

# Unfinished Business and Unexploited Opportunities: Central and Eastern Europe, Jews, and the Jewish State

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Israel and the Jewish people face a very special set of issues and potential opportunities with the successor states of post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe. Today, two-thirds of a century after the end of World War II and twenty years after the fall of the Soviet empire, this part of the world is an area that remains misunderstood—at least from the Jewish and Israeli perspectives.

The time has come to employ logic regarding problems where passion has too often overruled good sense. Israel and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have a great deal in common, and by reaching a consensus on the history of the mutual travails of Jews and the autochthonous peoples of that region, it is possible to find a road toward fruitful cooperation.

For centuries, the vast belt of territory sandwiched between the German-speaking and Russian-speaking lands, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, housed the greatest concentration of Jews in the world. Today, that region includes—in alphabetical order—Belarus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

## **The Tangled and Tortured Past**

As Jews were persecuted and expelled from German-speaking lands in the late Middle Ages, many thousands moved eastward—sometimes at the invitation of local rulers. For roughly 500 years (and in some instances, many more), Jews

lived side by side with Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Romanians, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and other peoples. There were times of persecution and times of mutually beneficial cooperation.

In earlier centuries, the sporadic mistreatment of Jews was due mainly to religious motives, though there were also economic conflicts. During the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, however, the rise of nationalism among these neighbors led to an increase in antisemitism.

Jews were seen as enemies or barriers to the fulfillment of national aspirations among the majority populations. Moreover, there were new features in this perceived conflict. The view of Jews as an unassimilable minority began to take hold, and the idea took root among the local peoples that Jews were siding with enemy, ruling nationalities (whether Germans, Hungarians, or Russians), and were the bearers of corrupting modernity. There was also deep-seated anger at the embrace by some Jews of anti-national leftist ideologies.

The twentieth century saw an increase in persecution in a number of these places, augmented by the rise of indigenous Fascist parties and large antisemitic movements. This culminated, of course, in the Holocaust. Many Central and Eastern Europeans collaborated with the Germans, whether as individuals or as members of various movements, and volunteered for German units that murdered Jews.

Thus, in Jewish memory and history, the antisemitic aspect of the interrelationships is stressed. Almost without exception, Jews fled or were killed. Antisemitism and even pogroms were not unknown even in the post-war period. As Central and Eastern European nationalism revived in the late- and post-Soviet period, many of these countries—at least significant elements in them—saw the historic antisemites as heroes, not so much because of their activities against Jews, but because of their struggle against the Communists. But what does it say, to cite only one example, when Ukraine enthusiastically rehabilitates and memorializes a leader like Semyon Petlura, who was responsible for the deaths of so many Jews?

This is not, however, the whole story. As noted above, there were long periods of fruitful cooperation and friendship among Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors. Powerful forces in Central and Eastern Europe, during the last century of large-scale Jewish presence there, opposed, or at least did not advocate, antisemitism. For example, the Polish socialists and the leader of Poland's struggle for independence, Jozef Pilsudski, saw antisemitism as both detrimental to Polish national interests and a stain on the country's honor.

Instead of seeing modern Central and Eastern Europeans and their history as universally antisemitic, it is more accurate to see a struggle over antisemitism, in which different groups and individuals held varied views. In his speech at the December 2010 Global Forum on Antisemitism in Jerusalem, the foreign minister of Lithuania, Vygaudas Usackas, asked, “How could it be that while some Lithuanians were risking their lives to save their Jewish neighbors, others were committing crimes by sending them to death?” Though the numbers on each side of the divide were disproportionate (with most of Lithuanian society looking upon the destruction of the Jews with enthusiasm or cold indifference), this is still the central question: How did people in each of these countries choose sides in this struggle, and what can we learn from this process?

In this sense, the history of Central and Eastern Europe is not so different from that of Western Europe. A consideration of the history of France—to say nothing of that of Germany and Austria—reveals far more parallels than are generally made between the two areas.

What is needed, then, is neither to idealize nor to demonize the historic relationship with the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, it is important to understand that while moderate conservatives, liberals, and democratic socialists in those countries were generally friendly, or at least indifferent, to Jews, the greatest enemies were on the far right—social reactionaries and hard-line nationalists—and on the far left—the Communists, especially after they seized power.

While the far right wanted to kill or expel the Jews, the far left wanted to engage in forcible assimilation to obliterate the Jewish community and religion. Obviously the former were far worse, but the latter also did tremendous damage and caused untold suffering. Jews, however, have generally acknowledged only one-half of this equation.

### **The Nazi Factor and the Holocaust**

For the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, caught as they were between the Germans and the Russians, fate has not been kind. In the 1930s and '40s, they were forced to choose between the doctrines of Nazism and Communism—behind which their traditional enemies were lurking.

But while the Jews had no choice but to prefer the Soviets and Communism over the Germans and Nazism, their neighbors had options. Indeed, many Central Europeans saw the Germans—if one had to be chosen—as the lesser of the two evils.

And on this point stands the knottiest problem between Central Europeans and Jews as they look back on this dreadful period in history.

Following a brief but brutal occupation by the Soviets, which ended with the June 1941 German invasion, many Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian nationalists supported, and even fought alongside, the Germans. In Belarus and Ukraine, many people who had lived and suffered under Soviet rule also changed sides and threw their fortunes in with the Germans. Hungary, Romania (including what is now Moldova), and Slovakia (then part of Czechoslovakia), which were independent countries at the time, allied themselves with Germany and assisted in the destruction of their Jewish subjects. As nations, the Poles and the Czechs were the most united and steadfast in opposing the Nazis. To be sure, some Poles did play a role in the murder of their Jewish neighbors, even though they opposed the Germans and struggled against them to preserve their national existence and identity and regain their freedom. To some extent that was true in the Czech lands as well.

Obviously, there can be no Jewish or Israeli sympathy with, or understanding for, those who collaborated with the Germans and played a hand in the Final Solution. But there are two other elements that have largely been neglected in this narrative — at least as presented by Jews. There can and certainly should be a degree of understanding for the objective dilemma in which these peoples found themselves (which in no way absolves those guilty of despoiling and destroying Jews). Moreover, there can even be a sense of shared fate in their common suffering under Communism.

### **The Communist Factor**

For around a half-century, from the 1940s to 1990, Central and Eastern European countries were either transformed into satellites or forcibly incorporated into the USSR, with central and eastern Ukraine and eastern Belarus having been under Soviet control since the consolidation of Communist rule after the Bolshevik Revolution. Oppression and repression of a personal and national nature were the norm under the Soviets. Resentment against Communism runs deep, and the national revival of these countries beginning in 1990 was permeated by a historical perspective that highlights that theme.

Because they viewed Communism as the principal villain of their modern historical experience (with Fascism and Nazism playing only a secondary role), while Jews saw Fascism and Nazism as the exclusive villains, there could not but be a clash of perceptions. And this is reinforced by the fact that Jews often see Central and Eastern Europeans as collective villains, while Central and Eastern Europeans

often associate Jews with Communism or at least blindness toward the depredations and suffering to which the Soviet system subjected its people.

This conflict is neither necessary nor desirable, and the perceptions on which it is based are also largely inaccurate. Briefly, while there is no denying that a number of Jews were Communists—and that some even played leading roles in the party as well as in the secret police and government apparatus after Communist takeovers—they accounted for only a very small proportion of the Jewish community in general. Their numbers, of course, are wildly exaggerated by antisemites. Moreover, it must be recognized—and clearly stated—that the Jewish Communists were also acting against, not in conjunction with, Jewish interests.

Curiously, though, this problem is actually intensified by a Jewish reticence to denounce Communist misdeeds. While the Soviets did save many Jews from the Nazis during World War II—including much of my family—this does not negate the tremendous harm done to the Jewish people by Communism before, after, and at times even during the war. Of course, one should not ignore the post-war role of the USSR and its allies in supporting Israel's enemies, supplying them with weapons, and even training terrorists who murdered many Israelis.

Why, then, should Jews, and Israel in particular, not place a priority on identifying Communism as a significant oppressor of their own and recognizing what their Central and Eastern European neighbors suffered at its hands?

To talk about Soviet oppression and to talk about the Holocaust are in no way mutually exclusive. It is wrong to see a focus on the oppressive practices of the Stalinist regime as somehow inevitably a challenge to the uniqueness and importance of the mass murder of Jews in those countries. To imply that talking about the deportations of the local population carried out by the Soviets constitutes a manifestation of antisemitism is to place the identity and history of Central and Eastern Europeans in confrontation to that of Jews. This is both inaccurate and counterproductive.

It is never a good idea to conceal history. Due to the existence of the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc until 1991, much of the truth about the terrible oppression of Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles, Ukrainians, and others was suppressed. As part of their national revival, these peoples want to highlight what happened to them and elucidate the full horror of their sufferings. They have every right to do so and no power in the world could or should stop them. And why should we Jews, of all peoples, oppose this trend so long as it does not bring with it a denial or justification of the Shoah? Is our highest priority to set up a “competition of suffering,” in which we define these oppressions as conflicting rather than mutually reinforcing?

Instead, we should fully participate, as Jews and Israelis, in this process for several good reasons. One factor is that many Jews were among the victims of Soviet repression. In Lithuania, in which Jews constituted about 5 percent of the population, approximately 10 percent of those deported by the Soviets in 1940–41 were Jews. One of them was Menachem Begin. Although being sent to Siberia saved the lives of those who managed to survive the deprivations of those camps, this was not the intention of the Soviet regime.

Almost a thousand Jews were massacred by the NKVD in Katyn and the other killing grounds of Polish officers, along with tens of thousands of ethnic Poles. Among the thousands of Jews who, along with Poles, were sent to slave labor camps from eastern Poland were members of my family. Other Jews were executed for being religious, Bundists, Zionists, or members of the so-called bourgeoisie. Some were even turned over to the Nazis.

Is the blood of these Jews and the tens of thousands who perished from Soviet bullets or in the Gulag of lesser value than those murdered by the Germans and their helpers?

Indeed, even if it came a very distant second to the Nazis in terms of brutality and efficiency, the Stalin regime also targeted Jews and greatly contributed to their suffering. If it had not been for the Soviet–Nazi alliance, Hitler might not have been able to start the war in the first place. Stalin turned over some Jewish leaders to the Nazis; let us not forget that being a Zionist was a criminal offense under the Soviet regime, including in the countries subjugated by Moscow during the war.

In the USSR, both before and after the war, Jewish schools, synagogues, and cultural institutions were shut down. An all-out campaign sought total assimilation, nominally into Communist society, but in practice into the Russian nation. There were, of course, also certain opportunities for advancement, but only at the price of abandoning one's own people. And many Jews who agreed to pay the price, including those who genuinely believed in Communism, were imprisoned or murdered. During the early 1950s, Stalin came very close to instituting a massive pogrom, which many historians believe did not take place only because of his own death.

A second reason why we should join with Central and Eastern Europeans in commemorating and revealing the true extent of this repression and mass murder is to help Jews and others understand today that the political right does not hold a monopoly on antisemitism. This is of particular importance at a time when the main source of antisemitism, along with hatred of Jews and Israel in the West, is from a left that justifies itself by claiming that it is immune to that contagion.

Third, the idea that Jews should only deal with Central and Eastern Europeans nowadays by demanding that they constantly proclaim their guilt over the Shoah is counterproductive, and also likely to produce resentment rather than any real acknowledgement of responsibility, let alone true repentance.

Finally, there is the question of the Jewish Communists, some of whom tortured and murdered local people—including other Jews—in the service of the Soviet secret police. Antisemites use this to stir up anti-Jewish hatred, just as the Nazis did (a point well made in Latvia's museum on both the Shoah and its oppression by Germans and Soviet occupiers). It is an important lesson for Jews to understand how some of their number betrayed them. Jewish Communists led the way in destroying the Jewish religion, language, and culture in the Soviet Union and satellite states. This is significant for us today at a time when extreme leftists, Jews among them, smear Israel and endeavor to harm or even dismantle it.

In short, it is in our moral and political interest to join with Central and Eastern Europeans in seeking to understand the truth about the past and its significance for the present. That includes acknowledging their suffering from both the Nazis and Stalinists during World War II—and the depredations they suffered over the subsequent half-century. One important element here is teaching children in Western schools about the costs and crimes of Communism as well as the ravages of Nazism.

We should discuss this issue honestly. Just as the actions of Nazi collaborators, whatever their number, cannot be blamed on an entire society, all Jews should not be held responsible for the deeds of a small minority, especially when those people did not act as Jews but as enemies of the Jewish people.

When we demand, and rightfully so, that they acknowledge their guilt for our suffering, while we refuse to recognize their own plight at the hands of their oppressors, we are setting up a conflict that can and is being exploited by antisemitic elements. We should engage in an open dialogue in which we respect their historical experience, which is also that of many Jews. On this basis of solidarity against totalitarianism, we can stand together as friends.

Indeed, the importance of historical memory to these countries can be seen in the fact that Poland's President Lech Kaczynski made a special trip to commemorate the Katyn massacre on the site in which it took place. Sadly, that journey ended in disaster when his plane crashed and he and dozens of other members of Poland's political elite died.

In the speech he was to have delivered, President Kaczynski recalled the murder of more than 21,000 Polish officers by the Soviets and added: "This crime of genocide was carried out at Stalin's will and by order of the highest authorities of the Soviet Union" in conjunction with the era of "alliance between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union."

Does his use of the word "genocide" somehow imperil the memory of the Shoah? While one can debate the use of that term on other grounds, the answer is: Of course not. Whether or not one calls it genocide, what occurred was a systematic attempt to murder "the people who formed the very foundation of our nationhood, unbending in their service to the motherland" in order to ensure that a truly independent Poland never arose again.

As with the Shoah, in the case of the mass murders of Poles by the Soviets, "the pits of death were supposed to forever conceal the bodies of those murdered, and the truth about the crime. The world was never supposed to find out. The families of the victims were robbed of the right to grieve publicly, to shed tears and to remember their loved ones. Earth covered the traces of the crime, and lies were supposed to wipe it from public memory."

These crimes are also a part of Jewish history, since there were Jewish victims as well, killed due to their loyalty to the countries of which they were citizens or because of their social status, religious piety, or political views. Now is the time for Jews to commemorate their lives and sufferings, just as we do for those who were murdered by the Fascists.

### **The Rational Alliance: Central and Eastern Europe and Israel**

Indeed, a major reason that past relations should be a basis for partnership rather than a source of conflict is because contemporary cooperation between these two parties is so important and easily accomplished. As a result of common historical experiences, the Central and Eastern Europeans and Israel have parallel problems and not dissimilar world views.

Since the post-Communist states are among the most pro-Israel governments in the world, they have become a pro-Israel lobby in the European Union and in other places where Israel is desperately short of friends. This is a very important asset for Israel.

What explains their behavior? It is partly due to the past relationship with the Jewish people—a combination of guilt and sentimentality. It is also a reaction against the anti-Israel policies forced on them by the Communist bloc. To be sure,

many people in this part of the world view friendship with Israel as a manifestation of freedom and democracy—a decisive rejection of the totalitarian past. By the same token, Israel’s enemies—and especially the Islamists among them—are associated with totalitarian dictatorships like those imposed by the Soviets on Central Europe. One is reminded of the common sentiment in Poland during the Six-Day War when many Poles rejoiced that “*our* Jews beat *their* Arabs.”

Yet another critical element here is the common worldview shared by Israel and Central and Eastern Europeans, whose subversion in other parts of the West has been a major part of Israel’s international problems. These are countries forced by circumstances to be realistic in understanding that international conflicts, threats, the need to defend oneself, and aggression from neighbors are not merely problems of the past.

Among the key ideas the two hold in common are the following:

- Loathing dictatorship and believing that such regimes cannot be trusted: Those who have suffered under such regimes can never lightly deal with such governments or ignore the human rights violations so common in dictatorships, nor confuse the shortcomings of democracies with the extreme and fundamental flaws of dictatorships.
- Ideology: Those who have lived under, or have been attacked by, ideologically dominated governments or movements can never underestimate the ways in which such systematic ideas transcend pragmatic considerations in making terrible social, economic, and political decisions.
- Appeasement: We understand that dictatorial and extremist ideological movements cannot be contained by appeasement or deterred by an attempt to foster greater understanding. Aggression can only be discouraged or defeated by a proven willingness to defend oneself, and by deterrence, alliances, and a belief in the justice of one’s own cause.
- Nationhood: Having fought for nationhood for centuries, and knowing what it is like to exist without it, we affirm the importance of national identity in the traditional sense of a population that has a basic identity, culture, and history. Of course, this should not detract from fair treatment of minority groups within our midst, but the nation itself should not be dissolved in a misguided attempt to be a mere collection of disparate cultures. In fact, these are precisely issues on which we need to cooperate today. At a time when nationalism is viewed as an unacceptable evil, we should affirm the importance of our shared belief in the preciousness of our peoplehood. We share, too, the experience of knowing that the threats of those who would wipe us off the map must be taken seriously.
- The importance of preserving and defending Western civilization: We believe that Western civilization is the best basic form of society and government. It has the ability

to correct its shortcomings, as history has repeatedly demonstrated. Improvement can only take place in the framework of what has already been achieved.

- The necessity of self-reliance along with the need to rally the West. While both Israel and the Central and Eastern European States have generally good relations with the US and Western Europe, there is a common knowledge among them that the Western democracies are not necessarily reliable allies. The subversion of these democracies by left-wing politics, pacifism, wishful thinking, and other factors is a direct danger to the existence of those countries which, in effect, are on the “front line” against major threats.

For Central and Eastern Europeans, these issues are not mere abstractions. Just as Israel faces a variety of countries and movements that want to destroy it, our friends in Central and Eastern Europe, too, have their own well-founded fears and conflicts. For example, in July 2009, an open letter was sent to President Barack Obama from twenty-two top Central and Eastern European leaders, including seven former prime ministers or presidents and nine former foreign or defense ministers of Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and the Slovak Republic. The letter stated: “We know from our own historical experience the difference between when the United States stood up for its liberal democratic values and when it did not. Our region suffered when the United States accepted Soviet domination over it and it benefited when the United States used its power to fight for principle.”

Those leaders fear a resurgence of Russian ambition combined with Western acquiescence that would relegate them to Moscow’s sphere of influence. For them, the Russo–Georgian war was particularly worrisome in that context, when they saw “the Atlantic alliance stand by as Russia violated the core principles of [international agreements] and the territorial integrity of a country that was a member of NATO’s Partnership for Peace... in the name of defending a sphere of influence.”

Unfortunately, hopes that Russia “would finally fully accept our complete sovereignty and independence after joining NATO and the EU have not been fulfilled.” Instead, Russia is waging overt and covert warfare against them, using “creeping intimidation” and tactics “ranging from energy blockades and politically motivated investments to bribery and media manipulation in order to advance its interests and to challenge the transatlantic orientation of Central and Eastern Europe.”

Israel has normal relations with Russia, yet Moscow is also acting increasingly like an ally of Iran, Syria, and Hizbullah. The question of Israeli–Russian relations is a complex one, and Jerusalem certainly does not want to undermine ties with

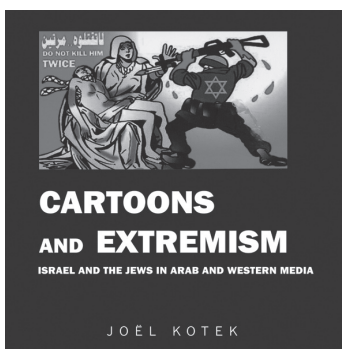
Moscow. Still, there are parallel interests between Israel and Central and Eastern Europe in trying to ensure that Russia does not play an active role in a radical alignment opposing Western and especially US interests; disrupting international stability; and targeting the front-line democratic states.

Central and Eastern Europeans are also well aware of what lay behind the complaint of Lech Walesa, the hero of Poland's struggle against Communism, even if they would not go as far as he did: "The world has no leadership. The United States was always the last resort and hope for all other nations. That was the hope, that whenever something was going wrong, one could count on the United States. Today we have lost that hope."

Aside from cooperation among themselves, the front-line states of Central and Eastern Europe and Israel—and there are other countries in the world that share these ideas and concerns—must form a lobbying group and wage an unrelenting struggle of ideas to ensure that this hope is not lost. They must strive to ensure that the West is willing to confront the threat posed by totalitarian aggressors in the contemporary world.

## Joël Kotek **Cartoons and Extremism** Israel and the Jews in Arab and Western Media

Foreword by Alan Dershowitz, Introduction by Anthony Julius



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Antisemitic cartoons have long been rife in the Arab-Muslim media. The September 2001 Durban Conference against Racism, intended to denounce and combat racism in all its forms, also featured the distribution of antisemitic cartoons by an Arab organisation, yet this elicited no reaction from Western NGOs at the conference. This event set the author on a trail that revealed thousands of such drawings. By reproducing more than 400 of these cartoons, taken from both Arab and Western media, this book exposes the use of hatred in the media and hopes to raise the alarm.



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