. An editorial in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* commented:

...the line between Judaism and Zionism is a fine one and Jewish societies cannot reasonably be expected to commit themselves to anti-Zionism. The unions where the anti-Zionist motions have been passed are themselves confused about their attitudes to Jewish societies. At Salford, there is no objection as long as the society’s role is cultural rather than political. Nobody, however, seems sure where to draw the line.

There is a long, passionately upheld student tradition of opposition to racism and the present policy of the National Union of Students is to deny a platform to those they think are fascists and racists.... Students Unions, however, must see that opposition to racism and the exclusion of fellow students from the union are very different matters.<sup>21</sup>



Similar conflicts were cropping up elsewhere. At Essex University, a motion was passed in May equating Zionism with racism. The atmosphere became so heated that both sides nearly came to blows. University College Swansea and University College Bangor both demanded an apology from Charles Clarke after he named them among six Students Unions that refused to allow Zionists a platform; not because Clarke was wrong (he wasn't), but because, they insisted, they did not discriminate against Jewish students, but only against Zionism. At Bristol University, a motion was proposed by the Palestinian Students Society to "sever all connections existing between this Union and Zionist groups and organisations," and "To expel Zionist student bodies affiliated to this Union."<sup>22</sup>

Jewish students were certainly not alone in opposing such moves. On May 7, the Federation of Conservative Students, Union of Liberal Students, National Organisation of Labour Students and the Communist Party National Student Committee issued a joint statement condemning all attempts to ban Zionism from Students Unions.

### JUDO AT YORK

In January 1977, York University Students Union passed a lengthy motion on Palestine which included a call "to sever all connections between NUS and Zionist groups and organisations."<sup>23</sup> The motion was proposed by Richard Burden, then the president of York Students Union and a former Young Liberal, now the Labour MP for Birmingham Northfield. Burden was astonished to find that the Jewish Society now expected to be banned. In an example of the profound cultural ignorance which blinded many anti-Zionist activists to the impact that banning Zionism would have on most Jewish students, it had simply not occurred to Burden that a policy to "sever all connections between NUS and Zionist groups and organisations" would affect the Jewish society. "Of course we are not going to ban you," Burden told the Jewish Society. "Why on earth would we?"<sup>24</sup>

The matter went to the Students Union Council (of which Burden was a member), which had the final say on the registration and funding of societies. The Council ruled that the Jewish Society was not Zionist, despite the Society insisting to the contrary, and could therefore continue to receive Union funds. The Jewish Society at York was very small — perhaps 30 or 40 members — but worked closely with UJS, which was developing a taste for confrontation and was not prepared to let the new policy stand unchallenged. They seized the initiative by amending the Jewish Society constitution

to include a clause explicitly supporting Zionism. Burden felt as if he were being set up, and he was not entirely wrong. According to Avi Linden, the Israel Officer for UJS at the time, “We used the official banning of the Jewish societies as a judo move. If someone wanted to ban us then they had to take the negative consequences.” The issue went back to the Union Council, which ruled in June that the change to the Jewish Society’s constitution could not be ignored. Burden did not personally support No Platform, but it was union policy and had to be applied. The Council issued a statement which reiterated its support for a Jewish Society, but said that it could not “continue to recognise or fund an organisation, one of whose explicit aims is to mobilise support for the Zionist State of Israel.”<sup>25</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, Burden views this as a rather naïve move. “If I had the political experience then that I have now, I would have recommended that we take no action: you don’t leap into the trap that somebody is setting for you.” But nobody on the Union Council saw the bigger picture and recognition of the Jewish Society was withdrawn. The intention was not to apply a strict No Platform policy to Zionists — they could still express their opinions and hold events in the union — but they could not be supported with Union funds. The fact that the Jewish Society would also not appear in the annual Freshers’ Guide or have a stall at the Freshers’ Fayre blurred this distinction somewhat. Conscious that it was not satisfactory for the Union Council to make this decision alone, a Union General Meeting was called for the following week to settle the matter.

Two motions were proposed to the new meeting. One, from Burden and Tim Lunn, the Students Union vice-president, reaffirmed the union policy equating Zionism with racism and called on the union:

To refuse to support, fund or recognise any organisation whose constitutional purpose is support of Zionist Israel and to refuse to support or fund any activities supporting Zionist Israel.<sup>26</sup>

An opposing motion called for the reinstatement of the Jewish Society, endorsed its right to express its support for Zionism and Israel, removed the equation of Zionism with racism and called for a two state solution in the Middle East. This second motion passed by 124 votes to 103. The ban on the Jewish society had lasted exactly one week and the official policy of York University Students Union now recognised Zionism as “an expression of the nationhood of the Jewish people.”<sup>27</sup>

The whole episode was a chastening experience for Burden, who learned some important political lessons very quickly. “The whole debate

misrepresented pro-Palestinian activism and led up blind alleys,” he feels now. Underpinning the whole debate was an inability on both sides to listen to their opponents:

People on both sides need to recognise and validate the deeply-held beliefs and collective memory of the other side. Palestinians need to appreciate the Jewish collective memory of existential threats, going back centuries. Israelis should understand the Palestinian collective memory of the Naqba. This doesn't happen enough.... If people, especially Jews, feel threatened, then they feel threatened and you should reach out to them and have a dialogue. You should try to be careful about the use of terminology, not leave room for misinterpretation and avoid words and actions that run the risk of being counterproductive. This also applies to people making allegations of antisemitism. It doesn't mean that there are subjects you must not discuss, but you have to consider the impact your words will have, and how they might get used in a way you don't intend.<sup>28</sup>

## THE RACE TO NUS

By 1977, NUS was the last remaining Students Union in Europe not to have a policy on Israel/Palestine. When students returned to their university campuses in the autumn, all sides in the argument knew that the race was on to prepare for the NUS conference in December, where the national union would finally adopt a policy on the issue. *The Observer* set the scene:

With the new academic year under way, Arab and Jewish students have wasted little time in resuming their bitter squabbling on the campuses of Britain.... The confrontation is expected to become increasingly intense in the run-up to the National Union of Students annual conference in December, where it is now almost certain that the Middle East will be debated.

The outcome of that debate is likely to determine a firm NUS policy on Zionism. Many Jewish students fear that if the vote goes against them, there will be an outbreak of anti-Semitism leading to the victimisation of Jews in universities and colleges.<sup>29</sup>

First out of the blocks was the Socialist Workers Student Organisation (SWSO — formerly the National Organisation of International Socialist Students)<sup>30</sup> at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, supported by Arab and African student societies there, which successfully

passed a motion to “refuse money and facilities to societies whose aim is to propagate Zionism and organise support for the state of Israel.”<sup>31</sup> SOAS Students Union officers insisted that the motion did not relate to the Jewish Society, only to union funding for an explicitly Zionist society. Attempting to prove the point, SWSO with the Arab and African Societies tabled an amendment to the policy they had created, allowing an Israeli Society to be formed but restricting its activities and denying it union financing. By December, the union executive had ruled that the Jewish Society was indeed Zionist, and could not receive union funds.

Similar motions were being debated in Students Unions up and down the country. At North London Polytechnic, a motion from SWSO was passed ordering that there should be “no material aid for Zionist propaganda,” although acknowledging that “Jewish students have to (sic) right to organise in Jewish Societies.”<sup>32</sup> One of the speakers quoted *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* during the debate.<sup>33</sup> The 20-strong Jewish Society was disbanded not long after. At North East London Polytechnic, a motion proposed by SWSO was passed which denied funds or facilities to any organization supporting Israel, and prevented any Zionist speakers from being invited onto campus. At Hatfield Polytechnic a motion was passed equating Zionism with racism, while affirming “the right of Jewish societies to organise along cultural, religious and social lines.”<sup>34</sup> Their political rights are notably absent from that list, although an amendment to offer support to any colleges that cut off funding from Zionist societies was defeated. At Middlesex Polytechnic a motion was narrowly passed which equated Zionism with racism, but like many such motions it stopped short of explicitly invoking the No Platform policy.

Not every student body was prepared to put the logical conclusion of such a policy down on paper, but without clarification to the contrary, everybody understood that once Zionists were branded as racists, there was nothing to stop a Students Union from cutting them off. Anyway, there were other ways in which these debates made Zionist activity more difficult: at Middlesex, antisemitic graffiti began appearing on posters and Jewish students received threatening phone calls.<sup>35</sup> At Leeds University, a female Jewish student was punched in the face by a Palestinian student before a debate, which was eventually won by the Jewish Society.<sup>36</sup>

The victory in Leeds was one of several that suggested UJS was finding its feet as a political force around the country. Jewish Societies won debates in Bristol, Cambridge, Hull and Liverpool, while at Warwick University a coalition of the Jewish Society, Conservative, Labour, Liberal and Communist students overturned a three-year-old policy equating Zionism with racism,

in the face of opposition from Palestinian and Trotskyite students. At Sheffield University, the 45-member Jewish Society won a debate attended by over 1,000 people, largely due to a coalition with Christian students and a sophisticated propaganda campaign. The most symbolic victory came at Salford University, which had been the first to enforce restrictions on its Jewish Society. A proposal by Dave Glanz, a Jewish member of SWSO, to maintain the existing ban on the use of union facilities by Zionist groups or individuals was overturned (although the policy defining Zionism as racist was maintained) and the Jewish Society was permitted to extend its constitution to allow it to take part in political activities.

### CREDIT AND BLAME

What had begun as a few isolated debates on university campuses had now become a major issue, filling the editorial columns and letters pages of national newspapers. UJS at that point received little funding from the wider Jewish community and, with the arrogance of youth, were quite happy to fight the battles on their own. They often had little choice: few in the Jewish community establishment considered student politics to be of great importance, often advising Jewish students not to get involved in debates about the Middle East, but rather to vacate the floor entirely. Jewish student activists who were enjoying the thrill of political battle had little patience with that attitude. David Cesarani, then the UJS political officer, viewed the communal leadership as “a liability . . . Slow to respond is putting it mildly. The leadership of the community was sclerotic and when it did act, incompetent.”<sup>37</sup> Despite this, UJS did try to enlist outside help. In November 1977 Moshe Foreman, the UJS chairman, briefed a gathering of Labour MPs, including four ministers. Soon after, Eric Moonman, Labour MP for Basildon, led an adjournment debate in the House of Commons on the efforts to ban Jewish societies and the associated intimidation and abuse of Jewish students who wanted to defend Israel. Moonman was a member of the Select Committee on Race Relations and had been increasingly brought into Jewish community affairs by Lord Fisher, president of the Board of Deputies. The debate was largely a rhetorical exercise, but it placed the Jewish community’s concerns on the statute book and garnered coverage in several national newspapers.

Moonman became increasingly popular with Jewish students and he began touring campuses to speak at Jewish Society meetings. Their energy and commitment certainly impressed him and his talks, in turn, boosted

their morale. UJS showed their appreciation by electing him honorary vice-president for 1978. From his perspective outside of the student bubble, Moonman had little doubt that the campaigns to ban Jewish societies would eventually fail. “Even the supporters of the Palestinians [in Parliament] could see that banning Jewish societies was wrong. It was taken as a given. The lack of wider political support meant that they were always going to lose the political battle in the end.”<sup>38</sup>

With the issue now firmly in the spotlight, one question being asked continually was whether any political faction or pressure group was behind the drive to ban Zionists — and therefore Jewish Societies — from operating on university campuses. Many pointed the finger at BAZO, and not just their opponents. *Free Palestine*, for one, was under the impression that BAZO was involved, writing in a review of the first two years of BAZO’s work:

The organisation was established at a founding conference in Glasgow in October 1975 to spearhead a campaign specifically to challenge Zionism and those organisations which promote or represent it. Its political position was greatly enhanced by the decision of the United Nations General Assembly to define Zionism as a form of racism, and this stand by the world community acted to strengthen BAZO’s campaign in British universities to bar explicitly Zionist groups under the National Union of Students ruling that no platform should be provided by university facilities to racists.<sup>39</sup>

Although not particularly influential within NUS at a national level, BAZO was active on several campuses around the country and was a constant thorn in the side of UJS. BAZO had a very confrontational approach. It promoted the idea that Zionists collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War, while at the same time comparing Israel to Nazi Germany. Richard Burden joined BAZO after he left York, but found it to be overly aggressive and its material full of dense diatribes. Even its name seemed unnecessarily negative: Burden suggested changing it from British Anti-Zionist Organisation to ‘Palestine Solidarity,’ as it should be trying to help Palestinians rather than arguing over the nature of Zionism. As a compromise, it was added as a suffix: BAZO became the British Anti-Zionist Organisation — Palestine Solidarity (BAZO — PS).<sup>40</sup>

Yet for all its hardline campaigning, even BAZO was unsure whether banning Jewish societies was the right thing to do. In a letter to *Socialist Challenge* (the newspaper of the IMG) in August 1977, BAZO insisted that it did not support banning pro-Zionist Jewish societies from campus, and had not done so “for a number of months.”<sup>41</sup> UJS activists at the time did

not consider BAZO to be responsible for an organized conspiracy as such, but held it at least indirectly responsible. "If you pour petrol all over a building," asks Avi Linden, "how can you avoid being responsible for the conflagration even if you do not actually light the match?"<sup>42</sup>

On the wider left, the International Socialists, now going under the new name of the Socialist Workers Party, were most supportive of the bans on Zionists. Richard Burden remembers them having "a very literal approach to the question of 'Zionism equals racism equals No Platform.'"<sup>43</sup> The ultra-left groups would always look for ways to distinguish themselves from the moderate left and the SWP in particular was quite predictable and opportunistic in this regard. Sue Slipman remembers the idea of banning Zionists as "something that was talked about and adopted organically as a general ultra-left position . . . nobody spoke out against it so a conspiracy of silence allowed it to gain momentum." This was not a matter of principle, but the SWP trying to "inject revolutionary zeal" into every issue that came along.<sup>44</sup> In June 1977 the SWP paper *Socialist Worker* reported:

Students in York are demanding that recognition of the Jewish Society by the Union Council be withheld until they change their explicit support for Zionism. Members of York NOISS, the student organisation of that supports (sic) the Socialist Workers Party, have declared: 'We support unconditionally the right of the Jewish Society to exist as a cultural and religious body within the students union. We support unconditionally the right of all people of all races to live in and participate freely in a secular state in Palestine.

'It is because we oppose all racism that we oppose an openly Zionist and racist Jewish society.'<sup>45</sup>

However, this remained a more localized phenomenon, with SWP activists proposing and supporting motions on their particular campus rather than following a centralized campaign from the party leadership. By October, the SWP felt the need to defend themselves against allegations that they were behind the banning of Jewish societies. As they never missed an opportunity to point out, several of their activists were themselves Jewish, including people who were promoting the bans on Students Union funding for pro-Zionist activities. In any case, they argued, they did not support restricting the rights of Jewish students; they were just opposed to the use of union funds to promote Israel and Zionism. Support was frequently voiced for the cultural and religious rights of Jewish societies, as if this mitigated circumscribing their political rights.



There was disagreement within the SWP about how to approach the issue. Andy Strouthous, an NOISS member on the NUS Executive, endorsed a policy to deny union funds to Zionists, adding that “pro-Israel government meetings should be treated like the one in Salford last term”<sup>46</sup> (i.e. banned). Not so, replied the SWP’s Alex Callinicos two weeks later: NOISS does not have a policy of physically preventing Zionists from meeting on campus, but it does argue that Students Union money and facilities should not be provided for the purpose.<sup>47</sup> Dave Glanz, who had led the NOISS anti-Zionist campaign at Salford University, wrote an NOISS Bulletin which stated:

We believe that clubs and societies etc. established in colleges which have the promotion of Zionism or Israel as part of their objectives are inevitably promoting racialism...we will campaign for this Union to refuse money and facilities when they aim to propagate Zionism and support the state of Israel.<sup>48</sup>

The SWP was effectively trying to separate the two parts of the No Platform policy that NUS had adopted three years earlier: no union funds or facilities for Zionism, but no disruption of their meetings either. Although they may have seen this as a compromise, their approach neglected the practical and emotional impact of denying Jewish societies funding for their activities unless they agreed not to promote Israel or Zionism in any way. This is without even considering the historic echoes of placing limits on Jewish behavior, if those Jews want to be accepted into the wider society.

## NUS TAKES CONTROL

From a situation at the start of 1977 where this issue was at the periphery of NUS’s vision, the leadership of the national union suddenly found themselves confronting a situation that threatened to get out of control. Nobody knew quite how they had got there, but there was a sense at the time that the banings were gathering enough momentum to become the dominant position within NUS, however unlikely that appears with hindsight. It was increasingly clear that the NUS leadership had to establish a policy on Israel/Palestine and set some limits on how the issue would be fought out on British campuses.

In June, GUPS invited NUS to send a delegation to visit Palestinians in various Arab countries. When UJS heard about the offer they insisted that Israel be included in the trip, so in late August four members of the NUS leadership set off for two weeks in Lebanon and Israel: Trevor Phillips, NUS national secretary and delegation leader; David Aaronovitch, vice-president

(Education); Eddie Longworth from the NUS Executive; and Colin Talbot, from the NUS Executive and NUS International Committee. The trip was paid for and the itineraries organized by GUPS and UJS. The composition of the delegation was carefully balanced: Phillips and Aaronovitch were both from the Broad Left, Longworth was a Conservative and Talbot from the Trotskyite Socialist Students Alliance.

The itinerary was similarly constructed to cover every angle. The group started off in Lebanon, which was in total chaos. The detritus of war was everywhere and basic order had completely broken down. A visit to an orphanage in Shatila refugee camp, full of children traumatized by the civil war, was profoundly disturbing. The group then flew to Israel via Cyprus. The Israeli leg of the tour was organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and fronted by the National Union of Israeli Students. Talbot was particularly impressed by their meeting with Golda Meir, by then almost eighty and no longer in office. Meir had obviously been very well briefed: she totally ignored Longworth, who was already pro-Israel, and Talbot, who as a Trotskyite was a lost cause, and concentrated all her efforts on persuading the other two of Israel's case.

The whole experience left a deep impression on all the participants. Talbot found it "incredibly emotional. One week we were in Shatila refugee camp seeing orphans from the Lebanese civil war, then seven days later we were at Yad Vashem." Phillips found it humbling: "The Palestinians were absolutely under the cosh [under pressure], while Israel was also caught in a desperate trap." Too many people on the outside, Phillips felt, presumed to tell both sides how to resolve their conflict.

The delegation wrote a report on their return, to be used as the basis for NUS to debate a policy on the Middle East at their conference in December. For Aaronovitch, the sole aim was to take the heat out of the issue: "We were a national Students Union, not a branch of the UN." Aaronovitch, Phillips and Longworth endorsed a proposal for two states, one Israeli and one Palestinian; that the PLO should be recognized as the representative body of the Palestinians; and that Zionism is not racism and is a legitimate expression of Jewish nationhood.

Talbot dissented from the recognition of Zionism and Israel, and wrote a minority report condemning Zionism as racist and endorsing a single-state solution. Talbot's report also included a recommendation that:

We should not place any bureaucratic or administrative measures in the way of an open and democratic debate, including any restrictions on the rights of the Zionists.

This reflected the position of the SSA and its parent body the IMG, which opposed the bans. It satisfied Talbot, who “always felt very uneasy about the bannings. The logic was clear but it was taking you to places where I didn’t want to be.” Now a professor at Manchester Business School, Talbot has changed his views on many things, including the existence of Israel. He left the IMG in the early 1980s, having been a member since 1972.<sup>49</sup>

Having amassed their evidence in the Middle East, NUS now turned to matters at home. In October a meeting of the NUS Executive voted, by 11 votes to 3, to propose that NUS adopt powers to suspend Students Unions which ban their Jewish society. This would require an amendment to the NUS constitution, which could only be granted by vote at NUS conference that December. Once the argument was won within the NUS Executive their strong leadership gave a welcome boost to UJS’s growing ability to win debates, and the momentum started to shift. At Hull University, the International Socialists Society withdrew a motion that proposed withdrawing union funds and facilities from Zionist groups. At Teesside Polytechnic, where Lewis Davies was President of the Students Union, an anti-Zionist motion was withdrawn by the proposers specifically because of the new threat of suspension from NUS. At Lancaster University, where there was an existing policy that did not allow the distribution of Zionist material on campus, Labour students proposed lifting the ban, again citing the warning from NUS.<sup>50</sup> Motions equating Zionism with racism were defeated at Leicester University, Sunderland Polytechnic and Aberdeen University. Motions condemning Students Unions that ban Jewish societies were passed at Leicester and at Exeter University, while the existing anti-Zionist policy at North East London Polytechnic was overturned.

Most significantly, GUPS, while criticising NUS for threatening to suspend Students Unions, announced that they opposed any bans being placed on Zionist student activity. GUPS included some relatively moderate people and one of the key aims of the NUS strategy had been to draw them away from the bannings. At the same time, Sue Slipman and others were in constant contact with UJS and the Board of Deputies of British Jews. UJS in particular felt beleaguered and frustrated. They had been warning for some time of the possibility of Jewish societies being banned, and felt, with some justification, that they had been ignored. The efforts of NUS to bring both sides together bore fruit on the eve of the NUS conference, when they brokered parallel statements from UJS and GUPS which called for debates to take place “within a free and open atmosphere,” and insisted that “No limitations on the rights of Jewish or Palestinian students or Jewish or

Palestinian societies, whether they are religious, political or social groupings, should be contemplated.”<sup>51</sup>

The NUS conference saw the successful conclusion of the NUS leadership’s strategy. The Middle East delegation’s report was presented to the conference and accepted; a motion was passed recognizing that “Both the Palestinians and the Jews have a right to national self-determination . . . [which are] not necessarily mutually exclusive;”<sup>52</sup> powers were granted to suspend member unions that banned their Jewish society; and, after several failed efforts by the NUS leadership, the entire No Platform policy was rescinded. The *Times Higher Education Supplement* breathed a sigh of relief:

The student year culminated in a triumph for moderation, as the new model National Union of Students met in December to ditch the extremist policies which had brought the union into disrepute and undermined the important educational campaigns the NUS was keen to wage.

At a Blackpool conference this month, the NUS agreed by a narrow margin to overturn its ‘no platform’ policy which had barred from campuses anyone loosely labelled racist or fascist. The same conference also voted to take steps to remove the spectre of Jewish students being discriminated against because of their allegiance with Jewish societies and the Zionist cause.<sup>53</sup>

## ANTI-ZIONISM AND ANTISEMITISM

This is, in large part, a story of unintended consequences. None of the people involved with banning Zionists from university campuses would have considered him or herself to be antisemitic. For the most part they acted, they sincerely believed, in the cause of anti-racism and out of sympathy and support for the Palestinians. Yet then as now, on every campus, the majority of ordinary Jewish students supported Israel and Zionism at some very basic, emotional level. It was Jewish societies that wanted to include the promotion of Israel and Zionism in their aims and objectives, and were consequently being denied the union funds and facilities provided to every other society. The theoretical question of whether or not it is antisemitic to describe Zionism as intrinsically racist divides many people. What UJS repeatedly did was demonstrate that, whatever the theoretical argument, translating that view into action opens the door to the marginalization of, and discrimination against, the majority of Jews. Whether or not this sort of disproportionately negative impact on Jews can be described as antisemitic, on a lot of campuses it left the relatively few Jews feeling isolated, intimidated and discriminated against.

This essay began by asking when anti-Israel political campaigning becomes antisemitic. However, even to describe these events as antisemitic requires some qualification. Antisemitism is often understood to mean a direct hatred of Jews or a desire to do them physical harm, and clearly neither motivation played much, if any, part in this story. The campaigns of the far left against Zionism were probably informed to some degree by prejudices about Jews that have punctuated the history of the left, but this is a story of a more insidious, but very British, form of antisemitism: that of partial exclusion, conditional acceptance to mainstream society, restrictions placed on what Jews can or should say and do if they want to be treated normally.

Yet a more profound factor was probably the fact that the campaign was framed from the outset as anti-Zionist rather than pro-Palestinian. Anti-Zionism is by its nature abstract, negative and potentially limitless. It fits the liberation politics of the student world — where everything is black and white and maturity and nuance are rare qualities — and provides a platform for the revolutionary agitation so beloved by Trotskyite groups. It is dehumanizing and leaves little room for compromise or dialogue. It is a world away from offering practical help to Palestinians. Richard Burden's realization of the need to listen to and understand your political opponents' fears and concerns is an important lesson to come out of this story. Another is that Jews, like all minorities, sometimes need to fight to establish their place in society. Bans on campus Zionism did not disappear after 1977 and continued to occur until the mid-1980s, but never reached the same pitch as they did that year. After the NUS conference in December 1977, UJS had one simple comment to make:

All that happened was that the national union decided that Jews have as many rights as anyone else. And that, after all, was all we ever wanted.<sup>54</sup>

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Liberal Party had two youth organizations with overlapping memberships and areas of activity: the Union of Liberal Students and the National League of Young

Liberals. ‘Young Liberals’ was often used as a generic name for both student and non-student youth activity. The Liberal Party is the forerunner of today’s Liberal Democrats.

2 GUPS was formed as an international body in Cairo in 1959; the UK and Ireland branch was formed in the late 1960s.

3 International Conference of European and Arab Youth, NUSUK Delegation Report, May 1973.

4 NUSUK Delegation Report.

5 The Delegates list names Louis Eaks, “Helluer” and “J Fogg” as the three Free Palestine delegates. “Helluer” refers to Peter Hellyer who has confirmed to the author that he was present at the conference; “J Fogg” almost certainly refers to Liberals for Palestine founder Nicholas Fogg. None of the British delegates at the conference were of Palestinian or Arab origin.

6 “Young Liberals reject extreme pro-Arab,” *Jewish Chronicle*, April 3, 1970.

7 Peter Hellyer, correspondence with the author, December 26, 2009.

8 “Dialectics of freedom,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 8:1 May/June 1974.

9 “Dialectics of freedom.”

10 “Dialectics of freedom.”

11 “Llandudno and after,” *Jewish Chronicle*, April 18, 1975.

12 Policy on Palestine and Zionism, North London Polytechnic SU Handbook 1977–78.

13 Motion on Palestine, February 1975. Copies of this and all other motions quoted in this essay are in the possession of the author.

14 “Minutes and Summary of Proceedings,” NUS April Conference, Llandudno 1975.

15 “Llandudno and after.”

16 Sue Slipman, interview with the author, January 5, 2010.

17 Full text available at <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/000/92/IMG/NR000092.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed February 5, 2010).

18 Avi Linden, correspondence with the author, November 26, 2009.

19 George Mitchell, “Statement on the struggle against Zionism in Britain,” published in *BAZO Infobulletin* October 1976.

20 “Students issue a writ,” *Jewish Chronicle*, March 18, 1977.

21 “Anti-Zionism on campus,” *Times Higher Education Supplement*, April 29, 1977.

22 Hani Salaman, motion on Palestine, May 11, 1977. It is not known if this motion was passed.

23 Richard Burden, Phil Harris & Steve Andrew, motion on Palestine, undated. As well as becoming union policy at York, this motion was submitted (but not discussed) to NUS conference in April 1977, hence the references to NUS rather than York Students Union in the actual text.

24 This and all subsequent quotes by Richard Burden are from an interview with the author, January 12, 2010.

25 “Students’ Jewish Society ‘racialist’,” *Yorkshire Evening Press*, June 16, 1977.

- 26 Richard Burden & Tim Lunn, motion for Union General Meeting, June 22, 1977.
- 27 Alan Newland & Steve Crook, motion for Union General Meeting, June 22, 1977.
- 28 Burden, January 12, 2010.
- 29 Iain Murray, "Students 'at war'," *The Observer*, October 16, 1977.
- 30 During this period, the student wing of the Socialist Workers Party was referred to both under its old name, the National Organisation of International Socialist Students (NOISS), and its new name, the Socialist Workers Student Organisation (SWSO).
- 31 Assif Shameen, "SOAS bans Zionists," *Sennet*, October 19, 1977.
- 32 Policy text, Middle East, 1977.
- 33 John Izbicki, "Left-wingers put student gag on Zionism," *Daily Telegraph*, November 18, 1977.
- 34 N. Rahimtulla & M. Ayyad, motion on Palestine, November 28, 1977.
- 35 "Middle East text for students," *Guardian*, November 25, 1977.
- 36 "Violence erupts in campus war," *Jewish Chronicle*, November 25, 1977.
- 37 David Cesarani, correspondence with the author, November 12, 2009.
- 38 Eric Moonman, interview with the author, December 11, 2009.
- 39 "BAZO enters third year of campaigning," *Free Palestine*, November 1977.
- 40 Burden, January 12, 2010.
- 41 BAZO Information Bulletin, November 17, 1978.
- 42 Linden, November 14, 2009.
- 43 Burden, January 12, 2010.
- 44 Slipman, January 5, 2010.
- 45 "Israel uses torture," *Socialist Worker*, June 25, 1977.
- 46 "NO to anti-semitism NO to Israel as well," *Socialist Worker*, October 29, 1977.
- 47 Alex Callinicos, "Argue with Zionists," *Socialist Worker*, November 12, 1977.
- 48 Dave Glanz, *NOISS Bulletin* November 1977; "Zionism: A Racist Ideology," *Agitator*, December 1977.
- 49 Interviews with the author: Phillips, December 14, 2009; Aaronovitch, December 22, 2009; Talbot, January 12, 2010.
- 50 It is not known if this new policy was passed.
- 51 Annabel Ferriman, "Move to end students' Jewish-Arab conflict," *The Times*, December 2, 1977.
- 52 Paul Infield, "NUS Conference 1977—What Really Happened," *UJS Journal*, December 1977.
- 53 Peter David, "NUS strides along middle of the road," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, December 30, 1977.
- 54 Infield, "NUS Conference 1977."