

Hitler's Unwilling Partners

**Zionism and Anti-Semitism in
Nazi Germany**

by Francis R. Nicosia

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324 pages.

Reviewed by Boaz Neumann

A historian of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, Francis Nicosia is no stranger to sensitive subject matter. With his new book, *Zionism and Anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany*, however, he trains the spotlight on an especially fraught topic: the ties between the German Zionist movement and the Nazi establishment, in particular between the years 1933-1939. This is highly combustible material, as a detailed account of their interactions—and yes, of their cooperation—can all too easily be exploited. In certain political and academic circles, there are those who would love to advance the claim,

however unfounded, that there exists a remarkable similarity (if not outright equivalence) between Zionism and National Socialism, with all that such a claim implies.

To Nicosia's credit, he is aware of this pitfall and attempts throughout the book to neutralize the possibility that his research might be used for dubious political purposes. He makes clear that while there existed both institutional and personal contacts between Zionist activists and senior Nazi officials throughout the 1930s, these were purely instrumental relations, the result of interests that happened to coincide. They were not, he insists, representative of any ideological or political common denominator. In Nicosia's clever wording, these were not "a dialogue," but rather "dual monologues."

Indeed, no one can accuse Nicosia of intentional provocation. He treats this delicate topic with sensitivity and care and provides a wealth of highly

detailed research. Nevertheless, with his chosen subject of inquiry he has entered a minefield, and his analysis is barely sufficient to defuse the danger. Considering how easily the facts may be distorted, his ultimate failure to rebut false impressions both in depth and at length poses a serious problem in this important and intriguing work.

Nicosia's argument that Zionism and antisemitism once shared common interests will seem utterly counterintuitive to most readers. After all, contemporary Jew-hatred is frequently bound up in the negation of Israel's right to exist. Yet from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, the very opposite was true: Antisemitic sentiments often led to support for the idea of a Jewish national homeland. The influential English writer G.K. Chesterton expressed this logic succinctly: "We know that there is a Jewish problem; we only hope that there is a Jewish solution."

Antisemites and Zionists were thus in agreement on the fact of a "Jewish problem" as well as on the impossibility of resolving it by means of assimilation into European society. Neither put any stock in the concept of a "hyphenated Jew," be it a German-Jew, French-Jew, or English-Jew. From the point of view of

antisemites and Zionists alike, a Jew is inherently an "other," whether from a religious, ethnic, or racial perspective. Moreover, the only way to remedy the difficulties this "otherness" poses is by removing it, through either civil-legal or physical means. The Zionist movement, then, was preaching to the antisemitic choir. It concurred not only with the diagnosis of the so-called sickness, but also with regard to its treatment: emigration. In this context, Nicosia quotes Hannah Arendt's claim that the immediate and direct result of the ascendant political antisemitism at the end of the nineteenth century was not the appearance of Nazism, but rather the birth of Zionism.

And yet the Zionist movement in Germany, on which Nicosia's book focuses, was beset with problems. It had to deal, on the one hand, with extreme expressions of antisemitism, and, on the other, with entrenched Jewish assimilation. Furthermore, in the wake of World War I, the Zionist movement had made a strategic decision to abandon the neutral stance it had hitherto maintained and adopt instead a clear preference for the British, who had promised to create a Jewish national home in Palestine; subsequently, the center of Zionist activity moved from Berlin to London, a fact that left the German Zionist faction considerably weakened. At the

same time, the defeat of Germany in the war, the Balfour Declaration, and the rising tide of overt antisemitism in the country highlighted, for many German Jews, the advantages of the Zionist option over the assimilatory alternative that appeared to have gone bust.

Unfortunately, the Zionists failed to stand up to the challenges posed by raging Jew-hatred, maintaining instead that there was no way to contend with it directly, and certainly not in an organized, effective fashion. In their view, a strategy of self-defense would contradict the basic notion that a Jew is not and never can be a “German”—and that, moreover, there is no reason for him to try and be one. Thus not only did the German Zionists avoid confrontations with antisemites, but they even went so far as to *renounce* the Jews’ struggle for civil rights altogether, preferring to brandish the claim that the rise of Hitler was the final proof of the failure of assimilation. As Kurt Blumenfeld, president of the German Federation of Zionists, wrote in 1932, “Deep down I felt from the bottom of my heart that the fundamental lie of Jewish life in Germany had to be eliminated.”

Ironically, and tragically, this principled opposition to any German-Jewish symbiosis prevented the Zionists from identifying the extent of the danger inherent in the Nazi

movement when the latter began its meteoric rise at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. Indeed, the Zionist leaders in Germany persisted in believing that some kind of interaction with the Nazis was both necessary and unavoidable—although, according to Nicosia, it is not clear whether such interaction in fact took place before January 30, 1933, when Hitler became chancellor of Germany.

National Socialism’s initial attitude toward Zionism was also ambivalent. On the one hand, the Nazis believed that a Jew was a Jew, and a dangerous and conniving parasite—Zionist or not. On the other hand, they recognized that the Zionists, too, believed in the “otherness” of the Jew and his inability to be a true German. The Nazis also acknowledged what for them was the most useful principle of modern Zionism: the straightforward solution to the “Jewish problem.” Thus could Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi movement’s leading ideologue, present Zionism as part of the Jewish scheme to join forces with British imperialism and stab Germany in the back, while at the same time writing, in 1919, that “above all, it is important that in the Zionist program the Jews are considered as a people”—that is, their *own* people, and not a part of the German one.

With the Nazis' rise to power, the principled consensus between them and the German Zionists assumed concrete expression. Although the Nazi regime did not function as a single, monolithic entity, at first almost all its different bodies supported the emigration of Jews to Palestine, each for its own reasons. The Reich's Foreign Ministry, for instance, saw such emigration as a means of alleviating the pressure of international public opinion against the regime's persecution of Jews. Likewise, the Ministry of Economics and the Reichsbank believed that their ties with the Zionist movement could occasion relief from the international boycotts from which Germany was suffering. Moreover, they reasoned, a Jewish Palestine might even prove a ready market for German exports. The Reich's Ministry of Justice jumped at the opportunity to cooperate with Jews who needed no convincing that dual loyalty was untenable, if not impossible, while the Ministry of the Interior and the SS both believed that the Zionists were simply offering a rational and efficient solution to the "Jewish problem."

The Transfer Agreement signed in 1933 between the government of the Third Reich and the Jewish Agency marked the height of the two sides' pragmatic cooperation. The agreement—which was in truth a

series of agreements organizing the transfer of German Jews' capital and property to Palestine between 1933 and 1939—reflects a bizarre consolidation of interests. It enabled Nazi Germany to facilitate orderly Jewish emigration from its territory, to curb the momentum of the crippling economic boycotts, to export merchandise, and to deliver the vast Jewish property left behind into German hands at a relatively cheap price. For the Zionists, it created an orderly mechanism for the emigration of Jews from Germany while at the same time enabling them to take some of their capital out of the country, albeit mostly in German goods. From an economic and logistical point of view, the agreement contributed in no small amount to the laying of the infrastructure of an eventual Jewish state.

The relations between the movements did not end there, however. From 1933 through the end of that decade, the Nazis encouraged Zionist activity in Germany in various ways, such as granting visas to Zionist activists who sought to enter the country, supporting training camps, approving Hebrew studies, and permitting members of Zionist organizations to wear their own uniforms. They also conducted an uncompromising campaign against non-Zionist Jewish activity. In one of the most fascinating chapters in his book,

Nicosia notes that Nazi officials sought to promote the Jewish Revisionist youth movement, Betar, so it could serve as a counterweight to the leftist-socialist factions then dominant in Zionist circles. Nevertheless, the dramatic blossoming of German Zionism through the 1930s cannot be attributed solely to the support of the Nazi establishment. As the decade stretched on, more and more Jews came to understand that they had no future in Germany and actively sought an alternative.

The Nazis were benevolent to the Zionists, then—on account of a shared interest in the removal of Jews from Germany. But what was their attitude toward the supreme objective of Zionism, the founding of a Jewish political entity in the Land of Israel? Here the picture is somewhat more complicated. Certain circles in the Nazi movement held that the Jews should be encouraged to gather in Palestine, out of a belief that the influence of world Jewry would thus be diluted. Confined to their own state, so went the claim, the Jews would no longer be able to rule over anyone else. Other Nazis, however, warned that such a state would surely serve as the locus of an international Jewish conspiracy, and still others feared that it would align itself with the League of Nations and join in an

anti-German coalition. Finally, the SS—the most critical agent in the execution of the Final Solution—argued that only Palestine could physically absorb mass Jewish immigration, and therefore the idea should not be rejected out of hand. In any case, the outbreak of World War II rendered a Nazi consensus on the advantage of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel moot. The strategic necessity of undermining British dominion in the Middle East led Nazi Germany to join forces with Arab leaders such as the Mufti Haj Amin el-Husseini, famous for his virulent anti-Zionism.

It is tempting to see the brief success of Zionism under Hitler's rule as a small ray of light in the darkness. In truth, however, the German Zionist legacy amounts to little more than dangerously raised hopes and unfulfilled expectations. The movement was hard-pressed to absorb the crowds of those joining its ranks, and it suffered from a leadership void as its upper echelons swiftly departed for Palestine. Moreover, to its own relentless organizational and economic problems were added the intensifying limitations that the government imposed on emigration from Germany—making the Zionist movement even more incapable of facilitating a large-scale departure to Palestine. In any event, from 1938 onward, and all the more so following Kristallnacht,

the Nazis' anti-Jewish policy underwent a dramatic radicalization, and they started to mercilessly persecute Zionists as well. Limited cooperation between the sides reached its violent conclusion with the start of German conquests in the East, which from the Nazi standpoint reduced to irrelevancy the possibility of resolving the "Jewish problem" by means of emigration. Since then, one fate, and only one, was designated for all Jews who fell under the swastika's shadow.

Nicosia's research leads to three major conclusions concerning the nature of the ties between the Zionist movement in Germany and the Nazi regime. The first is that the story of these relations is complicated, replete with contradictions, and cannot be reduced to a simple, linear description. Second, the Nazis' exploitation of the Zionists as a type of "subcontractor" proves that the idea of extermination had yet to flesh itself out in the 1930s. Third, and perhaps most important, after 1933, for obvious reasons, German Zionists had no choice but to "cooperate" with the Nazis. Clearly, then, one cannot deduce from the movements' "dual monologues" any meaningful similarity between them.

As I stated, this last claim is crucial to precluding a mendacious use of parts of Nicosia's research. Unfortu-

nately, however, the book leaves many questions in its wake. For starters, one has to wonder why it is called *Zionism and Anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany*, when a far more accurate title would have been *Zionism and National Socialism in Nazi Germany*. After all, although the Nazis on whom Nicosia focuses were indeed antisemites, they were much more than that. Specifically, they were efficient bureaucrats in the service of a racist ideology. When I teach my students about Hitler's Germany, I always say, *if only* the Nazis had "just" been antisemitic—if only their cause had "just" amounted to that—the story would have ended with several pogroms and anti-Jewish legislation. The problem is that the Nazis were not mere antisemites, but planners and executors of a grand, global design. In fact, they did not hesitate to *suppress* popular antisemitism when it threatened the efficacy of their system.

The problem doesn't end with the choice of title, however. The similarity between Nazism and antisemitism, a running theme of the book, is far too simplistic an equation and circumscribes Nicosia's research significantly. He does not devote enough attention, for example, to additional, critical components of the Nazi *Weltanschauung*: the concept of ethnicity as rooted in both descent and homeland (*Blut und Boden*, "blood and soil");

the obsession with territory and territorial expansion (*Lebensraum*, literally “living space”); the *prima facie* combination of socialism and nationalism; the fierce belief in the chosenness of the German folk, etc.

Only when we understand that Nazism is much more than antisemitism does the issue of its ideological similarity to Zionism become problematic, and its implications far more perilous. For indeed, Zionism can also be described as a nationalistic—some will add “racist”—movement, one that sanctifies the essentialist bonds between blood and land, promotes territorial expansion, seeks (or at least sought) to combine socialism and nationalism, and furthers the belief in the chosenness of the Jewish people. How easy it would be, for instance, to evoke the character of Haim Arlozorov, one of the architects of the Transfer Agreement with the Nazis, who spoke of the merits of what he termed “popular socialism,” and to present him as the Jewish counterpart to his German interlocutors. This misleading similarity may be more than enough to incite excoriating anti-Zionist criticism, which presents the State of Israel and the Third Reich

as two sides of the same coin. Precisely for this reason, it is regrettable that Nicosia does not preempt this argument at the outset and focus his debate more squarely on those points I just mentioned.

Admittedly, there is something almost obscene in the very idea of discussing—even from a critical point of view—an analogy between the Third Reich and the Jewish state. Zionism is not immune to criticism, of course, but there are accusations to which the very act of self-defense constitutes an affront. Nonetheless, in the prevailing political climate—of which Nicosia is well aware—there is perhaps no avoiding it. His research deserves the highest praise for its caution and meticulousness, but his reticence in delving into the complicated and nuanced phenomenological aspects of the movements that form the crux of his book—antisemitism, Nazism, and Zionism—is a serious failing. As they say, God is in the details. Or rather, in the case of the Nazis, it is precisely the devil who is there instead.

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