

## Exterminism in Palestine

The Editors of Monthly Review

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word exterminate comes from the Latin

*Exterminate by the seventeenth century, it had taken on the additional meaning of “to destroy utterly, put an end to (persons or animals); now only, to root out, extirpate (species, races, populations...)”*

for “to drive beyond boundaries.” From the sixteenth century onward, it meant “to drive forth (a person or thing), from, of, out of the boundaries or limits of a (place, community, region, state, etc.); to drive away, banish, put to flight.” However, by the seventeenth century, it had also taken on the additional meaning of “to destroy utterly, put an end to (persons or animals); now only, to root out, extirpate (species, races, populations...)” It was the latter meaning that Thomas Hobbes had in mind when he stated in *Leviathan* (1651) that “A People coming into possession of a Land by warre, do not always exterminate the antient Inhabitants.” Embracing both meanings, Francis Bacon asked in his dialogue *Advertisement Touching a Holy War* (1622), “how far an Holy War is to be pursued, whether to the displanting and extermination of people?” (Oxford English Dictionary, compact edition [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971], 938; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 172; Francis Bacon, *Works*, vol. 7 [London: Longman, Green and Co., 1859], 26).

The notion of extermination in its political sense, which was closely connected to the British settler colonial struggle in Ireland, thus came to mean both expulsion and extirpation, aimed at the complete removal of a people. Frederick Engels quotes the English historian Thomas Leland in his *History of Ireland* as stating of the English colonisation of Ireland that “The favourite idea of both the Irish Government and the English Parliament (from 1642 onwards) was the utter extermination of all the Catholics of Ireland.” This, as Karl Marx pointed out, was carried out with the utmost ferocity, utilising the same methods of “extermination” that were later to be applied in the British colonies in North America “against the Red Indians” (Thomas Leland, *The History of Ireland from the Invasion of Henry II*, vol. 3 [Dublin: R.



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Marchbank, 1774], 171; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Ireland and the Irish Question [New York: International Publishers, 1971], 266).

Settler colonies traditionally have been distinguished from those colonies that were directed principally at the establishment of enclaves aimed at extraction and export. What historians have called the “‘pure’ settlement colony,” or what Marx referred to as “colonies properly so called” (involving settler expropriation of the land in its entirety, extinguishing or expelling the original inhabitants), was in the modern period primarily introduced in English colonies in North America, Australia, and New Zealand; to some extent the Cape Colony of South Africa; and Kenya, along with the French colonies in Quebec and Algeria. Settler colonialism, in this sense, took the form of either slave plantations or colonisation by “free settlers.” British North America, later the United States, represented a classic example, causing Marx to refer to “the extirpation...of the indigenous population” of the Americas (D. K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965], 13; Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 [London: Penguin, 1976], 917).

A work that Marx was to rely on heavily was William Howitt’s 1838 *Colonisation and Christianity: A Popular History of the Treatment of the Natives by Europeans in All of Their Colonies*. Howitt emphasised throughout his work that colonialism was equivalent to exterminism, encompassing extirpation, expulsion, and expropriation. He described “the exterminating campaigns of General Jackson,” quoting Andrew Jackson’s declaration on March 27, 1814, with respect to the tribes of the southern United States, that the general was “determined to exterminate them” all. This policy was carried forward by wars against the Native population, followed under Jackson’s presidency by the infamous “Trail of Tears.” “Millions on millions of peaceful beings,” Howitt remarked in his critique of colonialism, “were exterminated by fire, by sword, by heavy burdens, by base violence, by deleterious mines and unaccustomed severities—by dogs, man-hunters, and by grief and despair,” while the “crowning crime” of European colonialism was to be “found in that unapproachable abomination...the slave trade” (William Howitt, *Colonisation and Christianity: A Popular History of the Treatment of Natives by Europeans in All Their Colonies* [London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1838], 404, 501–2; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Hannah Holleman, “[Marx and the Indigenous](#).”

Exterminism was woven into the whole myth of the frontier in the United States. For Frederick Jackson Turner, writing in *The Frontier in American History*, the frontier “begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery.” In 1893, Turner pronounced that the frontier had closed in 1890, the year of the Wounded Knee Massacre (Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* [New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1921], 1, 11).

In *The Winning of the West*, Theodore Roosevelt expressed the exterminist views of settler colonialism when he wrote: “The most ultimately righteous of all wars is a war with savages, though it is apt to be also the most terrible and

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inhuman. The rude, fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilisation under a debt to him. American and Indian, Boer and Zulu, Cossack and Tartar, New Zealander and Maori—in each case the victor, horrible though many of his deeds are, has laid deep the foundations for the future greatness of a mighty people”

(Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, vol. 3 [New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1889], 45).

How does this history of settler colonialism relate to the Zionist project in Israel and to the horrors now transpiring in Gaza? The Syrian historian Constantin Zurayk employed the Arabic word *Nakba* (“catastrophe”) in 1948 to refer to the forcible expulsion of Palestinians from their land, in line with the Zionist project of making Israel into a Jewish

ethnoreligious state. This meant the removal of more than a million Palestinians, descended from a population that had inhabited the land in the region for thousands of years. The result was the initiation of what is now understood as a permanent Nakba, aimed at the complete extermination (in the classic sense of the term) of the Palestinian people. Moreover, since the 1960s, Marxist and Palestinian analysts have theorised it as a form of settler colonialism, with all that implies in terms of a logic of exterminism (Vijay Prashad, "The No-State Solution Becomes More and More Real: Israel's Permanent Nakba Continues," Asia Times, December 14, 2023; see also "[Notes from the Editors: Settler Colonialism in Palestine](#)" [January 2024]).

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Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, Israel has carried out a genocidal war on Palestinians, targeting the entire civilian population. Israeli government officials have called for the annihilation and removal of Palestinians. Israel, at the time of this writing in mid-December 2023, has killed more than twenty thousand Palestinians, targeting hospitals, schools, mosques, and refugee camps. The population has been deprived of food, water,

fuel, and electricity. According to the United Nations Genocide Convention, genocide is "a crime committed to destroy a national, ethnic, and religious group, in whole or in part." In this case, it is crystal clear that Israel's goal is to destroy the Palestinians not in part, but in whole. Indeed, it is not genocide, as commonly defined, but rather the logic of exterminism that is most relevant here. The Palestinian population is today being exterminated by the Israeli colonial state in the double sense of extirpation and expulsion utilising the most advanced and deadly weapons, mainly supplied by the United States (United Nations, "[Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide](#) [1948]," un.org).

At the beginning of the current "Gaza Nakba," Israel told the Palestinian population that, if they did not want to risk death from its aerial bombardments, they should move to southern Gaza, near the Egyptian border. Some 1.8 million people were thus displaced from their homes. Israel then concentrated its firepower, with a total explosive force exceeding that of the two atomic bombs that the United States dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on northern Gaza... Washington has supported Israel militarily, economically, and politically. On three occasions it has vetoed ceasefire resolutions in the UN Security Council while at the same time rushing more and more lethal arms to Israel to aid its exterminist project.

reach the population. The explicit aim is the extermination (in the classical sense of the term) of the entire Palestinian population. In all of this, Washington has supported Israel militarily, economically, and politically. On three occasions in the past two months, it has vetoed ceasefire resolutions in the United Nations Security Council while at the same time rushing more and more lethal arms to Israel to aid its exterminist project (Prashad, "The No-State Solution"; "[Israel Hits Gaza with the Equivalent of Two Nuclear Bombs](#)," Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, November 2, 2023, euromedmonitor.org).

Israel as a nationalist ethnoreligious state exists in its present form only due to U.S. backing. In the face of such naked exterminist imperialism, the product of the whole history of capitalism and settler colonialism, the worldwide response is

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bound to be overwhelming in the end, marking a global historical turning point. Already as the horror unfolds before our eyes, tens of millions of people of all ethnicities, nationalities, and religions around the world are in the streets protesting, promising a resistance that will become more and more universal—a general revolt of humanity. The Palestinians today are the frontline defence in a much greater struggle against the exterminism that is

threatening the population of the earth as a whole, and that has been building over the entire course of capitalist history. In this sense, we are all Palestinians today.

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