

CHAPTER SIX

THE BRITISH COMMUNIST PARTY AND ISRAEL: FROM THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE JEWISH STATE TO THE INVASION OF LEBANON

As a member of the international communist movement, the British Communist Party (CP) had a strong internationalist current, holding that international socialism prevailed over national culture and that the cause of the international working class took priority over nationalism.¹ Supporting only those nationalist movements considered capable of overthrowing capitalism and imperialism, the CP had a long tradition of hostility for zionism and support for Arab nationalism. With respect to the conflicting nationalist claims to Palestine, the party opposed the Jews' claims on the grounds that zionism divided the working class and only paid 'lip service' to socialism. Moreover, it believed that the zionist movement depended upon an alliance with imperialism, whereas Arab nationalism represented a 'struggle for national independence against imperialism'.²

As the cold war intensified, the CP's support for anti-imperialist national liberation movements sharpened. Perceiving western imperialism as the major threat to progress, the party supported national liberation movements irrespective of their relationship to communism or socialism so long as they were anti-imperialist.³ To what extent did communist principles determine the party's policy positions during the various Israel/Arab conflicts? Was the party's attitude unchanging and monolithic or was there dissent? How did the communists' stand compare with Labour's? In this chapter I shall consider these issues. In the first section, I shall describe the way the CP interpreted the Israel/Arab conflict from the postwar period to the 1980s. In the second section, I shall explain its various policy positions and in the third section, I shall compare the evolution of its approach to Israel with Labour's.

¹ Hobsbawm, 1977:5-6.

² See Rennap, 1943:73-87.

³ Howe, 1993:288-293.

6.1 Changing Attitudes Towards Israel

Given the CP's traditional hostility towards Zionism, one might have expected it to oppose Jewish immigration into Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state. However, during the 1940s, the CP abandoned its principles and adopted a number of pro-Zionist policies, including the formation of a National Jewish Committee (NJC) in 1943 and support for Jewish immigration into Palestine and land purchases.⁴ Phil Piratin, MP for Mile End, and Jack Gaster, communist representative for Mile End on the LCC,⁵ made a statement to the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry saying that although Jewish development in Palestine had contributed to a large mass of landless Arabs, the existing Jewish community had earned the right to 'develop their new home as free and equal citizens of Palestine'.⁶ In 1948, the CP wholeheartedly supported the establishment of Israel, seeing the state's foundation as 'a big step toward fulfillment of self-determination of the peoples of Palestine' and 'a great sign of the times'.⁷ The party's past support for Arab nationalism gave way to a hostile characterisation of the nationalist movement as reactionary and feudalistic,⁸ with it suggesting that there should be an 'ultimatum to the Arab feudal lords, who are truly puppets of Anglo-American oil - an ultimatum to lay down their arms'.⁹

This position brought the communists into conflict with the Labour government. The CP condemned Bevin's Palestine policy, accusing him of having committed a 'shameful betrayal' of the Jews and claiming that 'Bevinism leads to antisemitism and all that follows'.¹⁰ In parliament, William Gallacher, MP for West Fife, and Piratin sponsored an EDM that stated that the government was responsible for the Arab states' invasion of Palestine, urging recognition of Israel and recommending the immediate withdrawal of military aid to the Arabs. The fellow-travellers, Denis Pritt and John Platts-Mills added their signatures.¹¹

⁴ Kushner, 1990:67-70.

⁵ Alderman, 1992:317.

⁶ CPGB, 'European Jewry and the Palestine Problem', 1946:14-15.

⁷ *Daily Worker*, 15 May 1948:1.

⁸ See Said, 1978 for an account of popular stereotypes of Arabs.

⁹ *Daily Worker*, 18 May 1948:1.

¹⁰ Kushner, 1990:70-71.

¹¹ Notices of Motions, vol. 4, 1947-48:3217;3242.

The party declared that the war in Palestine was 'British sponsored' and the direct consequence of 'imperialist policy':

'This reactionary war conducted by the chieftains of the Arab League under British control is entirely against the interests of the Arab masses, who in all the countries of the Middle East are striving for freedom from imperialist domination'.¹²

The communists portrayed the Jews' protest against British policy as an anti-imperialist struggle, declaring that 'the days of imperialism are numbered'.¹³

However, the party's ideological opposition to zionism and support for Arab nationalism quickly re-emerged. Its initial support for Israel gave way to a strong anti-zionist stand during the Slansky trials in Czechoslovakia and the 'Doctors' Plot' in Russia,¹⁴ with the party asserting that the Slansky trials:

'revealed the now familiar pattern of American espionage and sabotage against the People's Democracies...The fact that eleven of the fourteen conspirators were of bourgeois Jewish origin...proved beyond doubt the complicity of the zionist organisation and Israeli government in the plot'.¹⁵

Now the CP saw Israel as an imperialist state. Harry Pollitt, the party's secretary, said that the zionist movement had always been a 'tool of British imperialism' and that it was 'increasingly shifting its allegiance to the stronger American imperialism'. He claimed that Israel had become a 'pawn of the USA' and that zionism was 'a ready-made tool and weapon for the American-backed spies, traitors and wreckers'.¹⁶

The party adopted a pro-Arab position in the 1956 hostilities, seeing Nasser's nationalisation of Suez as 'Egyptian defiance of western imperialism',¹⁷ and

¹² *Daily Worker*, 22 May 1948:1.

¹³ *Daily Worker*, 22 May 1948:1.

¹⁴ See chapter one.

¹⁵ *World News and Views*, no. 50, 1953:591.

¹⁶ Pelling, 1975:167-168.

¹⁷ *Daily Worker*, 31 July 1956:1.

viewing the Anglo-French attack as a manifestation of the west's aim to undermine national liberation movements in the Middle East and North Africa. The communists claimed that the British government's

'only friends are rabid French imperialists, who, having got themselves embroiled in large-scale warfare in Algeria, would like their British allies and rivals embroiled up to the neck in Egypt...Their only semblance of a policy consists in the assumption that if Britain and France can overthrow Nasser, the Arab world will quieten down...'.¹⁸

Citing Lenin's theory of imperialism, the party argued that the Anglo-French invasion happened because 'while there [was] capitalism in the world, the forces of reaction, representing the interests of capitalist monopolies, will persist in military gambles and aggression'.¹⁹

The CP accused Israel of allying with western imperialism, suggesting that Israel's role in the war served 'the interests of the foreign colonialists' and was motivated by a desire for 'territorial expansion'. It claimed that the Ben-Gurion government had 'entered into a dangerous plot, together with the British and French imperialists, against neighbouring peoples defending their national independence and sovereignty'.²⁰ Bert Ramelson, head of the NJC, said that Israel's part in the conflict reflected the country's 'imperialist alliances'.²¹ The conflict revived the party's views on the nature of zionism and antisemitism. It claimed that antisemitism was the 'weapon of reactionary ruling classes' which 'split the working class' and reiterated the view that zionism could not combat antisemitism since it was based on the premise that antisemitism was 'ineradicable'.

However, the 1956 crisis saw an unprecedented groundswell of internal dissent over the party's position on Israel. Chimen Abramsky and Hyman Levy began to challenge communist policy and the view that the USSR was a haven for

¹⁸ *Daily Worker*, 1 September 1956:1.

¹⁹ *Labour Monthly*, December 1956:560.

²⁰ *World News*, 22 December 1956:815-819.

²¹ *Marxism Today*, January 1959:24.

the Jews. In September 1956 the International Department and the NJC held an emergency meeting on the question of Soviet antisemitism, revealing a split between some Jewish members and the leadership. Members of the NJC stated that the *Daily Worker* had suppressed debate on antisemitism in the USSR and had given the impression that the party condoned socialist anti-semitism. The majority of the NJC refused to accept Palme Dutt's defence of the Soviet Union.²² Levy and Abramsky in particular challenged the party's line on zionism and Israel, publishing a short book on 'Jews and the National Question' that called for a re-evaluation of communism's attitude towards Jewish nationalism and the party's policy towards zionism and the Arab/Israel conflict.²³

The break-down in the anti-zionist consensus reflected wider developments resulting from Khrushchev's revelations about Stalinist repression. Those who dissented over the party's attitude towards zionism were also involved in the movement for greater internal democracy. Abramsky argued that the party should learn from the Khrushchev revelations and that it should re-examine the principle of democratic centralism and he objected to the way in which ordinary party members played no part in the formulation of party policy and to the tendency for 'blind loyalty to Moscow'.²⁴ His and Levy's eventual departure from the party was part of a much wider flight, in which people such as Edward Thompson and John Saville took part: Between 1956 and 1959 about ten thousand members left.²⁵ The latter took part in the establishment of *The Reasoner* which also found the Soviet Union's attitudes towards Jewish nationalism disturbing.²⁶

The affair split Jewish communists. Chimen Abramsky later told Zaidman that members of his former branch regarded him as an 'untouchable'.²⁷ Jack Woddis, an active member of the MCF, also later broke with the party's line on Jewish nationalism, claiming that the Soviet Union was hostile to Jewish cultural expression.²⁸ Ramelson, Zaidman and Solly Kaye chose to remain in the party and to conform to its anti-zionist position. Reflecting on the affair, Solly Kaye has

²² Kushner, 1990:71-72.

²³ Levy, 1958:12-17.

²⁴ *World News*, 27 October 1956:687.

²⁵ Callaghan, 1990:186-187.

²⁶ Saville, 1976:6.

²⁷ Kushner, 1990:72.

²⁸ *Marxism Today*, March 1959:96.

said that although he could now see that what Levy said was well founded, at the time he was impressed by Dutt's expertise on international affairs.²⁹

The leadership responded by trying to repress the dissent. Palme Dutt disowned Levy's book on the grounds that it contradicted basic marxist tenets, saying that Jewish nationalist aspirations could only be realised by 'methods of colonial conquest or imperialism' and that it provided 'fodder for antisemitism'.³⁰ Bert Ramelson, head of the NJC, objected to Levy's call for a re-evaluation of the party's stand on zionism and described the book as a 'thinly disguised defence of zionism', attacking Levy for praising the Israeli party Mapam (to the left of Mapai) on the grounds that the party shared responsibility for the Israeli government's 'deeds'.³¹ Idris Cox recommended a review of the NJC's activities.³² Palme Dutt imposed hand-picked members on the committee on the grounds that there was an 'urgent need for a strong and effective Jewish committee' and claimed that the committee should put forward the communist perspective on the Jewish question as 'part of the general fight against imperialism'.³³ The new NJC complied with this imperative. In a subsequent policy statement it said that zionism falsely claimed that Jewish workers had something in common with 'Jewish supporters of imperialism'; that zionism was a reactionary doctrine and had rightly been condemned as such by the international socialist movement as early as the first world war. The committee further maintained that zionism was integrally linked with imperialism and that:

'No-one is Socialist - certainly not Marxist - who divides workers of a given country, city or locality, from each other and finds greater unity between capitalists and workers of one religion or race than among workers of the same class who may have different religions'.³⁴

²⁹ Interview with Solly Kaye, 3 April 1990.

³⁰ *World News*, 8 March 1958:156.

³¹ Undated document.

³² Memorandum from Idris Cox to the Political Committee, 7 November 1956.

³³ Minutes of a meeting of 'Jewish comrades', 11 September 1957.

³⁴ Policy statement on the Jewish Question, September 1958.

With respect to antisemitism in the Soviet Union, the committee contended that ‘bourgeois Jews’ who ‘could not believe that there [was] a difference between hostility to zionism and hostility to Jews’ had made the accusations.³⁵

The CP’s anti-Israel and pro-Arab position remained throughout the 1967 hostilities. Supporting the Arab countries, John Gollan, the general secretary, maintained that the struggle against imperialism demanded support for the Arab liberation movement.³⁶ The party claimed that the ‘imperialist powers’ had ‘stirred up conflict between Jews and Arabs to safeguard their own economic and strategic interests in the Middle East’.³⁷ It said that the west’s principal aim was to overthrow the Syrian and Egyptian governments and to bring these countries back into the ‘imperialist orbit’ to secure oil supplies and remove Soviet influence from the region.³⁸

As for Israel, the communists said that its role in the war was the result of ‘imperialist alliances’, with the political committee stating that:

‘Israel can never enjoy security and peace as long as it acts as an ally of imperialism, denies the rights of Arabs and ranges itself on the side of the forces opposing the Arab liberation movement’.³⁹

The 1967 hostilities produced another spate of anti-zionism. Ramelson’s pamphlet on the Middle East crisis contended that zionism was a ‘false’ and ‘reactionary’ doctrine whose sole aim was to ‘weaken the class sense of Jews by preaching a non-existent “common national interest”’.⁴⁰ His exposition of the party’s position included a conspiracy theory of zionism. He claimed that Israel’s military, financial and strategic force rested on ‘zionist inspired financial, economic and “pressure group” support from the widespread Jewish communities, conditioned by years of zionist propaganda to believe that they owe allegiance to the zionist state of Israel’,⁴¹ and that:

³⁵ NJC policy statement, September 1958.

³⁶ *Morning Star*, 10 June 1967:2.

³⁷ *Morning Star*, 6 June 1967:1

³⁸ Ramelson, 1967:24.

³⁹ *Morning Star*, 14 June 1967:2.

⁴⁰ Ramelson, 1967:7-10.

⁴¹ Ramelson, 1967:36-37.

‘It is...no accident that the “new found” friends of the Jews and Israel during 1956 and 1967 are often the same ones who supported Munich and the rise of Hitler and Mosley, and for exactly the same reasons - considerations of imperialist advantage’.⁴²

The party’s policy generated further dissent, with some members challenging the idea that Israel was the aggressor and suggesting that the Arab states had deliberately whipped up the Palestinian refugee crisis. They also queried the CP’s support for Egypt in the light of Nasser’s anti-communist policies. Other party members began to question the leadership’s defence of the Soviet bloc against accusations of antisemitism. Referring to the Polish Communist Party’s repression of Jewish cultural activities, the dissenters accused the British party’s leadership of refusing to take seriously the possibility of antisemitism in eastern Europe. In particular, they attacked Bert Ramelson and Maurice Lichtig for failing to provide information on Poland’s anti-zionist propaganda.⁴³ The leadership again tried to repress disquiet over its Arab/Israel position. Idris Cox and the International Department decided to re-establish the Middle East sub-committee and to merge it with the NJC.⁴⁴ Cox was responsible for the choice of potential members of the new sub-committee and decided that Maurice Lichtig should be chair.⁴⁵ This decision was significant because Lichtig was highly committed to the traditional communist view of zionism and the idea that the Soviet Union had solved ‘the Jewish problem’.⁴⁶

So, for most of the postwar period, the CP maintained a pro-Arab and anti-Israel stance. However, Israel’s involvement in Lebanon in the 1980s drew attention to some significant changes in the party’s outlook. By this time, the party had split between the traditionalists and the reformist new times faction. The traditionalists centred principally around the *Morning Star*, and the revisionists or the new times faction, centred around *Marxism Today*. The key

⁴² Ibid:41.

⁴³ Untitled document signed by A. Lewish and D. Jacobs from the Prestwich branch and D. Nesbitt and J. Garman from the Crumpsall branch.

⁴⁴ Correspondence from Idris Cox to Tom McWhinnie, 16 December 1968.

⁴⁵ Correspondence from Idris Cox to Maurice Lichtig, 13 January 1969.

⁴⁶ See *Comment*, 25 February 1967:117.

difference between the two factions rested on their analysis of the role of class in contemporary society. The former strand believed that communism's appeal to the working class should remain a priority, and although it recognised the importance of non-class identities, it maintained that it was wrong to understand them separately from class.⁴⁷ The new times strand included people like Martin Jacques and Beatrix Campbell and believed that there was a deep-seated weakness in the labour movement, arising primarily out of the decline of the working class. This faction challenged what they saw as an indiscriminate tendency to apply class analysis to new social divisions.

With respect to the Palestinian cause in the 1980s, the CP as a whole was committed to Palestinian nationalist aspirations, having a policy that claimed that Britain should 'recognise the Palestinian people's right to establish their own national state and the PLO as the sole voice of the Palestinians'.⁴⁸ After the invasion, Gerry Pocock, head of the international department, said that the party favoured 'full recognition of the PLO and the right of the Palestinian people to establish their own state in the occupied territories'.⁴⁹ An article in *Marxism Today* suggested that the decline of the communist Rakah party in Israel stemmed from its unwillingness to acknowledge the 'unity of the Palestinian people'.⁵⁰ The CP supported Labour's shift towards recognition of Palestinian national rights and called on the labour movement to follow the pro-PLO resolutions at the annual conference and at the TUC conference.⁵¹

However, this consensus over Palestinian national rights did not extend to views on Israel, with the traditionalists maintaining the party's previous anti-zionist approach and the reformers rejecting it. Pocock argued that the Israeli attack was part of a long-term plan to destroy the Palestinian people and to extend Israel's territory. He believed that the UN should impose sanctions against Israel to enforce a withdrawal.⁵² Just before the invasion, the *Morning Star* condemned Lord Carrington, the Foreign Secretary, for refusing to meet PLO representatives

⁴⁷ Pitcairn, 1985:102-120.

⁴⁸ 36th National Conference of the CPGB, 1979:7.

⁴⁹ *Morning Star*, 8 June 1982:1.

⁵⁰ *Marxism Today*, August 1982:6-7.

⁵¹ *Morning Star*, 11 October 1982:3.

⁵² *Morning Star*, 8 June 1982:1.

and claimed that Britain gave Israel ‘tacit support’ for expansionist policies.⁵³ Moreover, it drew parallels between the invasion and the Nazi holocaust, saying that Israel had used ‘Blitzkrieg tactics’ ‘modelled on the military theories of Nazi strategists’.⁵⁴ The party’s traditional strand portrayed Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon as ‘Nazi monsters’, stating that ‘General Sharon seems to have regarded this operation as some sort of Israeli version of a “Final Solution” but against the Palestinians’.⁵⁵

Some of the traditionalists’ coverage of Israel was antisemitic, drawing on anti-Jewish themes couched in biblical references. In response to the massacre, for example, the *Morning Star* declared that ‘the mark of Cain is clearly on Sharon’s forehead’ and:

“thy brother’s blood cries out from the ground”
needs to be inscribed in letters of blood over the
courtroom in Jerusalem...For these lines from the
biblical story of Cain and Abel have been in the
minds and mouths of millions the world over as ever
more horrific details emerged of the monsters who
masterminded it’.⁵⁶

In a pamphlet on Israel and the Palestinians, the party published a cartoon that depicted Begin salivating over skulls with his mouth open and revealing the teeth of a vampire.⁵⁷

With a sharp break from party orthodoxy, the reformists adopted a more moderate attitude towards Israel and Jewish nationalism, rejecting traditional communist rhetoric and confining its criticism to specific Israeli policies such as Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza on the grounds that it breached human rights and to the rise of the Israeli far right, most notably, the Kach Party.⁵⁸ Whereas in the past, the CP believed that there was no progressive

⁵³ *Morning Star*, 3 April 1982:3.

⁵⁴ *Morning Star*, 8 June 1982:1.

⁵⁵ *Morning Star*, 9 October 1982:3.

⁵⁶ *Morning Star*, 9 October 1982:3.

⁵⁷ ‘A Land With People’, May 1982:30.

⁵⁸ *Marxism Today*, April 1983:14-17. The Kach Party was founded by Rabbi Meir Kahane in 1977. Kahane became a member of the Knesset in 1984 but the Israeli High Court stopped him from seeking a return to Israel’s parliament in 1988 on the grounds that Kach was racist and

left-wing in Israel, the reformists sympathised with the Israeli *New Outlook*, edited by Simcha Flapan, which believed that zionism should return to its socialist roots,⁵⁹ and they supported members of the Israeli peace movement, such as Uri Avineri.⁶⁰ In the late 1980s, this, by now dominant, faction's new approach was sealed when it explicitly condemned left-wing anti-zionists like Lenni Brenner for being apologists for 'Marx's antisemitism' and rejected communism's 'simple binary theory' which posited that Jews were good but zionists were bad as 'sloganism which equates zionism with imperialism or Israel as a tool of the US'. It further objected to a fixation on zionist collusion with the Nazis and asked the left to take on board 'the experience of the Jew who has ingested the knowledge of the holocaust and now finds it uncomfortable to feel at home anywhere'.⁶¹ What accounted for the CP's various positions?

6.2 Explaining the Evolution of the CPGB's Attitudes

The CP's early attitude towards Israel and the Israel/Arab conflict stemmed principally from its subordination to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Although the British party was one of the smallest in western Europe, it belonged to the Communist International from 1920 until the International's end in 1943. While it was not formally a member of the Cominform, established in 1947, it tended to adopt the Cominform line. The formation of the Cominform meant that the British party came under greater pressure for conformity by Moscow. In relation to colonial and imperial affairs, it accepted the Russian leader's, Andrei Zhdanov's, view that the world was split into 'the imperialist and anti-democratic camp' and the 'anti-imperialist and democratic camp' whereby the first camp sought to establish American imperialism across the world and the second aimed to undermine imperialism and install democracy.⁶² The intensification of the cold war led the international communist movement

undemocratic for advocating the expulsion of Palestinians from Israel and the occupied territories (Ovendale, 1992:285)

⁵⁹ *Marxism Today*, August 1982:11.

⁶⁰ *Marxism Today*, April 1983:14.

⁶¹ *Marxism Today*, May 1987:47.

⁶² Pelling, 1975:141.

increasingly to pressurise the party into rejecting any possibility of a third way between the USSR and America.⁶³

It was primarily the CP's relationship to the Soviet party that led it to make various pro-zionist gestures in the 1940s. As part of its attempt to mobilise Jewish support after Germany's invasion of Russia, the CPSU set up the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC) and declared that the Jews had a 'right to political independence in Palestine'.⁶⁴ Moreover, Soviet officials made contacts with zionists and supported the Haganah's illegal efforts to bring Jewish survivors to Palestine.⁶⁵ As part of Russia's efforts to obtain Jewish support for its fight against Germany, the Soviet leadership sent the actor Shloime Mikhoels and the poet Itzik Feffer to Britain to advertise the USSR's pro-Jewish activities. The CPSU directed Jewish communists in Britain to raise specific issues in their electoral campaigns, such as Mikhoel's Moscow Yiddish State Theatre, the activities of the JAFC and Birobidzhan (an autonomous Jewish region established in 1934). Piratin and other candidates dutifully complied with the directive.⁶⁶ The British party's recognition of Israel directly mirrored Soviet positions. Stalin's immediate postwar policy was pro-Israel, symbolised by Golda Meir's visit to Moscow's Grand Synagogue soon after the Jewish state's establishment. At this time, the Soviet Union had no allies in the Middle East and the zionist movement in Palestine was anti-British. Russia supported Israel because it wanted to weaken the western alliance by exploiting Attlee's and Truman's disagreement over Jewish immigration and to obstruct western control over oil resources.⁶⁷

The British party's position in 1956 also arose out of its identification with the Soviet Union, which had intensified in the early 1950s. During the Suez crisis, Nikita Khrushchev, Russia's leader between 1953 and 1964, denounced Britain, France and Israel for their war against Egypt, saying that Russia would help Egypt militarily if the three countries did not withdraw their forces.⁶⁸ In an effort to improve Russia's position in the Middle East, Khrushchev adopted a pro-Arab

⁶³ Howe, 1993:160.

⁶⁴ Wistrich, in Wistrich ed., 1979:277-278.

⁶⁵ Brod in Wistrich, ed., 1979:53-55.

⁶⁶ Srebrnik, 1986:285;295-300.

⁶⁷ Wistrich in Wistrich ed., 1979:278-279;281.

⁶⁸ Campbell in Louis and Owen, eds., 1989:246-247.

stance, seeing the non-aligned states in the Third World as potential allies and portraying Arab nationalists like Nasser as progressive as well as providing Egypt with military aid.⁶⁹ As the Soviet Union's relations with Egypt improved, its relations with Israel deteriorated. Russia's identification with Third World neutralism and Egypt occurred when border clashes between Israel and Egypt had exacerbated relations between the two Middle Eastern countries. The Russian premier, Bulganin, declared that Israel's role in the war would alienate the Jewish state and even threaten its existence.⁷⁰ Under Khrushchev, Russia continued to repress Jewish nationalist expression and its media consistently linked Zionism and Judaism with reaction.⁷¹

The CP's position in 1967 again reflected the Soviet Union's. The Soviet Union was neutral about the war at first,⁷² but soon moved to an anti-Israel stance, breaking off diplomatic relations with the Jewish state and other east European countries quickly followed suit.⁷³ Russia protested against Israel's aggression and called on the country to give up the occupied territories. The Russian leader, Brezhnev, said that 'the Israeli aggressors [were] behaving like the worst of bandits. In their atrocities against the Arab population...they want to copy the crimes of the Hitler invaders.'⁷⁴ This position stemmed from the USSR's continuing pro-Arab strategy aimed at strengthening its position in the Middle East by establishing a military presence there.⁷⁵ In this context, Russia presented itself as the Arabs' natural ally by identifying with Third World liberation movements and the Soviet leadership described Nasser as 'Hero of the Soviet Union', portraying the Egyptian leader's movement as preparing the way for socialism.⁷⁶

The CP's anti-Zionist campaign in 1967 directly mirrored developments in Russia. The new international rivalries between the USSR and America over the Middle East expressed themselves in an extreme anti-Zionist campaign.⁷⁷ The

⁶⁹ Wistrich in Wistrich, ed., 1979:285-286.

⁷⁰ Brod in Wistrich, ed., 1979:64-66.

⁷¹ Wistrich in Wistrich, ed., 1979:286.

⁷² Golan, 1991:67.

⁷³ Laqueur, 1969:59.

⁷⁴ Wistrich in Wistrich, ed., 1979:287;302 39n.

⁷⁵ Golan, 1991:58.

⁷⁶ Wistrich in Wistrich, ed., 1979:286.

⁷⁷ Wistrich, ed., 1979:137-152.

postwar Soviet press constructed a conspiracy theory of zionism, claiming that zionism was a 'ramified system of agencies and political practice of the Jewish big bourgeoisie closely linked to the monopoly groups in the United States'.⁷⁸ In the late 1960s, the Polish Communist Party embarked on a campaign against zionism, accusing zionists of being imperialism's lackeys, warmongers and wanting to isolate Poland from the Soviet Union; a campaign launched in response to economic problems and internal unrest, despite the fact that Polish opinion was sympathetic to Israel.⁷⁹

The British CP, like the CPSU, opposed Israel because it was a western ally. Almost from its inception, Israel adopted a pro-western orientation, identifying with the west over the Korean conflict and seeking to join the western alliance at the early stages of the cold war.⁸⁰ In the 1950s, the Israeli government became increasingly anti-communist. After the Slansky trials, Ben-Gurion began actively to oppose the Israeli Communist Party. The Histadrut banned communists from its trade unions, the government stopped the distribution of the communist daily newspaper and Ben-Gurion wanted to expel communists from the Knesset.⁸¹ Later, Israel moved increasingly towards a pro-American stance, depending upon alliances with powerful countries like the America to fulfil its military, economic and political needs. This coincided with America's need to find suitable allies to protect its interests in regions like the Middle East. Israel's original pro-Europe orientation gave way to a pro-American alignment and the Jewish state simultaneously became more hostile towards the Soviet Union, condemning Russia for supporting the Arabs.⁸² In contrast, Nasser began increasingly to stress socialist values,⁸³ and in international affairs, Egypt started increasingly to identify with the Soviet Union.⁸⁴

The party's loyalty to the Soviet Union at the height of the cold war led it to have very little internal democracy. After 1947, the CP initiated procedural changes that undermined its earlier openness. In 1945 the executive committee

⁷⁸ 'Soviet Opinion in the Middle East and the Adventures of International Zionism', 1970:48-50.

⁷⁹ For a full discussion of anti-zionism in Poland, see Ciolkosz in Wistrich, ed., 1979:137-152.

⁸⁰ Pappé, 1990:561;578.

⁸¹ *Jewish Chronicle*, 23 January 1953.

⁸² Shanin in Halliday and Alavi, eds., 1988:248.

⁸³ Ayubi in Foley, ed., 1994:168.

⁸⁴ Laqueur, 1969:67-68.

was chosen by open ballot, but by 1952 the Political Committee drew up a list from which an open ballot was then conducted. In the same year, the leadership decided that the rank and file could only discuss party policy and could not actively take part in its formulation.⁸⁵ The Khrushchev revelations did not unduly upset the leadership, with Palme Dutt describing them merely as ‘spots on the sun’.⁸⁶ The lack of internal democracy and loyalty to the CPSU accounted for the way the party dealt with members who dissented from the anti-zionist line. The leadership’s attack on Levy was part of its wider campaign against party intellectuals and marked the start of the party’s attempts to establish a division between intellectuals and industrial workers.⁸⁷ Although under Gollan between 1956 and 1975 the CP was supposed to have become more democratic, its subordination to Russia remained entrenched.⁸⁸

The party’s relationship with the CPSU also influenced part of its reaction to Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980s. Although the traditionalists were not uncritical of the Soviet Union, having objected to its intervention in Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan,⁸⁹ they continued broadly to follow Moscow policy. From the mid-1970s, Russia consistently supported Palestinian nationalism, recognising the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinians and supporting the establishment of a Palestinian mini-state.⁹⁰ The invasion of Lebanon occurred when Russia’s relations with America had deteriorated, partly as a result of the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan and the election of Reagan as president. Moscow provided the PLO with arms supplies, paralleling its previous policies towards Egypt. Russia’s support for the PLO arose from its desire to undermine American influence in pro-American Arab countries.⁹¹ The CP’s traditionalists held America responsible for the events in Lebanon through the use of its veto in the UN and its economic and military aid to Israel.⁹²

⁸⁵ Pelling, 1975:160.

⁸⁶ Callaghan, 1990:186-187.

⁸⁷ Saville, 1976:16;20-22.

⁸⁸ Miliband, 1976:136.

⁸⁹ Pitcairn, 1985:110.

⁹⁰ Wistrich, in Wistrich ed., 1979:299.

⁹¹ Golan, 1991:126-132.

⁹² *Morning Star*, 11 June 1982:1; *Morning Star*, 13 June 1982:3.

However, the British party's policies did not always flow from Russian policy. When its relationship with the CPSU loosened, national factors played a part. Between 1943 and 1947, for example, there was a relatively high level of intra-party democracy and the party tried to integrate more directly into the British democratic system.⁹³ This situation played out in the party's attitude towards the Palestine conflict. While pro-zionist policies mirrored Soviet initiatives, they also stemmed from internal factors. For instance, the party had significant political ties with the Jews, especially in London's East End, to the extent that Poale Zion had been worried about Jewish support for communism. At the end of the war, the zionist movement had only managed to attract about seven per cent of Britain's Jewish population.⁹⁴ Jews accounted for 10 per cent of the CPGB's national membership,⁹⁵ and for an even greater proportion of membership of London branches, making up at least half of the Stepney party's membership in 1945.⁹⁶ Many of the party's Jewish members were actively involved in organisations such as the Bundist Workers' Circle Friendly Society (WCFS) and local trade unions.⁹⁷ The NJC contained a number of Jewish communists such as Chimen Abramsky, Hyam Levy, Mick Mindel, Alec Waterman, Lazar Zaidman and Issie Panner.⁹⁸

The identification between Jews and the CP was rooted partly in the level of pro-Soviet feeling within the Jewish community. Those of East European origin, were committed to socialism, having been impressed by post-revolutionary Russia's attempts to deal with the Jewish question, including the establishment of Birobidzhan, a Jewish national region, and the Soviet Union's role in the war.⁹⁹ It also sprang from the party's history of actively seeking to combat antisemitism and fascist groups like British Union of Fascists (BUF), activities that contrasted favourably with the Board of Deputies of British Jews' (BOD) non-confrontational approach.¹⁰⁰ The Jewish left has traditionally been hostile towards the BOD's passivity.¹⁰¹ Solly Kaye, for example, joined the party because of the communists'

⁹³ Pelling, 1975:129.

⁹⁴ Alderman, 1992:315.

⁹⁵ Ibid:317.

⁹⁶ Kushner, 1990:66.

⁹⁷ Ibid:66-67.

⁹⁸ Ibid:67-70.

⁹⁹ Srebrnik, 1986:285-288;298; Kushner, 1990:70.

¹⁰⁰ Alderman, 1992:316.

¹⁰¹ Kushner, 1990:68.

participation in anti-fascist campaigns.¹⁰² The communists believed that the Nazis' anti-Jewish activities justified limited immigration into Palestine.¹⁰³

This link provided the basis for the party's attempts to exploit the Jewish vote during the 1945 general election campaign. Wanting to pre-empt the Zionist movement's influence in the Jewish community,¹⁰⁴ communist candidates like Phil Piratin and William Rust, the candidate for South Hackney, tried to attract Jewish voters in their campaign by moderating the party's assimilationist principles. Piratin stood as a 'communist and a Jew' and both candidates called for anti-Semitism to be outlawed and for measures to satisfy Jewish cultural needs.¹⁰⁵ Communist candidates did not do well in the general election, winning only two parliamentary seats when William Gallacher was re-elected for West Fife and Phil Piratin won the Mile End seat, taking it from the Labour incumbent.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, their limited success was largely due to Jewish electoral support, with about half of Piratin's vote probably coming from Jews.¹⁰⁷

In the 1980s, when the party's reformists began to dominate, the CP's more moderate attitude towards Zionism and Israel reflected its distancing from the Soviet Union. From the late 1970s, the British party came under the influence of Eurocommunism, a term that refers principally to the French, Italian and Spanish parties' attempts to create a more distinctive national identity by distancing themselves from the Soviet Union and emphasising integration into their own democratic systems. Eurocommunist strategies reflected the national parties' efforts to enhance their domestic image and increase their electoral strength after years of being marginalised because of their identification with Moscow.¹⁰⁸

The British reformists' attitude sprang from their movement away from Soviet politics. Although they were not strongly anti-communist,¹⁰⁹ they refused blindly to follow the Soviet Union's line. This meant that they refrained from judging nationalist movements only in terms of their contribution to Soviet

¹⁰² Interview with Solly Kaye, 3 April 1990.

¹⁰³ Weekly letter of the CPGB Executive Committee, 5 October 1945; *Jewish Clarion*, December 1945:1;4.

¹⁰⁴ Kushner, 1990:69.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*:70.

¹⁰⁶ Pelling, 1975:131-132.

¹⁰⁷ Alderman, 1992:317.

¹⁰⁸ Webb, 1979:3-6.

¹⁰⁹ Miliband, 1985:24-25.

interests and started to support them for intrinsic reasons. The new times manifesto called for a greater sensitivity to ethnic and national identities for their own sake. Their sympathy for both Palestinian and Jewish nationalism came from a new emphasis on national identities:

‘The character of the working class is changing...other sources of collective identity among women, black people, and other social groups will be central to progressive politics. Progressive politics has to realign itself to changes in its potential constituencies of support’.¹¹⁰

The revisionists’ position stemmed from an attempt to create a new alliance with Labour. In their efforts to rejuvenate socialist politics, the new times people began to forge links with Labour’s soft left, in particular with members of the Labour Co-ordinating Committee (LCC).¹¹¹ This Labour faction, like the revisionists, began to stress the importance of identities like gender and ethnicity as well as class. Although in the 1980s, hard left Labour activists like Ted Knight tried to get Labour to adopt an anti-zionist agenda, they failed when the Kinnock leadership embarked on a process of making the party more electable. After the divisions of the early 1980s, Labour eventually adopted the soft left’s support for a two-state solution to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict as policy.¹¹² The CP’s move towards a more moderate attitude towards Jewish nationalism represented an attempt to appeal once more to left-wing Jews. In the late 1980s, Jewish groups like the Jewish Socialists’ Group (JSG) continued to draw on the Jewish communist tradition, being attracted to Bundist ideology and celebrating the Bund’s 90th anniversary in 1989.¹¹³

So, although communist principles played a significant part in shaping the CP’s policy positions on Israel, by the late 1980s other factors, including intra-party changes and political expediency, directed the party away from orthodox

¹¹⁰ Manifesto For New Times, CPGB, 1988:13.

¹¹¹ Heffernan and Marqusee, 1992:63-64.

¹¹² See chapter five.

¹¹³ See Kushner, 1990:72 for details of this group.

communist policy. In the following section I shall consider the way the CP's attitudes towards Israel and the Arab/Israel conflict compared with Labour's.

6.3 Conclusion: Comparing the CPGB and Labour

There were significant differences between the Communist Party's and Labour's approach to Israel in the postwar period. Immediately after the war, the Labour leadership jettisoned the party's electoral commitment to the establishment of a Jewish state in favour of an anti-zionist policy. In contrast, the CP abandoned its traditional hostility towards zionism and support for Arab nationalism in favour of a pro-zionist policy, supporting the creation of Israel and opposing the government's approach to Palestine. During the Suez war, although both parties campaigned against the tripartite attack on Egypt, they differed considerably in their attitudes towards Israel and Nasser. Labour explicitly tried to separate its anti-war stance from an anti-Israel one and made clear that its opposition to the war did not entail support for Nasser's nationalist aims.¹¹⁴ The CP, on the other hand, strongly identified with Arab nationalism and reverted to its previous anti-zionist ideology, condemning Israel for being an imperialist state.

The CP and Labour diverged even more sharply over the 1967 war. The majority of the Labour Party, including the leadership, the PLP and most of the extra-parliamentary party, rallied behind Israel, claiming that Arab aggression caused the war. The CP adopted a completely different policy, showing solidarity with the Arab states and arguing that Israeli aggression caused the war. It accused the Labour government of colluding with America and Israel in the war against the Arab countries, saying that Wilson and President Johnson favoured Israeli aggression. Ramelson wrote that both leaders had threatened Egypt with force; that they failed to act to help stop the aggression and that they prevented a cease-fire decision at the UN.¹¹⁵ Moreover, the 1967 conflict led the CP to reassert its anti-zionist views, whereas anti-zionism barely existed in the Labour Party at this

¹¹⁴ Chapter three.

¹¹⁵ Ramelson, 1967:19-25.

time, being confined to a tiny minority of people including Christopher Mayhew.¹¹⁶

The two parties also differed in the direction in which their respective dissenters from their traditional attitudes towards Israel tried to push them. In 1956, Labour's dissenters, including people like Michael Foot and David Ennals, began to move towards a more sympathetic approach to Arab nationalist claims. The CP's dissenters, including people like Levy and Abramsky, went the other way, urging the leadership to refrain from unquestioningly adopting a pro-Arab stance and to re-evaluate its attitude towards Jewish nationalism. In 1967, Labour's dissenters comprised a small group of right-wingers, most notably Christopher Mayhew, and some left-wingers like Michael Foot, who began to criticise Israel's postwar policy and tried to get the party to recognise Arab grievances. The former saw the conflict as a chance to air previously held views in the tradition of Bevin whereas left-wing critics began to support the Arabs as a result of their involvement in anti-colonialist politics.¹¹⁷ The CP's dissenters again challenged the idea that the Arabs were victims of Israeli aggression and accused the leadership of pandering to anti-semitism in its anti-zionism.

What lay behind these differences? In the first place, the CP never constituted a serious rival to Labour, stemming partly from the nature of the political system.¹¹⁸ At its high-point in the 1945 it only won two parliamentary seats. Thereafter, the party suffered a drop in its membership,¹¹⁹ and both local and national decline. During the 1950 election, the CP put up a hundred candidates, with only three managing to keep their deposits.¹²⁰ Piratin and Gallacher both lost their parliamentary seats in 1950, with Piratin attracting the lowest number of votes in his constituency. Moreover, communist representation on the LCC collapsed.¹²¹ By the 1980s, the party had irretrievably lost its industrial base, rendering it unable to influence the trade union movement, and was completely unable to attract the younger generation into its ranks.¹²²

¹¹⁶ Chapter four.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Newton, 1969:1.

¹¹⁹ Morgan, 1989:295.

¹²⁰ Pelling, 1975:163.

¹²¹ Alderman, 1992:318.

¹²² Callaghan in Seldon, ed., 1990:74.

Furthermore, the relationship between Jews and communism broke down in the aftermath of the 1956 events. Although by 1957 every communist candidate elected to Stepney Borough Council was Jewish, this situation was confined to Stepney.¹²³ Although Jewish support for communism still existed in 1967, with Jews making up around ten per cent of the party's membership, the new crisis further undermined the link between Jews and communism.¹²⁴ While the CP recognised the political advantages of adopting a pro-zionist platform in the immediate postwar period, it did not appeal to Jewish opinion again until the late 1980s. In contrast, the relationship between Labour and the Jews, despite a couple of hiccups, remained significant until the 1970s. Unlike the CP, Labour's integration into formal politics and its continuing links with Jews meant that it continued to appeal to Jewish opinion in the postwar period. In 1956, Gaitskell was worried that Labour's anti-war stance would jeopardise the party's ties with the Jews and he tried to reassure Jewish opinion about Labour's continuing identification with Israel.¹²⁵ In a period of some unpopularity, members of the Wilson government were aware of the weight of popular and Jewish sympathy behind Israel during the 1967 hostilities and realised that sympathy for Israel would do its image no harm.¹²⁶

The parties' different approaches to the Israel/Arab conflict also reflected the rivalries between them in the postwar period. Relations between the CP and Labour deteriorated after the war as a result of the cold war, the communist leadership's pro-Stalinism and the Labour leadership's anti-communism.¹²⁷ The postwar Labour government was strongly anti-communist, believing that communist infiltration into the unions would damage government policy.¹²⁸ With the start of the cold war and communist opposition to the Marshall Plan,¹²⁹ the government began to clamp down on communists, with Attlee refusing to allow communist civil servants to handle sensitive documents. Attlee, Morrison,

¹²³ Alderman, 1992:318.

¹²⁴ Litvinoff, 1969:158.

¹²⁵ Chapter three.

¹²⁶ Chapter four.

¹²⁷ Howe, 1993:263.

¹²⁸ Pelling, 1991:101.

¹²⁹ The American Secretary of State George Marshall's plan for Europe's economic reconstruction. The Soviet Union opposed the plan because it viewed it as the US's attempt to undermine its influence in Europe.

Dalton, Shinwell and Morgan Phillips saw people like Platts-Mills and Konni Zilliacus as subversive elements¹³⁰ and initiated a policy to purge the party of such 'fellow-travellers', expelling Platts-Mills and his colleagues for their pro-Soviet sympathies.¹³¹

The rivalry between Labour and the CP in the 1940s expressed itself in the parties' respective attitudes towards the Palestine conflict. Believing that the Middle East was critical to Britain's economic and strategic needs, the Labour government began to regard communism as a threat to its interests in this region and Russia's support for the Jewish state reinforced Bevin's fears.¹³² Thinking that Israel could 'turn red' as a result of an influx of Jews from eastern Europe,¹³³ Bevin became obsessed with preventing the Soviet Union from gaining strength in the Middle East.¹³⁴ In contrast, having decided to join the anti-imperialist side, the CP thought that a pro-Soviet Jewish state would undermine Britain's imperialist interests in the region. Many of Israel's founders were Russian Jews who sympathised with the Soviet Union. The Yishuv contained people like Moshe Sneh, who led the Haganah, between 1940 and 1946, and who believed that the Yishuv should support Russia's struggle against British imperialism. Left-wing Zionists in the Palmach, the Haganah's elite force, and Mapam shared this view.¹³⁵ Moreover, the CP believed that in Palestine, as well as India, the eradication of colonialism would end local conflicts.¹³⁶

Gaitskell was as opposed to communist links with Labour as his predecessors, denouncing communist activism in the constituency parties.¹³⁷ He belonged to the revisionist right, a faction that was notoriously suspicious of Soviet foreign policy.¹³⁸ Labour's opposition to the war arose from a number of factors, but anti-imperialist politics did not play a part in the leadership's stance. Gaitskell took an anti-war line because he feared that Britain's action would jeopardise the Anglo-American alliance. His faith in the UN's authority also led

¹³⁰ Schneer, 1988:110-112.

¹³¹ Howe, 1993:160-161; note 55.

¹³² Callaghan in Fyrth, ed., 1993:128

¹³³ Pappé, 1990:563.

¹³⁴ Morgan, 1989:218.

¹³⁵ Wistrich in Wistrich, ed., 1979:283.

¹³⁶ Howe, 1993:157-158.

¹³⁷ Haseler, 1969:38.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*:120.

him to oppose the war on the grounds that it breached international law, because the UN had not sanctioned the tripartite attack on Egypt.¹³⁹ The motivation behind Gaitskell's opposition to the war contrasted sharply with the communists'. By now, having made the defeat of imperialism its overriding priority, the CP supported anti-imperialist nationalist movements irrespective of their character arguing that even bourgeois nationalist movements were progressive,¹⁴⁰ an outlook that informed the communists' attitude towards Nasser. The party had little in common with the Labour leadership, saying that:

'The battle for a socialist foreign policy has not yet been won in the Labour Party and the trade unions: and that showed itself in...November 1956, in spite of the wonderful and heartening protests against the attack on Egypt.'¹⁴¹

In 1967, the two parties' different allegiances in the cold war and the rivalries between them displayed themselves in their positions on the war. Wilson's pro-Israel orientation sprang from his commitment to the Atlantic alliance. The CP's pro-Arab position stemmed from its pro-Soviet orientation. In the 1960s, the communists' commitment to anti-imperialist nationalist movements had intensified,¹⁴² justifying their support for non-communist movements such as Nasser's on the grounds that imperialism had prevented the growth of a working class in colonial regions by preventing industrial development.¹⁴³ The communists' opposition to Labour's attitude towards the hostilities was part of its wider disillusion with Wilson's foreign policies, especially the Labour leader's refusal explicitly to condemn America's involvement in Vietnam and his failure to prevent the unilateral declaration of independence from Britain in Southern Rhodesia. The CP supported a Labour back-bench rebellion over this issue.¹⁴⁴

However, there were some similarities between the CP and Labour, especially between the communists and the Labour left. In the 1940s, both parties

¹³⁹ Chapter three.

¹⁴⁰ Howe, 1993:290.

¹⁴¹ *Labour Monthly*, December 1956:564.

¹⁴² Howe, 1993:290-293.

¹⁴³ Ramelson, 1967:17.

¹⁴⁴ *Morning Star*, 16 June 1967:1.

adopted a pro-zionist platform in the campaign to the 1945 general election. The CP's attempts to forge links with Labour and integrate into the political system made it subject to some of the same constraints as Labour, including an appreciation of popular and Jewish opinion. Aware of the political advantages of adopting a pro-zionist stance, both parties did so for electoral gain. Once Labour won power, the CP allied with the Labour left in protesting against Bevin's Palestine policy, a unity that stemmed from a shared disappointment with the government's approach to foreign policy. Both the Labour left and the CP believed that the government had jeopardised its commitment to a socialist foreign policy. The communists' protests against Bevin's Palestine policy were part of a campaign against other aspects of the government's policies abroad, including, most notably, the government's response to the insurgency in Malaya.¹⁴⁵

There were also some similarities between the two parties in 1956. The CP joined the anti-war demonstration in Trafalgar Square along with the Labour Party, the TUC and other Labour organisations such as Labour Women from Scotland.¹⁴⁶ It particularly sympathised with the Labour left, portraying this faction as responsible for Gaitskell's decision to oppose the British government's policy.¹⁴⁷ The party presented Bevan as the hero of the anti-war movement and described the demonstration as 'the most united', where 'Labour and Communist, trade unionist, Ministers of religion and students stood side by side'.¹⁴⁸ This unity reflected the CP's links with Labour left-wingers, especially with people like Maurice Orbach and William Warbey. Prominent communists like Idris Cox, Kay Beauchamp and Jack Woddis, worked with Labour anti-colonialists in the MCF.¹⁴⁹ Partly under the influence of the MCF, the Labour left began to support national liberation movements in the Third World, putting pressure on the leadership to pursue a more radical approach to foreign and colonial affairs.¹⁵⁰ It was Labour members of the MCF, including Orbach, who protested against the war for anti-colonialist reasons, like the CP.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ See Howe, 1993:159-160.

¹⁴⁶ *Daily Worker*, 17 September 1956:1.

¹⁴⁷ *World News*, 25 August 1956:534.

¹⁴⁸ *Daily Worker*, 5 November 1956:1.

¹⁴⁹ Howe, 1993:262-265.

¹⁵⁰ Kavanagh and Morris, 1989:98.

¹⁵¹ Chapter three.

There were also parallels between the CP's position and the Labour left's in 1967. The CP's opposition to the government's pro-Israel orientation stemmed from its view that the war could not be understood outside America's neo-colonialist agenda in the Third World. It supported left-wing MPs like James Dickens, who opposed Israel's occupation of the territories.¹⁵² Labour's left-wing dissenters from the party's pro-Israeli tradition similarly began to show some sympathy for the Arab countries because of their hostility towards American neo-colonialism. Having been influenced by the rise of Third World nationalism and new left politics, which centred on anti-colonialist politics, the Labour left started to see Israeli politics as helping to force through America's agenda in the Third World.¹⁵³

There were even stronger parallels in the 1980s and these were twofold. First, in the early part of the decade Labour contained a small group of far left people, such as Ted Knight, which espoused anti-zionist ideas, condemning Israel for being a racist, imperialist state and calling for its dissolution. Some of this anti-zionism was anti-semitic.¹⁵⁴ The CP's traditionalist strand articulated identical themes, making links between zionism and racism, comparing zionism and Nazism and elaborating anti-Jewish themes. This faction differed from Labour's far left only in so far as it did not call for Israel's abolition, in line with communist orthodoxy. Both the Labour far left's anti-zionism and the CP's traditionalists' reflected their unwillingness to adapt their basic ideological assumptions to changing situations. The orthodox communists were reluctant to depart from classical class analysis.¹⁵⁵ Labour's far left was unwilling to abandon conventional Trotskyist formulas.

The second similarity turned on that between Labour's soft left and the CP's reformers. By the late 1980s, both of these factions in the respective parties adopted an even-handed approach to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, recognising Palestinian and Israeli nationalism. Both parties ended up in this position for similar reasons, including intra-party changes and decisions to make the parties

¹⁵² *Morning Star*, 13 June 1967:1.

¹⁵³ Chapter four.

¹⁵⁴ Chapter five.

¹⁵⁵ Callaghan in Seldon, ed., 1990:74.

more accountable to popular opinion. The entry of a younger generation of activists, influenced by the new left movements of the 1960s and anti-racist and anti-colonialist politics, led Labour to take on board non-class issues such as national identity. This new current favoured recognition of Palestinian as well as Israeli national rights. Moreover, under Neil Kinnock, Labour embarked on a policy review process designed to make the party more attractive by eradicating what the leadership saw as unpopular policies like unilateralism. By the late 1980s, this aim underpinned Kinnock's attempts to remove some of the more extreme aspects of the pro-Palestinian campaign, especially the far left's demands for the dissolution of the Jewish state. The leadership wanted to rebuild the bridges that had been broken in the late 1970s and early 1980s between Labour and the Jews.¹⁵⁶

Similarly, it was the rise of a younger generation of communists, people like Martin Jacques, which forced the CP to take on board non-class issues like gender, ethnic and national identities, and to depart from communism's emphasis on class. This co-incidence of ideas between the soft left and the, by now dominant, communist reformers, reflected the links between these two groups. In the aftermath of Labour's 1983 election defeat, Neil Kinnock's supporters and the Labour Co-ordinating Committee (LCC) worked with *Marxism Today* to push for policy changes¹⁵⁷ in order to combat Thatcherism. Like the Labour Party under Kinnock, the CP embarked on a policy review process, re-evaluating its position on questions like public ownership and nuclear disarmament.¹⁵⁸ Also like the new Labour leadership, the CP's reformers began to purge their party of what they thought of as Stalinists,¹⁵⁹ in order to rid the party of unpopular ideas. The CP's efforts to make the party into a more effective political force and to re-connect with socialist members of the Jewish community triggered this shift towards a more moderate approach to the Israel/Palestinian conflict.

This review has shown that the CP's policies towards Israel and the Arab/Israel conflict were more ideologically driven than Labour's. Communism's

¹⁵⁶ Chapter five.

¹⁵⁷ Callaghan in Seldon, ed., 1990:71.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid:75.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid:74.

principled hostility towards zionism frequently surfaced in the party's position on the various conflicts in the Middle East in the postwar period. This situation stemmed from the CP's subordination to the CPSU and its greater distance from the formal political system than Labour, leading it simply to repeat the Soviet line and to ignore popular or Jewish opinion. However, it is not the case that the party's stance was monolithic and unchanging. In this respect, it is important to distinguish between the leadership and the activists. Until the 1980s, there was far more stasis on the part of the leadership than the activists. While Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt were happy to conform to the communist line, party intellectuals and activists were not. People who were disillusioned with the party's refusal to be flexible over policies and its lack of internal democracy, also challenged its automatic anti-zionist stand. However, the party's authoritarian structure made it very difficult for dissenters to affect its policy positions, especially at the height of the cold war. The leadership's rigidity forced those who questioned communist anti-zionism to take a highly oppositional position. This sometimes led opponents to go too far in the other direction and to ignore Arab nationalist feeling.

Nor is it the case that the CP's stance was unchanging and that it was entirely unresponsive to external and internal developments. The rise of Eurocommunism and the introduction of Gramscian ideas into the party dovetailed with Labour's electoral defeat in 1979 and the rise of Thatcherism to introduce a whole new set of values into the CP. The reformers, or the Eurocommunists, were particularly willing to embrace the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and to take on board a range of issues including feminism, environmentalism and ethnicity. After a bitter struggle with the party's traditionalists in the mid-1980s, the reformers gained control of the party.¹⁶⁰ These developments produced significant changes in the revamped party's attitude towards the Israel/Palestinian conflict. With the new times faction in the ascendant, the CP dropped its traditional hostility to Jewish nationalism, but without losing its commitment to Palestinian national rights.

Having considered the similarities and differences between the British Labour Party and the British Communist Party's policy towards Israel, the next

¹⁶⁰ Callaghan in Waller and Fennema, 1988:227-241.

thing is to see how these parties' positions compared with the French left. To what extent did the French left reproduce these patterns of policy change? Did factors peculiar to French history and its political system produce different policy outcomes? In the following chapter I shall provide an account of the way the social democratic and communist left in France conceptualised the Israel/Arab conflict in the postwar period.