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History Keeps Happening
Anarchists and Fellow Travellers on Palestine
September 2026

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Historically speaking, anarchists have never had a unified stance on Palestine or Zionism. Even anarchists who shared an opposition to Zionism didn't necessarily oppose it for the same reasons, nor did they necessarily have any concern whatsoever for Palestinians.

On the one hand, there were historical Jewish anarchists such as Emma Goldman and Joseph Cohen, who claimed to be against Zionism but at the same time dismissed or ignored the role of British imperialism and Zionist colonialism in the oppression of Palestinians.

Goldman and Cohen rejected Zionism due to their abstract anti-nationalism. They were concerned solely with the detrimental effect of the Jewish nationalist movement on the Jewish people and the broader international working class, minus any particular regard for Palestinians as Palestinians.

Goldman, in 1906 had already published a comrade's anti-Zionist article in her periodical, Mother Earth. However, in 1938 she wrote her own article defending the Zionist colonization of

Palestine, ignoring the repression of Palestinians by the British, and deploying Zionist mythology and John Locke's theory of property to justify Zionist land theft. Goldman claimed, in a standard colonial trope, that Jewish settlers had gained rights to Palestinian territory because they had "tilled the soil... reclaimed wastelands and... turned them into fertile fields and blooming gardens."

Reginald Reynolds, a gentile fellow traveller of anarchists, responded to Goldman most appropriately at the time, criticizing her Lockean/Zionist argument, pointing out that by her "till the soil" logic, "the land in Palestine should have belonged to the Arab peasant," and that "'finding is keeping' is a good motto for conquistadores and imperialists, but not, I should have thought, for Anarchists."

Joseph Cohen, in his 1945 book on the Jewish anarchist movement in America, callously dismissed out of hand the idea that Palestinians might have been resisting British and Zionist imperialism during the disturbances of 1929. (The Jewish Anarchist Movement in America, 2024 English e

On the other hand, there were historical Jewish anarchists such as Marcus Graham and Albert Meltzer who did just the opposite of Goldman and Cohen, specifically highlighting British imperialism and Zionist colonialism as crucial factors for anarchists to tackle.

This split also applied to historical gentile anarchists. On the one side there was Camillo Berneri and Vernon Richards, calling out British imperialism and Zionist colonialism, and on the other, George Woodcock, reiterating the Zionist/Lockean myth that settlers made the desert bloom and naively describing the kibbutz movement as holding shared principles with anarchists. (Freedom: Anarchist Fortnightly, Oct.18, 1947)

In 1986, the Jewish American anarchists Murray Bookchin and Sam Dolgoff wrote an article and a book chapter, respectively, defending the State of Israel.

Bookchin, in his article, tossed aside any concern for Western imperialism and even spuriously claimed that the problem was just

war in the abstract, that the "partition lines that were eventually established after the 1948 invasions were the product of bloody warfare — literally the give-and-take of battle — not of 'imperialistic' or 'land-grabbing Zionists.'"

Dolgoff, in his book chapter, went so far as to support the claim made by his Israeli comrades that against the Arab states, "Israel must be defended."

Anarchist incoherence around Palestine and Zionism should come as no surprise, however, given that European and Euro-American anarchists don't exactly have a perfect track record when it comes to Indigenous peoples in general, nor have they been consistent in rejecting collaboration with the State (see Spain in the 1930s or Ukraine today.)

Furthermore, abstract anarchist universalism, however well-intentioned it may be, is no ready-made and automatic solution to particularity, and Palestine perhaps has shown this more clearly than anywhere else. An attention to the specifics of settler colonialism, its imperialist backing, and the dynamics of Palestinian history is necessary, now more than ever.

As the infamous Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin put it way back in 1868, "only by uniting those two faculties, those two apparently contradictory tendencies — abstraction and attentive, scrupulous, and patient analysis of details — can we rise to a true conception of our world."

Shall we finally rise to Bakunin's challenge (while at the same time firmly rejecting his anti-Indigenous and anti-Semitic tendencies) and to the challenge that the Palestinian struggle presents to the world, or shall we continue to wallow in the mire of a merely abstract and aesthetic radicalism that sweeps settler colonialism under the rug?