

When Blacks and Irish Nationalists Were Zionist Allies

by Norman Berdichevsky (April 2018)



Two of the closest allies in the Jewish struggle to realize the Zionist Dream of “A Nation Once Again” (a Mantra of the Irish National Movement as well) have largely deserted their once-close ties. This is most apparent to those of us old enough to remember that British opposition to what they called “Zionist Propaganda” used the image of an unholy alliance between Jews, Blacks, the Civil Rights Movement and Irish Nationalist sympathizers in the United States, all of whom were supposedly tainted by extremist views.

This may come as a surprise to many younger people today, especially on the political Left end of the spectrum. For at least four decades, African-American and Jewish relations have soured and whatever platitudes may be uttered by recognized leaders of both groups, the rank and file among both groups often hold aggressive and condescending views of each other. Few remember or care to celebrate the heyday of the close,

cordial and fraternal relations in the 1940s that differed from the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s when many Liberal Jewish activists were often in the forefront of that struggle, sometimes to the chagrin and open resentment of many young Blacks.

Prior to that time, African-Americans often took the lead among gentile support by way of public statements in favor of rescuing Jews from the Holocaust and helping to create a Jewish state. The same was true of Irish-Americans, devoutly Catholic and sympathetic to the nationalist cause.

These forgotten older alliances were linked in part to the political action campaigns undertaken by what many liberal Jews today label as "The Far Right" of the Zionist movement. It was identified with so-called underground "dissident movements" in Palestine—The Irgun and the Stern Gang (known by the acronym of LEHI, the Hebrew acronym for "Lochamei LeHerut Yisrael"—Fighters for the Freedom of Israel) and managed in the United States by Peter Bergson (code name of Hillel Kook), a Zionist emissary from Jerusalem connected with the Revisionist Movement, headed by Menachem Begin.

These so called "dissident" groups challenged the official position of most of the establishment Jewish organizations in the United States who were reluctant to voice any criticism against President Roosevelt. It nevertheless won the support of a wide array of members of Congress, Hollywood celebrities, writers, artists and intellectuals, including many prominent African-Americans.

Initially known as the "Committee for a Jewish Army", the Bergson group sought to create a Jewish armed force that would fight alongside the Allies against the Nazis. Due to public relations purposes, the British authorities in Mandatory Palestine eventually agreed (to their later regret) to establish a 5,000-man force, known as the "Jewish Brigade." It fought with distinction on the European battlefields in 1945, and many of its veterans acquired the military skills that proved decisive in Israel's 1948 War of Independence.

Few American Jews or Blacks active in the Democrat Party today care to recall this era. While many American Jewish leaders during World War II balked at the idea of any Jewish "separatist" front that might make them appear as having "special interests," some of the most dynamic and radical black civil rights leaders of the time supported the idea. These included labor union leader A. Philip Randolph, President of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Roy Wilkins, Bayard Rustin, Whitney Young and W. E. B. DuBois (a founding member of the NAACP), the leading African-American intellectual of his era. Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, two of the most well recognized and honored black writers and intellectuals were sponsors of the Bergson group "July 1943 Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People" of Europe.

The conference, held in New York City, openly challenged the Roosevelt administration's claim that rescuing Jews from Hitler was physically impossible or would be detrimental to the overall Allied war effort and that only by defeating the Nazis on the ground, could a Jewish remnant of survivors be rescued with full victory.

More than 1,500 delegates at the Conference heard panels of experts on military matters, relief proposals, escape routes and transportation logistics, discussing practical ways to save Jews from genocide. One of these speakers was Walter White, executive director of the NAACP. Among the most prominent black supporters of Bergson's Jewish statehood campaign were noted actor Canada Lee, and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of Harlem-the first African-American to represent New York in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The noted singer, actor and political activist, Paul Robeson, was one of the stars of a Madison Square Garden "Show of Shows" (a name copied later by Jewish American comedian Sid Caesar for his successful television comedy show) organized by Bergson in 1944 to raise money for his campaign to rescue Jewish refugees. Robeson even appeared later in Moscow to help celebrate Israel's Independence and gave a stirring rendition in Yiddish of the Jewish Partisan Fighter's Song "Never Say this is the end as you go along the last road" Zog Nit Keyn Mol.

Full-page newspaper ads, a Congressional resolution urging the creation of a U.S. government agency to rescue refugees, and a march by over 400 rabbis to the White House just before Yom Kippur embarrassed the Democratic administration and "convinced" FDR to establish the War Refugee Board, a proposal originally suggested by his wife Eleanor. The Board helped save an estimated 220,000 lives during the last 15 months of the war.

In 1946, Ben Hecht, recognized as one of the most prominent and talented screenwriters in Hollywood, and a fervent Bergson ally, authored a Broadway play called "A Flag is Born," in

support of Jewish statehood. Hecht had enjoyed a reputation at that time as one of the American Jews who had been most prominent in support of full civil rights for Blacks.

Many of the leading leftwing radical figures who brought about a shift in Black-Jewish relations argued that Jews sympathy to Israel's cause and Zionism had nothing to do with the Civil Rights Movement and was only a front to ensure their popularity in liberal circles. New African-American leaders who came to prominence in the nineteen-sixties and seventies (and preferred the term "Black") such as Malcom X, writer James Baldwin, the Black Panther and Black Power movements, philosopher Cornel West, Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, and poet LeRoi Jones (Amira Baraka) all rejected the pro-Israel sentiments of Martin Luther King and the earlier figures who had supported Israel's establishment in the 1940s.

They had already forgotten or were ignorant of how early in the 1920s, Hecht had already organized campaigns against the Ku Klux Klan long before his Zionist activity. Hecht's authorship of stories about black-white relations was a tribute to Bert Williams, a Bahamian American entertainer of the Vaudeville era and one of the most popular comedians for all audiences of his time. He was by far the best-selling black recording artist before 1920. This was forty years before Hecht's involvement with Zionism.

In the same period, circa May-June 1923, Hecht collaborated on a musical with Dave Peyton, jazz pianist and music critic for the black newspaper the Chicago Defender who broke taboos by publishing a regular column, "Black-belt Shadows" about Chicago.

In 1943, he wrote a widely read article in Reader's Digest magazine about the reality of the Holocaust correctly estimating that Jewish civilian casualties from Nazi atrocities totaled close to two million. In the same year, he organized and wrote a pageant, "We Will Never Die," which was produced by Billy Rose and Ernst Lubitsch, and with the help of composer Kurt Weill and staging by Moss Hart.

Hecht wrote the script for the Bergson Group's production of "A Flag is Born", which opened on September 5, 1946 at the Alvin Playhouse in New York City. The play, which compared the Zionist underground's campaign in Palestine to the American Revolution, was intended to increase public support for the Zionist cause in the United States.

The play starred Marlon Brando and Paul Muni during its various productions and proceeds from the play were used to purchase a ship that was renamed the SS Ben Hecht. It brought 900 Holocaust survivors to Palestine in March 1947. The Royal Navy captured the ship after it docked. Six hundred passengers were detained as illegal immigrants and sent to internment camps in Cyprus. The SS Ben Hecht later became the flagship of the Israeli Navy.

In October 1948, the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association, a trade union representing about 4,700 British film theaters, announced a ban on all films in which Hecht had a role. This was a result of "his intemperate utterances on the Palestine problem". As a result, American filmmakers, concerned with jeopardizing the British market, became more reluctant to hire Hecht who subsequently cut his fee in half and wrote

screenplays under pseudonyms or completely anonymously to evade the boycott, which was finally lifted in 1952. Many Brits in high positions did not forget the dislike they had felt at the Jews who had defied British policy opposing Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel, a fact that can partially explain the failure of Queen Elizabeth to ever pay an official visit to the State of Israel. Prince Charles made two “private visits” to Israel to attend the funerals of Shimon Peres in 2016 and Yitzhak Rabin in 1994 but did not include diplomatic meetings and are not considered official royal visits. The British Foreign office reportedly put pressure on him not to attend a 100th anniversary celebration in Israel of the Balfour Declaration for fear of antagonizing the Arab and Muslim states.

After the war, Bergson established the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation and the “American League for a Free Palestine”, which played a crucial role in mobilizing public support and in Congress for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

During the last two years of the war, the NAACP worked closely with the Bergson group to help bring about the desegregation of theaters in Baltimore, which restricted African-Americans to less desirable seats. The play “A Flag is Born” had a successful 10-week run on Broadway and was scheduled to be performed in various cities around the country. The advance notice that African-Americans might be barred from attending or segregated in some theaters led the producers and Bergson group looked for an alternative.

The London Evening Standard expressed horror that large audiences were flocking to Hecht’s play and what it called

"The most virulent anti-British play ever staged in the United States." American publications took a different view: Time called the play "colorful theater and biting propaganda," while Life complimented its "wit and wisdom."

Hecht and 32 other playwrights announced they would not permit their works to be performed at theaters that barred African-Americans. The Washington engagement of "Flag" was rescheduled for the Maryland Theater in Baltimore, and a train car was secured to bring 18 US Senators and a number of foreign diplomats to Baltimore for the February 1947 event.

The Maryland Theater didn't formally exclude African-Americans but was regarded by the NAACP as a bastion of segregation and Southern regional particularism. It provided seating in the balcony for blacks only, which local bigoted whites had long dubbed "nigger heaven," Bergson's group, at the last moment before opening night, informed the management of the theater that, if that traditional seating arrangement was not rescinded, the NAACP would picket the show with signs provided by Bergson declaring "There is No Difference Between Jim Crow in Maryland and Persecution of Jews in Palestine. The message included the threat that bodyguards would escort African-American guests to their seats in the regular sections of the theater. Even more persuasive was the hinted threat of a massive publicity campaign orchestrated by Jewish journalists and Zionist sympathizers in congress and the press.

The theater hurriedly agreed that the Bergson group would be regarded as "The Lessee" of the evening's performance and thus entitled to arrange the seating. A dozen African-Americans attended that opening night performance on February 12, 1947 (Lincoln's Birthday) and the next day, "The Baltimore Afro-

American” reported that members of the audience “were seated indiscriminately without any untoward events.” (See “[lecture](#) titled “A Comparison of the Hebrew and Gaelic Revivals,” delivered by Trinity College Dublin speaker Aidan Beatty (currently a lecturer at Wayne State University in Michigan) to the Irish Jewish Museum on the 22nd of August 2013, he contrasted the political and cultural backdrops to the respective revivals and examined the disappointed expectation that the Irish language would be at the forefront of establishing independent Ireland’s national identity as Hebrew was. A sullen reply on the talk’s website gives what might be an explanation of accounting for repressed feelings of hostility and failure among some Irish.

“The Jews have all the money and political power to support the revival.”

These bitter grapes cannot obscure what has remained a cherished recollection for both peoples when they shared a common cause, and especially the affection of those Irish nationalists for whom the revival of their language stands as a glorious achievement, rivaled only by Hebrew.

In a major article to The Jewish Journal, Aidan Beatty has argued that the founding fathers of the modern Irish Republic, O’Connell, Davitt and de Valera all engaged in a thought experiment about Irish statelessness parallel to the Jews and about where Ireland fits into a broader European world.

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, had much to say about the timidity of the Jewish

establishment committed to the Democrat Party and F.D.R. and their reluctance recall the magnificent efforts of Mayor O'Dwyer and Peter Bergson. Wiesel issued this call in his keynote address to the Fifth National Conference of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, held at the Fordham University School of Law, in New York City.

Former New York City Mayor Ed Koch spoke at the conference on "The Forgotten Irish-Jewish Coalition: Bill and Paul O'Dwyer, the Bergson Group, and the Holocaust." Journalist and Irish-American activist Pete Hamill was the commentator. Mayor Koch focused on the support given to the Bergson Group by Mayor Bill O' Dwyer; the mayor's brother Paul, and Congressman Andrew Somers. Based on these facts, Koch contended that the sudden decrease in anti-Jewish violence by Irish youths in the mid-1940s was due in part to the high-profile positions taken by the O'Dwyers.

Jewish, Irish, and African-Americans would do well to remember and cherish these facts.

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