

Herzl as settler colonialist... Not!

CENTER FIELD

• By GIL TROY



remove the Jewish people from its land, is like arsonists saying “We didn’t burn the forest down with our matches; who knew the wood was flammable?”

AS THE editor-in-chief of *HERZL: Zionist Writings*, the inaugural volume in Koren’s forthcoming Library of the Jewish People, appearing in 2022, I am doing a deep dive into Herzl’s writings.

I acknowledge Herzl’s shortcomings, from his vanity and brittleness to his Jewish insecurity and European blind spots. Still, I am offended – not surprised – by the divergence between what Herzl actually believed and the Herzlian phrases these academics sloppily, tendentiously, cherry-pick to use against the Jewish people.

Herzl’s analysis of the state of the Jews catapults us back to the stateless Jews’ misery – mocking today’s anachronistic attacks on Jews as perpetually privileged. Herzl’s colleague Max Nordau defined the Jewish problem crisply: “The Jewish people can be freed from its bitter poverty only when it leads a normal economic existence on its own soil.” Subsequently, Nordau would describe the broken Jew’s purgatory: “He has lost his home in the ghetto, and he is denied a home in his native land.”

The Jews’ powerlessness, their ancestral ties to Palestine, and their intentions to live permanently on the land, all refute the trendy “settler colonialism” charge.

“Colony,” from the Latin “*colonia*,” as in settlement or farm, is a late Middle English word describing retired Roman soldiers settling freshly conquered territory. Sometimes, the word simply means people living or farming together – which is what Herzl usually meant when he dreamed of Jewish colonies in Palestine and the Jewish Colonial Trust.

Traditionally, settler colonialism was “extractive,” like the British in India – enriching the imperial “mother country” far away with goodies from conquered lands. But *Eretz Yisrael* is the Jews’ mother country. As Herzl and other Zionists proclaimed, they moved there to build and be rebuilt, not extract and exploit.

Moreover, if there was one thing Herzl was famous for, it was for giving up on Europe and the Diaspora, recognizing that Jews were not welcome there – and recognizing Palestine as their only viable long-term option. Jews weren’t sent from “home” to enrich back home – they were coming home!

Academics also describe an “eliminationist” settler colonialism, defined by Oxford Bibliographies “as an ongoing system of power that perpetuates the genocide and repression of indigenous peoples and cultures.”

Beyond forgetting that genocide involves mass murder – not the population explosion Palestinians have enjoyed – and ignoring all the Jewish attempts at coexistence and peace with Arabs contrasting with colonialism, this lie highlights the core ideological conflict.

To say, as many of us two-staters do, that the Jews and Palestinians are “two peoples in love with the same land” respects the conflicting land claims. To say, as the Abraham Accords do, that Jews, Muslims, Christians share spiritual ties to these lands, seeks a very un-Palestinian vision of coexistence.

But playing this all-or-nothing game as though there were only one indigenous people, then designating the Johnny-come-lately Palestinians as the natives, not the Jews, reads history backward.

A famous tale claims Herzl’s successor Chaim Weizmann asked Lord James Balfour, “Would you give up London to live in Saskatchewan?” But the British have always lived in London, Balfour muttered. Weizmann replied: “Yes, and we lived in Jerusalem, when London was still a marsh.”

True, many modern academics act as politicized prosecutors, not objective analysts. Still, there are many words, phrases, concepts one could use to criticize Israel and Zionism while affirming Palestinian rights. That even some Jewish studies professors have joined the anti-Israel pile-on, feeding the delegitimization derby with demonizing distortions, is scandalous.

Most important for scholars – it’s untrue. Most important for humanists – it’s incendiary.

Zionism, meaning Jewish nationalism, is anomalous. It’s a story of powerlessness, not imperialism; genuine indigeneity, not colonialism. This obsessive need to impose false analogies denigrates but doesn’t illuminate.

Calling Israel racist, apartheid, genocidal, settler-colonialist and white supremacist or Jewish supremacist, is inaccurate and insulting, counterproductive and self-destructive. It encourages war, not peace; Jew-hatred, not reconciliation. It hardens hearts and polarizes positions. And, in demonizing the Jewish state, it encourages hooligans who target the Jews living in that state – and the Jews living everywhere else, too.

The writer is a distinguished scholar of North American history at McGill University and the author of nine books on American history and three on Zionism. His book Never Alone: Prison, Politics and My People, coauthored with Natan Sharansky, was just published by PublicAffairs of Hachette.