

Irreconcilable Difference?

The 1982 Lebanon War, British Jews, and the Political Left

Imogen Resnick

The 1982 Lebanon War is upheld as a sharp turning point in Israeli and Middle Eastern history. Although provoking unparalleled international criticism, the war's critical impact on relations between British Jews and the political Left has been largely ignored within current historiographical literature. Through examination of the British Labour Party and its far-left fringes, and the British women's movement, this paper examines how the 1982 Lebanon War ruptured British political Left attitudes towards Israel. By sparking unprecedented condemnation of Israel within Labour at both a grassroots and parliamentary level, the war reshaped Jewish-Left political relations and – in the Jewish establishment's eyes – amplified the Labour Party's value as a political battleground. The ensuing voracious debate over antisemitism and anti-Zionism also coded Jewish feminists as inherently politically suspicious, forcing them to choose depoliticisation and abandon the women's movement.

On 6 June 1982, Israeli troops crossed the border into Lebanon, hailing the first day of “Operation Peace for Galilee.” Although promoted as a mission to defend Israel’s northern settlements from Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) shelling, in truth, Defence Minister Ariel Sharon sought to implement a grandiose geo-strategic plan.¹ The “big plan” failed.² Instead, Sharon and Prime Minister Menachem Begin ensnared Israel in an eighteen-year military quagmire that provoked widespread international criticism.³ The war also brought Israel’s reputation into serious disrepute through its indirect responsibility for the Sabra and Shatila massacre (16-18 September 1982), involving the slaughter of Palestinian civilians by Christian Lebanese militiamen allied to the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). Sharon’s incursion provoked unprecedented vocal and significant opposition within Israel, while most of the world’s governments condemned Israel’s aggressive invasion and occupation.⁴ In Britain, the public was fiercely critical: letters sent to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – which normally expressed sentiment in Israel’s favour – were overwhelmingly opposed to the invasion.⁵

Lebanon is cited as a turning point in histories of the British political Left’s

¹ Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 407.

² Shlaim, *Iron Wall*.

³ Jonathan Rynhold, “Israel’s Foreign and Defence Policy and Diaspora Jewish Identity,” in Danny Ben-Moshe and Zohar Segev, eds., *Israel, the Diaspora and Jewish Identity* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), 146.

⁴ William Frankel, ed., *Survey of Jewish Affairs 1982* (London, UK: Associated University Presses, 1984), 10.

⁵ Azriel Bermant, *Margaret Thatcher and the Middle East* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 96.

relationship to Israel.⁶ One would therefore expect that the Jewish state's most reviled war would have received at least some attention in modern Anglo-Jewish historiography. On the contrary, Lebanon's divisive impact is typically either ignored or conferred a mere sentence in the records of British Jewish experience.⁷ Where the Lebanon War has been given a cursory glance, scholars have relied exclusively on newspaper sources or their own conjecture.⁸ Why has the war been neglected? First, Anglo-Jewish scholarship is a small field, a fact compounded by pressure on scholars to ensure their focus is not "too Jewish"; in a numbers-equals-impact game, minorities always lose.⁹ Second, within existing historiography, research is overwhelmingly confined to the period 1870-1945.¹⁰ And third, most of this scholarship exclusively considers the experiences of men and elitist communal institutions. This parochial focus has, for example, rendered the war's momentous impact on British Jewish feminists entirely absent from Anglo-Jewish historiography. Historiographical neglect does not, however, equate to historical inconsequence.

This discussion seeks to recover the 1982 Lebanon War's profound impact on the British political Left and Jews within the Left, alongside their redefined relationships with each other, Israel, and Zionism.¹¹ Through examination of the Labour Party, its far-left fringes, and the British women's movement, it is evident that the war forced a rupture amongst and between Jews and the Left. Within the Left, Lebanon increased pro-Palestinian activities, sparked a surge in anti-Zionist sentiment, and raised new questions about the interconnectedness of antisemitism and anti-Zionism. For the Zionist Jewish political establishment and its pro-Israel allies, the Left's anti-Israel shift increased Labour's value as a political battlefield; for Jewish feminists, the radical feminist Left's newfound anti-Zionism resulted in Jewish women being vetted, pressured to prove their anti-Zionist credentials, and ultimately, de facto exiled from the British feminist movement. Both reactions demonstrate how the Lebanon War inextricably linked British Jews and the political Left, reshaping their perceptions of and relationship with the other. This article unearths and places these siloed narratives into conversation with one another, connecting Jewish, political, social, and feminist histories where their historiographies have traditionally been partitioned – enabling the full scope

⁶ Albeit only two authors offer detailed analysis: June Edmunds, *The Left and Israel: Party-Policy Change and Internal Democracy* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000), and Paul Keleman, *The British Left and Zionism: History of a Divorce* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2012).

⁷ See (or, not see) William D. Rubinstein, Michael Jolles, and Hilary Rubinstein, *The Palgrave Dictionary of Anglo-Jewish History* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011).

⁸ See W. D. Rubinstein, *A History of the Jews in the English-speaking World: Great Britain* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1996), and Colin Shindler, "The Reflection of Israel within British Jewry," in *Identity*.

⁹ Tony Kushner and Hannah Ewence, "Whatever Happened to British Jewish Studies? In Search of Contexts," *Jewish Culture and History* 12, no. 1 (2010): 6-7, and Kushner, "Heritage and Ethnicity: An Introduction," *Immigrants & Minorities* 10, no. 1-2 (1991): 3.

¹⁰ Bar Geoffrey Alderman. See *Modern British Jewry* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1992), and *London Jewry and London Politics 1889-1986* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 1989). Some skim past 1945, mainly focussing on demographic changes such as Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1965 to 2000* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Bernard Wasserstein, *Vanishing Diaspora: The Jews in Europe Since 1945* (London, UK: Penguin, 1997); and V.D. Lipman, *A History of the Jews in Britain since 1858* (Leicester, UK: Leicester University Press, 1990).

¹¹ Anglo-Jewry and British Jews are used interchangeably.

of Lebanon's impact to emerge. Through this inter-historiographical approach, my analysis – whilst primarily elucidating an absence within Anglo-Jewish historiography – additionally seeks to demonstrate the efficacy of bridging two disciplines that are too often academically sundered: Jewish Studies and Middle Eastern Studies.

To achieve an in-depth insight into the war's impact, my analysis encompassed a wide range of archival sources, including personal letters, political memos and reports, and minutes of meetings. This method is, admittedly, flawed: documents in archival records are often missing, potentially producing factual and timeline inconsistencies, and the brevity of minutes renders only a partial picture of discussions in meetings. Other primary sources – newspapers, political diaries, and House of Commons debates, alongside periodicals and pamphlets published by Jewish and leftist groups – have been examined for discussion of Israel and the war, along with language indicative of opinion on anti-Zionism, antisemitism, and the representation of Jews (including the use of Holocaust imagery). An interview with a Jewish feminist enhanced insight into how the war impacted the women's movement, while secondary literature is incorporated and critiqued to complement analysis and ground events in historical context.

Before the Rupture: The Left and Israel

The Labour Party had traditionally held deep sympathy for Israel. Close ideological affinity with the incumbent Israeli Labour party – encouraged by personal links between senior British Labour politicians and their Israeli counterparts – fostered a “mutual sense of loyalty.”¹² Moreover, Labour and Anglo-Jewry shared a “strong political alliance”; the majority of Jews voted Labour until the 1970s.¹³ However, in the decade preceding the Lebanon War, a plethora of socio-political factors caused support for Israel within the British and international political Left to falter.

The 1967 War did not immediately shake Labour's support for Israel.¹⁴ However, in the far Left's eyes, Israel's post-war occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and Golan Heights transformed its image into that of an aggressive imperial power.¹⁵ Israel's expansionist settlement policy served to “widen the circle of sceptics,” with enthusiasm for Israel's 1973 victory more subdued than in 1967.¹⁶ Throughout the 1970s, the international political Left increasingly identified with Third World national liberation activities and opposed U.S. intervention in these regions.¹⁷ Significant segments of this movement, strengthened by the UN's 1975 “Zionism is Racism” resolution,

¹² June Edmunds, “The British Labour Party in the 1980s: The Battle Over the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict,” *Politics* 18, no. 2 (1998): 112.

¹³ Edmunds, “British Labour Party,” and Jonathan Rynholt and Jonathan Spyer, “British Policy in the Arab-Israeli Arena 1973-2004,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007): 143.

¹⁴ David Feldman, “Zionism and the British Labour Party,” in Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S. Mandel, eds., *Colonialism and the Jews* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 209.

¹⁵ Toby Greene, *Blair, Labour and Palestine: Conflicting Views on Middle East Peace After 9/11* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 38-39.

¹⁶ Keleman, *British*, 163.

¹⁷ June Edmunds, *The Left and Israel: Party-Policy Change and Internal Democracy* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000), 9, and Edmunds, “The Evolution of British Labour Party Policy from 1967 to the Intifada,” *Twentieth Century British History* 11, no. 1 (2000): 34.

touted Israel as inherently racist and steeped in a colonial ideology – Zionism.¹⁸ Israel's close ties with the U.S. further positioned it as "an inhibitor of anti-colonial movements," especially anti-colonial Arab nationalism.¹⁹ However, for the mainstream Left in the 1970s, the 1977 election victory of the right-wing party Likud was the most significant event to dampen enthusiasm for Israel.²⁰ Western leftists had long admired Israel's socialist ideology; for many disappointed Labour members, Likud's ascension betrayed their identification of Israel as a progressive state.²¹

Domestic factors were also crucial in waning Labour's enthusiasm. Arab political groups began to make headway, with fringe Palestinian clusters operating at annual conferences throughout the 1970s.²² This coincided with an increasingly right-wing Jewish electorate that sympathised with Thatcherite Conservatism; political re-alignments induced a dramatic decline of Jewish Labour MPs and a growing Jewish "cultural vacuum" in the party's grassroots.²³ Jewish support was steadily replaced by Black and Asian communities, many of which – as noted by the Labour Middle East Council (LMEC) in 1982 – held "strong internationalist and anti-imperialist concerns."²⁴ These demographic changes were significant for some areas – albeit only within London – with a motion declaring opposition to the State of Israel passed by the Hackney North Labour Party in 1979.²⁵ However, in *The British Left and Zionism* (2012), Paul Keleman appears to misread the LMEC's 1982 discussion on Black and Asian activists, overstating their influence in moulding Labour's Palestinian stance:²⁶ the LMEC acknowledged that it had actually yet to "tap in" to these communities' "sense of solidarity for the Palestinians."²⁷

Considering the revolutionary Left's fundamental opposition to Zionism, increasing Trotskyist "entryism" into the Labour party in the late 1970s was likely more influential in shaping opinion on Israel.²⁸ Groups, such as Militant, saw membership triple between 1976 and 1982, while centrists in 1981 reported regularly seeing the "clenched fist salute" at party conferences.²⁹ Labour MP Eric Heffer asserted the far Left "consolidated its position" on the National Executive Committee (NEC) from 1978, influencing the deposition of Poale Zion (now the Jewish Labour Movement) member Ian Mikardo.³⁰

¹⁸ Edmunds, *Left*, 9-10.

¹⁹ Edmunds, "Evolution," and Greene, *Blair*, 38.

²⁰ Phillip Mendes, *Jews and the Left: The Rise and Fall of a Political Alliance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 123.

²¹ Mendes, *Jews and the Left*, and Feldman, "Zionism," 210.

²² Edmunds, "Evolution," 32.

²³ Alderman, *London*, 125, and Colin Shindler, *Israel and the European Left: Between Solidarity and Delegitimization* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2012), 251.

²⁴ Labour Middle East Council: Discussion Paper for the Third Working Party Meeting (hereafter: LMECDP), 14 July 1982, FAULDS3/2/50, Andrew Faulds Papers, LSE Library Archives and Special Collections, London School of Economics and Political Science (hereafter: AFP).

²⁵ Alderman, *London*, 125.

²⁶ Keleman, *British*, 168.

²⁷ LMECDP.

²⁸ Michael Billig, "Anti-Jewish Themes and the British Far Left," in *Patterns of Prejudice* 18, no. 1 (1984): 8, and David Webster, "The Labour Party and the New Left," *Fabian Tract* 477 (1981): 18.

²⁹ Edmunds, "Evolution," 35, and Webster, "Labour," 13.

³⁰ Heffer, *Never a Yes Man: The Life and Politics of an Adopted Liverpudlian* (London, UK: Verso, 199), 172.

Although “New Left” discourse permeated much of the Labour Party³¹ – and LMEC membership increased by 15 percent after the 1979 election³² – international and domestic trends were not influential enough in and of themselves to catalyse a significant pro-Palestinian swing. Although senior Labour officials were “disturbed” by Likud’s policies,³³ leadership often espoused more pro-Israel sentiment than the Conservative Party: in 1980, Labour Party Leader James Callaghan deplored the Venice Declaration as a PLO “propaganda victory” that “cannot contribute to peace.”³⁴ Moreover, before the war, most constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) exhibited little interest in producing motions on Israel.³⁵ Indeed, between 1974 and 1981, only three (out of 3,400) annual conference resolutions on the Middle East were submitted – and two of these were submitted by Poale Zion.³⁶ And although Labour MP Eric Heffer asserted the Left had “consolidated its position” on the NEC, until the war, this group still included notable pro-Israel supporters such as Tony Benn and Heffer himself.³⁷

Nonetheless, it should be noted that in late May 1982, the NEC passed a draft policy advocating the PLO’s participation in peace process.³⁸ The motion did, however, receive strong objections from Labour’s International Committee, highlighting sustained senior support for Israel.³⁹ Moreover, although the motion indicated a pre-Lebanon War policy shift, the change merely signalled Labour’s closer convergence with mainstream political opinion: the motion did not approve of Palestinian statehood or consider the PLO to be the Palestinians’ sole representative.⁴⁰ Given that both these sentiments would be proposed as a direct result of Israel’s invasion, the Lebanon War clearly transformed burgeoning anti-Israeli opinion into tangible pro-Palestinian policy.

The Rupture

The war sparked unprecedented condemnation of Israel within Labour at both a grassroots and parliamentary level. Before Lebanon, Israel was of negligible importance for the vast majority of CLPs. Now, motions criticising Israel’s invasion were approved in CLPs around the country.⁴¹ Moreover, whereas anti-Zionist sentiment (such as the aforementioned Hackney North’s 1979 motion) was formerly restricted to London CLPs, after Israel’s invasion lurid anti-Zionism became cross-regional – one motion in Leeds North-West called for the expulsion of Poale Zion members.⁴² Prominent MPs Benn and Heffer resigned from Labour Friends of Israel (LFI); the latter professed Israel’s invasion

³¹ Shindler, *Israel*, 244.

³² Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the LMEC, 10 December 1980, FAULDS3/2/50.

³³ House of Commons (hereafter: HC) Debate, 16 June 1980, vol. 986, col. 1138.

³⁴ HC Debate, 16 June 1980, vol. 986, col. 1129.

³⁵ Keleman, *British*, 167.

³⁶ Keleman, *British*.

³⁷ Heffer, *Never*, 172, and Keleman, *British*, 167.

³⁸ *Jewish Chronicle* (hereafter: JC) (4 June 1982).

³⁹ JC (4 June 1982).

⁴⁰ JC (4 June 1982).

⁴¹ JC (20 August 1982).

⁴² Alderman, *London*, 125, and JC (20 August 1982).

had “shaken him to the core.”⁴³ Benn’s resignation was particularly notable since he shared intimate ties with Israel. In July, whilst the war was ongoing, his mother had been awarded a fellowship from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.⁴⁴ In September, Benn’s unparalleled critical stance toward Israel was emphasised by his championing of a major Labour policy development in favour of the Palestinians: an NEC resolution (passed by twenty-two to three) that called for the establishment of a Palestinian state.⁴⁵

Labour’s annual September conference clearly confirmed the war as a catalyst for a more pro-Palestinian shift within Labour; forty-six emergency resolutions were submitted to the conference castigating Israel’s invasion.⁴⁶ Moreover, two momentous resolutions were accepted: one, passed with 3,318,000 votes, recognised the PLO as the Palestinians’ “sole legitimate representative”;⁴⁷ the other, approved by 3,538,000 delegates, committed Labour to supporting a “democratic, secular state of Palestine.”⁴⁸ The latter did not concede Israel’s right to exist, leaving open the interpretation that delegates supported a one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a radical and unparalleled step within Labour and amongst mainstream political parties. Although neither resolution (on account of not being carried by a two-thirds majority) was included in the 1983 Labour manifesto,⁴⁹ the millions of Labour members in favour provided a historic blow to Labour and Israel’s relationship. Indeed, celebrating this enormous shift, the LMEC cheered the resolutions as a “historic move away from the traditional pro-Zionist emphasis of party policy.”⁵⁰

Anti-Zionism, Antisemitism and the Left

The Lebanon War triggered “an avalanche of anti-Zionism” on the Left.⁵¹ This “avalanche” gave “renewed impetus to antisemitism,” generating amongst Jews an unprecedented anxiety about the power of events in the Middle East to influence their position in the Diaspora.⁵² Julius Gould argues that the Left’s anti-Zionism veered into the realm of antisemitism, while Ceserani asserts the war significantly expanded “the myth of Nazi-Zionist collaboration.”⁵³ In fact, Lebanon intensified comparisons of Israel and Nazism amongst both the Left and the Right (a fact ignored in Robert Wistrich’s Anti-Zionism): soon after the war, the fascist National Front displayed a poster in London declaring

⁴³ Keleman, *British*, 174.

⁴⁴ Tony Benn, *The End of An Era: Diaries 1980-90*, Ruth Winstone, ed. (London, UK: Arrow, 1994), 238.

⁴⁵ Benn, *End of An Era*, 240.

⁴⁶ Edmunds, *British*, 112.

⁴⁷ ACC/3121/E4/1043, Board of Deputies of British Jews, London Metropolitan Archives, City of London (hereafter: BDBJ).

⁴⁸ Jenni Frazer, “Labour Backs PLO Policy,” *JC* (1 October 1982).

⁴⁹ Frazer, “Labour Backs PLO,” and Jenni Frazer, “Only Jewish Voters,” *JC* (3 June 1983).

⁵⁰ “Developing LMEC’s work in the Labour Party – a discussion paper for the LMEC AGM,” 19 November 1982 (hereafter: LMEC AGM DP), FAULDS/3/2/51.

⁵¹ David Ceserani, “The Perdition Affair,” in Robert S. Wistrich, ed., *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism in the Contemporary World* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1990), 53.

⁵² Shlomo Avineri, et al., “Antisemitism Today: A Symposium,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 16, no. 4 (1982): 29 and 51.

⁵³ Julius Gould, “Impugning Israel’s Legitimacy: Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism,” *Anti-Zionism*, 192-193, and Ceserani, “Perdition,” 53.

“Beirut ’82 – The REAL Holocaust,”⁵⁴ while in the House of Commons, Conservative MP Tony Marlow denounced Begin as “the Israeli *führer*” and decried “Jewish Nazis” in Lebanon.⁵⁵ Begin himself used and abused Holocaust analogies during the Lebanon War, describing the PLO as Nazis and comparing PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat to Hitler.⁵⁶ By presenting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a struggle of Jews fighting anti-Semites, Begin sought to justify Israel’s military violence in Lebanon as a moral necessity. The coarse use of potent Holocaust analogies also signifies the morbid political climate induced by the war’s brutal nature. However, in the UK, Trotskyist entryism into the Labour Party – coupled with more vocal anti-colonialist voices – drew greater prominence to anti-Zionism on the Left.

Michael Billig purports that most radical left publications were essentially antisemitic because they accepted the legitimacy of Palestinian nationalism, but not Zionism.⁵⁷ Representatives from several of these publications attended the inaugural meeting of the Labour Committee on Palestine (formed in response to Israel’s invasion);⁵⁸ the war strengthened connections between Labour Party officials and far-Left groups that propagated – at least according to Billig – antisemitic discourse. Moreover, anti-Jewish tropes used to denounce the war seeped into publications associated with Labour: Labour Leader incorporated language resonating with the antisemitic “blood libel” theme,⁵⁹ while the Labour Herald (in a cartoon entitled “The Final Solution”) condemned Sabra and Shatila by depicting Begin in Gestapo uniform standing over dead Palestinians.⁶⁰ By invoking the Holocaust to specifically denounce Israel (but not other countries), Jewish suffering in Europe was presented as the terms of reference for Israeli actions in the Middle East.⁶¹ “Collective guilt” for the Lebanon War was applied to all Jewry: the Diaspora was judged responsible for Israel’s actions.⁶²

Ken Livingstone’s controversial leadership of the Greater London Council (1981-1986) was also significant for the perception of leftist anti-Zionism in Lebanon’s wake. As editor of the Labour Herald, the “Final Solution” cartoon led to Livingstone being reported to the police by the Board of Deputies of British Jews⁶³ – Anglo-Jewry’s most prominent representative body – for “incitement to racial hatred.”⁶⁴ Poale Zion’s Ealing, Richmond, and Wembley branch singled out “miserable mustachioed manipulator” Livingstone as leading the Trotskyite entryists;⁶⁵ his villainous description reflected his poor reputation amongst many Jews. Moreover, members accused the far-left of

⁵⁴ David Rosenberg, “Holocaust Analogies,” *Jewish Socialist* 1 (1985): 21.

⁵⁵ HC Debate, 8 June 1982, vol. 25, col. 14, and Reg Robinson, “Verbal Excesses,” *JC* (2 July 1982).

⁵⁶ Rosenberg, “Holocaust,” 21.

⁵⁷ Billig, “Anti-Jewish,” 9.

⁵⁸ Billig, “Anti-Jewish,” 9-10.

⁵⁹ June Edmunds, “The Left’s Views on Israel: From the Establishment of the Jewish State to the Intifada” (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014): 134.

⁶⁰ Edmunds, “Left’s Views,” 132.

⁶¹ Rosenberg, “Holocaust,” 21.

⁶² Rosenberg, “Holocaust.”

⁶³ Hereafter: the Board.

⁶⁴ *The Times*, 3 July 1982.

⁶⁵ Annual report of the Poale Zion Labour Zionist Movement,(hereafter: PZAR), 24 April 1983, SHORE13/6/7, Peter Shore Papers (hereafter: PSP), LSE.

“employing the term Zionism anti-Semitically in order to curry favour with Moslem anti-Semites.”⁶⁶ Reference to alleged Muslim antisemitism reflected Jews’ sensitivity to the political implications of London’s evolving demographics: local factors intersected with the Lebanon War to reconfigure perceptions of British anti-Zionism and pro-Palestinian activity.

The Left and Pro-Israel Lobbyists

Poale Zion leadership dubbed Labour’s 1982 conference “disastrous” – a sentiment echoed by LFI Chairman Lord Glenamara, who recognised that the “tide of opinion in Labour” was now against Israel.⁶⁷ Sam Jacobs, Poale Zion’s General Secretary, felt the resolutions passed were understandable because of “outrage felt at the massacre in West Beirut,”⁶⁸ emphasising Sabra and Shatila’s significance in sharply shifting the Left’s perception of Israel. At Poale Zion’s 1983 conference, the Islington branch demanded solidarity with the Israeli peace group Peace Now.⁶⁹ Support for Peace Now demonstrated their unhappiness with Israeli policy – in contrast to the leadership of the rigidly pro-Israel Board of Deputies, they publicly affirmed that Zionism did not entail embracing every action of the Israeli government. However, Islington’s resolution also called for the “withdrawal of all troops from Lebanon,”⁷⁰ concealing (and mitigating) Israel’s role as the war’s instigator: reticence in singling out Israel persisted, even amongst those who criticised Israel’s policies. In contrast, the Ealing, Richmond, and Wembley branch sought to undermine non-Zionist Jews that criticised Israel’s actions in Lebanon by disassociating them from the community; non-Zionists were besmirched, without evidence, as having “opted out of the Jewish community” and purportedly possessed “no Jewish emotional or other ties.”⁷¹ The war’s fallout revealed that many Zionist Jews thought non-Zionist Jews were not “real” Jews: their opinion on Israel qua Jews was therefore irrelevant. For much of Anglo-Jewry, the state of Israel remained one of the “main components of Jewish collective identity”: rejecting Zionism equated to rejecting one’s Jewishness.⁷²

The extent of the damage inflicted on Israel’s support base shocked both Poale Zion and LFI into increasing their activities. Poale Zion pledged to quash the resolutions passed on the Middle East,⁷³ while Glenamara asserted that LFI would redouble its lobbying efforts.⁷⁴ Their efforts were significant, recognised by the LMEC as early as November 1982 as “a counter-offensive [...] to weaken the impact” of Conference’s passed resolutions.⁷⁵ However, in 1985, the LFI director was jeered off stage at Labour’s women’s conference; delegates rejected her proposed motion congratulating Israel for Operation Moses – the

⁶⁶ PZAR, 24 April 1983.

⁶⁷ PZAR, 24 April 1983, and JC (5 November 1982).

⁶⁸ Jenni Frazer, “Labour to Unravel Middle East Policy Jumble,” JC (8 October 1982).

⁶⁹ PZAR, 24 April 1983.

⁷⁰ PZAR, 24 April 1983 [my emphasis].

⁷¹ PZAR, 24 April 1983.

⁷² Yosef Gorny, “The Jewish People at the End of the Twentieth Century Between Two Existential Experiences,” *Journal of Israeli History* 15, no. 2 (1994): 193.

⁷³ PZAR, 24 April 1983.

⁷⁴ JC (5 November 1982).

⁷⁵ LMEC AGM DP.

evacuation of Ethiopian Jews from Sudanese refugee camps – by lambasting Israel for the “massacre” of Palestinians.⁷⁶ Three years later, Sabra and Shatila lingered on in Labour’s political consciousness, moulding its perception of Israel: clearly, pro-Israel lobbyists were unable to wholly heal the wound that Lebanon had ruptured within Labour.

For the Board, Labour’s Israel policy was rarely (and usually positively) discussed in its Erets Israel committee meetings before 1982; after the war, deputies became acutely aware of and concerned about Labour. In November 1982, deputies pondered galvanising the Jewish community to actively influence Labour opinion, while in March 1983, deputies agreed to maintain regular contact with and monitor Labour.⁷⁷ The Board’s new attitude towards Labour attests to how Lebanon fundamentally ruptured and redefined Labour’s relationship with Israel and its Jewish supporters: formerly perceived as the British Jewish establishment’s friend, an increasingly hostile approach to Israel transformed Labour into a political foe.

The Feminist Movement

Throughout the 1970s, burgeoning internationalism encouraged greater interest in “Third World” feminists, including Palestinians.⁷⁸ At the 1975 UN Decade for Women inaugural conference, an event marking the advent of an “international sisterhood” prioritising Third World women’s voices, delegates called for Zionism’s “elimination.”⁷⁹ Zionism’s new repellent status – at least according to Third World women – was reaffirmed at the 1980 conference, where American women expressed outrage about Leila Khaled (a convicted plane hijacker) leading the PLO’s delegation.⁸⁰ Zionism increasingly became a yardstick highlighting Western and Third World women’s ideological differences.⁸¹

British feminists were not unaffected by broader trends within the global feminist debate. Internationalism intersected with domestic developments, including the rising popularity of the National Front, to advance the political mobilisation of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women in the late seventies.⁸² Concurrently, New Marxism induced a shift in feminist discourse: feminists increasingly refracted the world through a prism of oppression – “identity politics” – as opposed to class exploitation.⁸³ Ergo, racism was viewed as a separate force equal to classism, augmenting BME and Third World women’s voices within the movement.⁸⁴ These developments undoubtedly influenced the pro-Palestinian stance of some feminists; self-described anti-imperialist

⁷⁶ JC (21 June 1985).

⁷⁷ Erets Israel Committee minutes (hereafter: EICM), ACC/3121/C14A/11, BDBJ, 1 November 1982; EICM, 9 March 1983.

⁷⁸ Jenny Bourne, “Homelands of the Mind: Jewish Feminism and Identity Politics,” *Race & Class* 29, no. 1 (1987): 5.

⁷⁹ Juliet J. Pope, “Anti-Racism, Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism – Debates in the British Women’s Movement,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 20, no. 3 (1986): 14, and Ellen Cantarow, “Zionism, Anti-Semitism and Jewish Identity in the Women’s Movement,” *Middle East Report* 154 (1988): 38.

⁸⁰ Nelly Las, *Jewish Voices in Feminism: Transnational Perspectives*, Ruth Morris, trans. (London, UK: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 204.

⁸¹ Pope, “Anti-Racism,” 14.

⁸² Pope, “Anti-Racism,” 14-15.

⁸³ Bourne, “Homelands,” 3.

⁸⁴ Pope, “Anti-Racism,” 14.

feminists praised Palestinian hijackers and sought to promote critical discussion on Zionism at women's conferences.⁸⁵ However, until the Lebanon War, the budding Zionist debate lingered on the side-lines: British feminists – faced with glaring gender inequality at home – primarily channelled their energies into domestic campaigning.⁸⁶

The Lebanon War propelled Israel to the forefront of British feminist consciousness. For the first time in the history of the British women's movement, Zionism's incompatibility with feminism was explicitly avowed in two prominent feminist publications – *Spare Rib* and *Outwrite* – exploding a debate that raged throughout the 1980s.⁸⁷ Anti-Zionism does not, of course, equal antisemitism; the following analysis of this historic episode is not intended as a critique of anti-and non-Zionist ideology, but a critical examination of the antisemitic sentiment that accompanied it in this instance.

Feminism and Zionism: Irreconcilable Difference?

In a similar vein to far-left Labour publications, *Spare Rib* likened Israel to Nazism: a Jewish Israeli writer urged feminists to condemn the "Holocaust" in Lebanon, alleging her mother affirmed "what Israel is doing now is what the Nazis did" to her.⁸⁸ *Spare Rib* sought to legitimise – via a Jewish woman's voice – a moral equation between Israel's operation and the Holocaust. By employing a Jew to invoke the efficacy of the Holocaust, *Spare Rib* implied Diaspora Jewry had a moral responsibility to denounce Israel's actions and Zionism. Although this assertion is not in itself antisemitic – indeed, many Jews would concur that the Diaspora has a duty to speak out against injustices committed by Israel – the insensitive Holocaust analogy it is packaged in serves to generalise and consequently undermine the Holocaust's devastation. As contended by David Rosenberg in the Jewish Socialist, the utilisation of Holocaust comparisons fell prey to depicting "what the Jews suffered in a European context" as the terms of reference for Israeli atrocities; *Spare Rib* left open an interpretation that Diaspora Jewry was collectively responsible for Israel's actions.⁸⁹ Since feminists now asserted that Zionists did not belong in the women's movement, this conflation of Israel and Diaspora Jewry – coupled with the misuse of Holocaust analogies – aggravated an atmosphere piling pressure on Jewish women to "prove" their anti-Zionist credentials.⁹⁰

In *Outwrite*, writers speciously claimed that Jews had "lived in harmony" with Muslims before the Israeli state's establishment.⁹¹ Furthermore, a Jewish writer ignored Jewish suffering under Islamic rule by asserting that Middle Eastern Jews had been accorded "much more" respect in Arab countries than in Israel.⁹² Arguably, Jewish

⁸⁵ Dena Attar, interview, 9 March 2018, London.

⁸⁶ Mail correspondence with Dena Attar, 26 April 2018.

⁸⁷ Roisin Boyd, "Women Speak Out against Zionism," *Spare Rib* 121 (1982): 23, and "Statement from Outwrite," *Outwrite* 5 (1982): 2. For late-1980s debate, see Bourne, "Homelands," and Danielle Harway, et al., *A Word in Edgeways: Jewish Feminists Respond* (London, UK: JF Publications, 1988).

⁸⁸ Boyd, "Women," 23.

⁸⁹ Rosenberg, "Holocaust," 21.

⁹⁰ Las, *Feminism*, 172.

⁹¹ *Outwrite* 4 (1982): 2.

⁹² *Outwrite* 4 (1982): 3.

women lent credence to *Outwrite*'s ideological historical duplicity; their voices could protect the journal from any ensuing accusations of antisemitism. Moreover, this author only referred to Israel in quotations ("Israel"), signifying her (perfectly legitimate) refusal to recognise Israel's validity as an established state. However, in contrast, non-Jewish writers did not feel the need to qualify their opinion, suggesting she felt the need – or even felt pressured – to prove her anti-Zionist credentials as a Jew.⁹³ Her overcompensation indicates that, in the war's wake, a burden of proof was implicitly imposed upon non and anti-Zionist Jewish women to demonstrate an 'acceptable' political position on Israel. This burden was not discerned by their non-Jewish peers, evidencing that Jewish women were coded – though not necessarily consciously – as politically suspicious.

Many Jewish women were deeply disturbed by *Spare Rib* and *Outwrite*'s historical deception and perceived antisemitic coverage of the War. Their anxiety was only heightened when both publications refused to publish Jewish feminists' letters on the grounds their critiques were Zionist.⁹⁴ Moreover, while *Outwrite* claimed it was committed to combating antisemitism, its editors excluded Jewish women from a list of intra-movement marginalised groups.⁹⁵ This suggested that although *Outwrite*'s non-Jewish editors recognised the historic existence of antisemitism, they believed its contemporary impact on British Jewish women was negligible – if not non-existent. Dena Attar, a non-Zionist Jewish feminist who was highly active in the women's movement at that time, felt that non-Jewish feminists were simply unable to discern – and therefore dismissed – the antisemitism that Jewish women felt attacked by.⁹⁶ Attar further questioned how the *Spare Rib* collective could have rebuked Jewish feminists' letters as "Zionist" when she knew many letters' authors (including herself) were explicitly not Zionist.⁹⁷ Arguably, both publications employed "Zionist" as a smear to silence (Jewish) critics and to deflect from allegations that they published antisemitic articles – material which their non-Jewish editors did not recognise as antisemitic.

Linda Bellos, the only remaining Jewish (and black) member of the *Spare Rib* collective, resigned after being pressured to share the task of editing correspondence with non-Jews.⁹⁸ Whereas *Spare Rib* would not have questioned Bellos' ability (as a black woman) to detect racism, the collective felt her Jewishness undermined, rather than enhanced, her ability to recognise antisemitism.⁹⁹ In addition to coding Jewish women as inherently politically suspicious, the incident – coupled with the publications' discriminatory censorship – set a precedent that unless Jewish feminists unequivocally renounced Zionism, their perceived ties to Israel impaired their ability to distinguish between anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

⁹³ *Outwrite* 4; see "Statement from *Outwrite*," *Outwrite* 5 (1982): 2, and "The Fight to Save Beirut," *Outwrite* 5 (1982).

⁹⁴ See Bev Gold, "Reply to Jenny Bourne's Piece in *Spare Rib*," *Edgeways* 16, and Dena Attar, "An Open Letter on Antisemitism and Racism," *Trouble and Strife* 1 (1983): 13.

⁹⁵ "Statement," *Outwrite*.

⁹⁶ Attar, interview.

⁹⁷ Attar, "Open," 14.

⁹⁸ Jan Shure and Barbara Lantin, "Dig in the Rib for Israel," *JC* (20 May 1983).

⁹⁹ Shure and Lantin, "Dig in the Rib."

Further complicating matters, *Spare Rib*'s editorial committee – which now, after Bellos' resignation, had no Jewish women involved – was racially divided over censorship. BME editors clearly framed the Zionist debate, in line with international trends, as a division between Third World and Western women. One writer, specifically addressing “British Zionist” women, excoriated charges of antisemitism against Third World women since a “Black and Third World peoples’ holocaust” was ongoing.¹⁰⁰ As well as implying that BME and Third World women could not be antisemitic, by stressing that the ongoing nature of a “holocaust” against Third World people was more important than the Holocaust, the author grotesquely diminished the Holocaust’s impact in order to dismiss modern antisemitism. Another writer, erasing BME and Mizrahi Jews, dismissed antisemitism as a “white women’s issue”; white Jews were deemed indistinguishable from white non-Jews, meaning antisemitism was not considered a problem – and definitely not a form of racism – worth discussing.¹⁰¹ Indeed, in a new post-Lebanon environment, antisemitism was dismissed as a distraction from Zionist critiques.

The debate eventually burst beyond the confines of articles: Jewish feminists were accused of sending bomb threats to *Spare Rib* and *Outwrite*, while “Women for Palestine” picketed a meeting of Jewish feminists alleging it was a cover for Zionist activities.¹⁰² Lebanon transformed the movement into an environment in which cadres of committed Jewish feminists felt silenced and unsafe: *Spare Rib* and *Outwrite*'s damning verdict on Israel resulted in many Jewish women's de facto expulsion from the feminist movement.¹⁰³ In exile, “Jewish feminist” identity politics blossomed: new groups and a national newsletter emerged, alongside Britain's first Jewish feminist magazine – *Shifra* – which sought to redefine Jewish feminism and provide space for Jews alienated by the movement.¹⁰⁴ In its first editorial, a short paragraph was included that, in vague language, defended the rights of Jews to a homeland – albeit not at the “expense” of Palestinians. Although the editors accepted that Jewish feminists “have a particular relationship to Israel,” after this brief acknowledgement *Shifra* did not include a single article addressing Zionism or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁰⁵ Neither the editors nor the readers were willing – or able – to define the meaning and scope of this relationship.

By refusing to take a coherent political stance, *Shifra* created a space for Jewish women to evade addressing the very issue which had driven them out of the mainstream women's movement. Lebanon transformed Zionism into a point of irreconcilable difference: forced to define their politics on Zionism, Jewish feminists turned away from confrontation and chose depoliticisation. Depoliticisation reflected the extent to which discord over Zionism threatened *Shifra*'s internal unity. Abstention was also a reclamation of Jewish identity not defined by Zionism and certainly not defined by non-Jews; Jewish women transformed their political identities through depoliticisation. However, their retreat arguably also reflected that they had simply lost the argument

¹⁰⁰ “Sisterhood is Plain Sailing,” *Spare Rib* 132 (1983): 25.

¹⁰¹ “Sisterhood,” 25.”

¹⁰² Gail Chester, “Notes on the Impossibility of Passing,” *Edgeways* 13, and Pope, “Anti-Racism,” 22.

¹⁰³ Harway, et al., “About this Pamphlet,” *Edgeways* 1; Chester, “Notes,” and Gold, “Reply,” 16.

¹⁰⁴ “Editorial,” *Shifra* 1 (1984): 2; “Editorial,” *Shifra* 3-4 (1986): 2.

¹⁰⁵ “Editorial,” 2.

within a now conclusively anti-Zionist radical Left.

In the late 1980s, the women's press agreed to publish a Jewish feminist anthology; however, the publishers later stipulated that the anthology's editors affirm an "acceptable" stance on Zionism in its introduction.¹⁰⁶ The Jewish women – who regarded the condition as a form of antisemitic vetting – rejected the condition. Consequently, the publishers refused to publish the anthology.¹⁰⁷ The incident echoed key themes that emerged in the war's wake – inherent suspicion of Jewish women; pressure on Jews to declare an "appropriate" stance on Zionism; anti-Zionist Jews as "good" Jews – but it also underlined that Jewish women's depoliticisation disguised their failure to claw back any political ground after Lebanon.

Conclusion

In 1989, the historian David Cannadine pronounced Anglo-Jewish history "bland and lukewarm [...] neither very interesting nor very exciting."¹⁰⁸ Evidently, Cannadine was – along with most Anglo-Jewish historians – oblivious to the Lebanon War's heated social and political ramifications for relations between British Jews and the political Left, many of which are highly relevant for the present-day political climate.

Although Labour's rosy relationship with Zionism had been declining for a decade, the unprecedented brutality of Israel's invasion – including its connection to the massacre of thousands of Palestinians – irrevocably ruptured the Labour-Israel alliance. The destruction and death wreaked on Beirut precipitated a wave of pro-Palestinian sentiment amongst the political Left, hammering the nail into the coffin of friendly Labour-Israel relations. Benn and Heffer's LFI resignations underscored how the IDF's aggression rapidly deteriorated Israel's credentials in the eyes of the Left: Israel was, for the first time, rendered indefensible. Lebanon also strengthened a prospering far-left anti-Zionism, an ideology which increasingly influenced segments of the Labour party during the war; some hues of this anti-Zionism promoted political antisemitism via Holocaust analogies. Just as the media portrayed critical Jews as Israel's moral redeemers ("good Jews"), some sections of the far-left depicted Jews as having a specific moral responsibility (because of the Holocaust) to denounce Israel: Jews that did not were "bad Jews" and guilty of Israel's crimes. For the pro-Israel Board of Deputies, and much of the Anglo-Jewish community, Labour's new anti-Israel sentiment was of deep concern. Although Labour had been steadily losing the Jewish vote, arguably, Lebanon fundamentally transformed Labour's image in the eyes of the Zionist Jewish establishment: Labour was now a foe tainted by its anti-Zionist fringes.

Lebanon also irrevocably ruptured the women's movement. Lebanon dirtied Zionism, and feminists unprecedently avowed Zionism's incompatibility with feminism. Jewish women were pressured to prove themselves as "good Jews" by denouncing Zionism; failure

¹⁰⁶ Attar, interview.

¹⁰⁷ Attar, interview.

¹⁰⁸ David Cannadine, "Cousinhood," *London Review of Books* (July 1989), accessed 22 February 2018, [https://www.lrb.co.uk/v11/n14/david-cannadine/cousinhood>](https://www.lrb.co.uk/v11/n14/david-cannadine/cousinhood).

to do so rendered them incapable (in the eyes of non-Jews) of distinguishing between antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Viewed in conjunction with the far-left's abuse of Holocaust analogies and non-Jewish feminists' dismissal of antisemitism as a white woman's issue, within the British Left the Lebanon War exposed and strengthened a sinister undertone of antisemitism which non-Jews did not recognise. This hostile environment led to Jewish women's exclusion from the feminist movement, and their turning-away from the Zionist debate. In choosing depoliticisation, they refashioned their political identities but also tacitly acknowledged that they had lost the argument with anti-Zionists.

There are striking parallels between today's political climate and the aftermath of the Lebanon War: the present-day Labour Party has been besieged by allegations that its' far-left touts antisemitism. This atmosphere has seemingly lessened Jewish support for Labour.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the incompatibility of Zionism and feminism continues to be affirmed in many feminist circles, both local and transnational.¹¹⁰ However, this analysis cannot and does not pretend to propose an ahistorical, unmodified link between the Lebanon War and present-day politics. Future scholarship should consider how historical developments after Lebanon have reshaped antisemitism and anti-Zionism in the Left and women's movement, alongside the response of British Jews.

¹⁰⁹ *Guardian*, 4 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/may/04/labour-antisemitism-scandal-blamed-for-tory-win-in-barnet>.

¹¹⁰ Emily Shire, "Does Feminism Have Room For Zionists?", *New York Times*, 7 March 2017.