

## BDS: bullying, demonization and slander



**Gil Troy**

On Jan. 31, 1961, Israel's ambassador to Canada, Yaacov Herzog, 39, visited McGill University to debate famed 71-year-old British historian, Arnold Toynbee. Five days earlier, while lecturing at McGill, Toynbee had denied Israel's right to exist while unfairly comparing Israelis to Nazis. In the ensuing debate, the older historian ultimately disavowed his comparison, while the Israeli diplomat eloquently defended the rights of Jews, like all peoples, to a homeland. Fifty-five years later, McGill's students produced another righteous do-over, refusing to ratify an unfair, insulting student union resolution targeting Israel.

The 512 McGill students who supported the BDS movement – pushing for boycotts, divestments, and sanctions – disrespected democracy, trying to impose this destructive resolution for a third time in

18 months. In championing boycotts, they undermined bridge-builders who seek Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. In endorsing divestment, they encourage extremists and reward terrorism, further poisoning the atmosphere. In applauding sanctions, they failed to understand that the more you want Israeli territorial concessions and peace-processing, the less you should support demonizing boycotts. And in bullying Israel, they voted to make thousands of pro-Israel and Jewish students uncomfortable: on a campus that abhors micro-aggressions against women, blacks and LGBTQ students, they injected offensive anti-Semitism-laced macro-aggressions.

The BDS movement is dishonest. While it claims “only” to oppose Israeli settlement in the West Bank, its founding document opposes Israel's existence. Falsely claiming, in the original 2005 call for an international boycott, that Israel “was built mainly on land ethnically cleansed of its Palestinian owners,” essentially calls Israel a criminal state that should be eliminated. This phrasing floats on a cesspool of Palestinians' daily cries to kill the Jews and destroy the Jewish state. Most Palestinian BDSers

admit that their fantasy is to destroy Israel, but most BDS campus activists hide those exterminationist intentions in a cloud of human rights rhetoric – which returns us to Herzog's triumph over Toynbee.

BDS, Toynbee and the Red-Green, far left-Islamist alliance all stem from one historic poisonous plant. Despite Jews' legitimate national rights, only Israel is subjected to a systematic campaign questioning its right to exist. BDSers, like Toynbee, weave any Israeli imperfections into a broader, ultimately anti-Semitic, demonization of Jewish actions – and repudiation of Jewish rights. For millennia, bigots have exaggerated criticisms of Jewish individuals or Jewish communal acts to caricature Jews as a global threat and Judaism as threatening. Today, that same hatred targets Zionism and the Jewish state. Israel is now treated as “the Jew among nations,” in the words of former justice minister Irwin Cotler, who watched Toynbee and Herzog debate as a 20-year-old McGill student.

Just as women, African-Americans, and gays endure insults today in the context of historic humiliations they suffered, today's obsession with Israel reeks of historic Jew

hatred. Anti-Semitism's long pedigree, compounded by the Arab world's vicious medieval expressions of anti-Jewish bigotry today, explains the anguish these repeated BDS attempts have caused so many who revere McGill as a centre of higher education, dialogue, reason and reasonableness.

So, no, McGill's pro-Israel voices were not overreacting by resenting the resolution's insensitivity and bigotry. And yes, Jews take Israel personally, because it is the Jewish state built after millennia of Jewish suffering. Jews take Israel personally because most anti-Zionism echoes the historic demonization of Jews. And Jews take Israel personally because those attacking Israel usually attack Jews, too.

Kudos, then, to the McGill majority that created a broad left-right coalition, not for or against Israeli policy – that wasn't the issue – but for a fair debate on campus, a safe space for all McGill students, and a reasonable, productive approach to campus discussion in ways that don't demonize, polarize or marginalize. Let's debate Israel's actions – and others' actions – substantively, passionately, but let's drop the BDS BS – bullying, demonization and slander. ■

## Facing the past is more important than ever in Poland



**Sara Horowitz**

My Polish colleagues and students are understandably sensitive when the terms “Polish death camps” and “Polish concentration camps” are used to refer to such places as Auschwitz, Treblinka, Chelmno and Sobibor. With good cause, they contend that such nefarious places were located in occupied Poland and under direct Nazi control. They note that when these sites of atrocity and death were operational, they were on German – and not autonomous Polish – soil.

I'm sympathetic to this desire to place blame squarely where it belongs. The Nazi genocide was, of course, a plan that emanated from Germany under Nazism, not hatched in Poland by Poles. My Polish colleagues note that their country and their countrymen were also victims of Nazism. They're right. Many, however,

will add that the record of their countrymen toward Jews during the war was mixed. Many acknowledge that the victimization of Poland by the Nazis didn't preclude some Poles from also acting as victimizers of their Jewish neighbours.

That mixed record has been at the heart of the struggle of Polish national memory about World War II and the Holocaust: how to talk about the suffering of Poland under German occupation, and, at the same time, not use the memory of that suffering to cover up the collaboration of many Poles.

It's a natural, but not productive, impulse for both people and nations to shy away from shameful things in the past. In our millennium, Poland has been trying to look with honest eyes at the complexity of the historical record. Thanks to the work of pioneering historians of Poland such as Princeton professor Jan Gross, along with bold and committed researchers, educators and activists within Poland, there's been a movement to be accountable for Polish collaboration, alongside a commemoration of Polish rescuers, resisters and victims.

A look at two Polish films about Jewish victimization during the war – one from 1989 and one from 2013 – makes the change in attitude apparent. The 1989 made-for-TV film by renowned Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski – No. 8 in his *Decalogue* series – features a Polish-born American woman who has come to Warsaw to confront a distinguished professor of ethics. The American interrupts a university class to ask the professor how she understands the ethical issues involving a Polish woman who had agreed to help shelter a little Jewish girl during the Holocaust, provided the girl underwent baptism, and then reneged on that commitment because the baptism entailed a false promise to God. We soon learn the ethics professor was that Polish woman and the American woman was the little girl she'd turned away. The plot centres on a challenge to Polish behaviour toward Jews during the war, but as we see the past unfold, the film vindicates the professor and the complexity of her motives.

By contrast, Pawel Pawlikowski's 2013 film *Ida* dramatizes the discovery of the

shameful behaviour of a Polish farmer who murders a Jewish family he'd been paid to shelter, so that he could lay claim to their property. Unlike the earlier film, *Ida* doesn't soften its presentation of Poland's ambivalent treatment of Jews during war. It emerges from a different moment in Polish culture and a willingness to examine its past.

Many of us who research and teach about the Holocaust or eastern Europe fear signs that – in the name of restoring national pride – the present Polish government is working to reverse the accountability and honesty that reshaped Polish national memory in recent years. New legislation now under consideration would make it punishable by law to “blame the Polish nation for Nazi or Stalinist crimes.” And there's a move afoot to strip Gross of the prestigious Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit awarded to him in the 1960s.

Perhaps the attention now being focused on Poland will reverse this ominous trend. Meaningful national pride emerges from facing history, not obscuring or falsifying difficult aspects. ■