



ARTICLE

Thinking with the Jewish State: The Norwegian Labour Movement, Israel and ‘Civilisation’, 1949–1951

Åsmund Borgen Gjerde 

Institutt for arkeologi, historie, kultur-og religionsvitenskap, Universitetet i Bergen, PO box 7805, 5020 Bergen, Norway
asmund.gjerde@uib.no

In 1949, Norwegian social democratic representations of Zionism and Israel shifted from mere support to idealisation. Despite the existence of an increasingly voluminous literature on the European left and Zionism, idealisation of Israel has never previously been explained as distinct from more general support. Regarding the Norwegian case, this article argues that idealisation differed from mere support in its implicit message about the status of ‘civilisation’. Support for Zionism in 1947–8 had been founded on the notion that Europeans needed to ensure the survival of the Jews in a Jewish state in order for European civilisation itself to survive. The idealisation of Israel that emerged from 1949 implicitly argued that Israel proved the attainability of the civilisational ideal and removed from European shoulders the obligation to ensure civilisation’s survival. For the Norwegian labour movement, the 1949 decision to make Norway a founding member of NATO contributed to making idealisation of Israel particularly desirable.

In recent decades in Western Europe, few things have signified a position on the left as clearly as a sharply critical opinion of Israel. For more than a decade after the state’s founding, however, things were very different. Members of the dominant strand of the left in many countries, the social democratic labour movements, tended to admire and praise the new state.¹ Scholars have documented such a tendency in West Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Norway.² In an early study of the West German left and Israel, Martin Kloke describes social democratic idealisation of Israel as pathetic and ‘cathartic’: by praising Israel, social democrats attempted to cleanse themselves and their German identity of the antisemitic atrocities committed by other Germans in the very recent past.³

Since Kloke’s pioneering study, several scholars have explored left ideas of Israel in different European countries. Most of the focus, however, has been directed at the critical views of Israel that emerged after the Six-Day War in 1967. This is perhaps because many scholars have been most interested in the topic of antisemitism in the left, and in differentiating between antisemitic

¹ The positions of the European communist parties, on the other hand, tended to follow the Soviet Union, which supported the partition of Palestine and the establishment of Israel, but soon became intertwined with antisemitic policies toward Jews living in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Colin Shindler, *Israel and the European Left: Between Solidarity and Delegitimization* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 120–52; Paul Kelemen, *The British Left and Zionism: History of a Divorce* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 106.

² W.D. Rubinstein, *The Left, the Right and the Jews* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 103–4; Martin W. Kloke, *Israel und die deutsche Linke: Zur Geschichte eines schwierigen Verhältnisses* (Frankfurt: Haag+Herchen, 1990), 41–66; Hilde Henriksen Waage, *Norge – Israels beste venn: Norsk Midtøsten-politikk 1949–1956* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1996), see especially 35–41; Henrik Bachner, *Återkomsten: Antisemitism i Sverige efter 1945* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1999), 90–9; Kelemen, *Zionism*, 111–49.

³ Kloke, *Linke*, 46. According to a recent study by Daniel Marwecki, such idealisation as was developed by the SPD had little influence on West German policy toward Israel, which was driven by far more cynical motivations. *Germany and Israel: Whitewashing and Statebuilding* (London: Hurst, 2020).

and 'legitimate' criticism of Israel.⁴ Those who have paid any attention to the social democratic support for Israel that preceded New Left hostility in many countries have generally agreed it was a direct response to the Holocaust, and not only in Germany. Accounts with a pro-Israeli bent portray the support for Israel as a 'realisation': the Holocaust made people realise Jews needed a state of their own.⁵ In accounts that are implicitly or explicitly critical of the justice of founding Israel, the overwhelming impact of the Holocaust prevented realisation of the justice of Palestinian claims.⁶ For the most part these scholars have not explained idealisation of Israel as a phenomenon distinct from more general 'support'. Aside from Kloke, another partial exception to this is Hilde Henriksen Waage, who describes Norwegian social democratic ideas about Israel as practically 'a question of faith' resulting from a 'religious conversion'.⁷

The primary focus of Waage's work is Norwegian foreign policy toward Israel. Ideas about Israel in the labour movement enter into her narrative as a factor that contributes to explaining the Norwegian-Israeli relationship. My interest in examining these ideas is different. Its broader context is the history of thinking about Israel in the European left, and it is motivated by the absence in this historiography of detailed attention to the actual content of social democratic ideas about Israel. I approach them not to illuminate foreign policy or to challenge Waage's account of Norwegian-Israeli relations, but rather to understand the ideas themselves and the context of their emergence. David Nirenberg has examined European ideas about Jews from pre-Christian times to the 1930s, arguing that throughout this history, Europeans not only thought 'about' Jews, but used ideas about 'Jews' as tools to 'think with', for making sense of their own most pressing concerns.⁸ This article, similarly, considers how Norwegian social democrats used ideas about Israel as tools to think with.

None of the aforementioned histories of (parts of) the European left and Israel provide much in-depth analysis of the sources in which the idealisation was articulated. This article, by contrast, aims to identify the meaning of such idealisation, to recover the 'work' done by idealising Israel. It seeks to understand Norwegian social democratic idealisation of Israel through contextualised close readings of a few key sources. These sources are the earliest accounts in which members of the Norwegian labour movement idealised Israel.

All of the idealising accounts analysed here were published in the daily newspaper *Arbeiderbladet* (*The Workers' Newspaper*), the Labour Party's (*Arbeiderpartiet*) main mouthpiece. In 1939, its circulation was second highest in the country, just behind the conservative *Aftenposten* (*The Evening Post*), with many expecting *Arbeiderbladet*, due to its rapid recent growth, to soon overtake *Aftenposten* and become the country's number one newspaper.⁹ Under German occupation during the Second World War, authorities forced *Arbeiderbladet* to cease publication and handed its printing press and offices to the main collaborationist newspaper. After liberation in 1945, *Arbeiderbladet* never fully recovered from the loss of market shares during the occupation, when many of its mostly working-class subscribers had started subscribing to more conservative newspapers, which succumbed to censorship and

⁴ This is especially true of the German literature on the topic, of which these are merely a few examples: Holger J. Schmidt, *Antizionismus, Israelkritik und 'Judenknax': Antisemitismus in der deutschen Linken nach 1945* (Bonn: Bouvier, 2010); Timo Stein, *Zwischen Antisemitismus und Israelkritik: Antizionismus in der deutschen Linken* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011). Recent and influential English-language studies with a similar approach are Dave Rich, *The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and anti-Semitism* (London: Biteback, 2016); David Hirsch, *Contemporary Left Antisemitism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

⁵ Shindler, *Israel*, 233–40; Robert S. Wistrich, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, The Jews, and Israel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 20–3; Jeffrey Herf, *Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West German Far Left 1967–1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 10–12, 88.

⁶ Waage, *Norge*, 36, 391; Kelemen, *Zionism*, 123–36.

⁷ Waage, *Norge*, 10, 20.

⁸ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

⁹ Bjørn Bjørnsen, *Arbeiderbladet 100 år 1884–1984. Bind II 1918–1984: Har du frihet og sommersol kjær?* (Oslo: Arbeiderbladet/Tiden, 1984), 213.

were allowed to continue publication.¹⁰ During the years covered here, *Arbeiderbladet* only had the third highest circulation of the country's newspapers.¹¹ From the early 1950s to the early 2000s, Israel was *the* country outside of Europe and the United States that received most coverage in the Norwegian press.¹² A major contributing factor to the creation of this 'special relationship' of the Norwegian press, and especially the labour press, with Israel is analysed below: *Arbeiderbladet's* response to a November 1949 accident.

In a previous article, I traced and analysed attitudes toward Jews and Zionism among Norwegian social democrats from when they first learned about the Nazi genocide of Jews in 1942 until *Arbeiderbladet* published its first pro-Zionist article in 1947. I argued that the traditional explanation – knowledge of the Holocaust created empathy for Jews, which was then extended to the movement to create a Jewish state – was insufficient. Norwegian social democrats were aware of the Holocaust for several years without revising their traditional anti-Zionist views. War and occupation deeply affected almost everyone in the upper echelons of the movement by way of captivity, torture, exile, resistance or the deaths of comrades and family members. Many of them responded to such experiences by adopting a notion of European civilisation as fragile, threatened and in need of defending. This did not, however, affect their views on Zionism until they realised, in 1946–7, that antisemitism had lived on in liberated Europe, which resonated with the widely held notion of a fragile, threatened civilisation.

They interpreted the continued existence of antisemitism as an internal threat to European civilisation. From this they deduced that if European civilisation was to have a future, Europeans needed to ensure Jews would have a future. This pro-Zionism, then, was grounded in European obligation rather than in idealisation of Jews and the state they were creating in Palestine.¹³ Idealisation was also absent from the coverage of the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948–9.¹⁴ The present article examines how and why mere pro-Zionism gave way to idealisation of Israel. It thus examines the origins of what would become a dominant mode of representing Israel.¹⁵

The article begins by analysing the first idealising article about Israel to appear in *Arbeiderbladet*, in April 1949. Later that year, in response to a horrific accident, *Arbeiderbladet* and the powerful party secretary Haakon Lie launched an aid campaign for Israel. The second section considers the idealisation of Israel that accompanied this campaign. The third section analyses writings published in connection with the 1951 journey to Israel of labour leader Martin Tranmæl. The final section considers how NATO membership and the onset of the Cold War changed the political and cultural context in a way that may contribute toward explaining why members of the Norwegian labour movement began to idealise Israel at this particular time.

The Emergence of Idealisation

The novelist and journalist Odd Bang-Hansen spent the summer of 1948 in Israel. Shortly after returning he became involved in organising a Norwegian-Israeli friendship association, of which he himself became

¹⁰ Bjørnsen, *Arbeiderbladet*, 5–6, 213–334.

¹¹ Sigurd Høst, 'Systemet tømres', in Guri Hjeltnes, ed., *Norsk presses historie, bind 3: Imperiet vakler, 1945–2010* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2010), 45–53.

¹² Elisabeth Eide and Anne Hege Simonsen, *Verden skapes hjemmefra: Pressedekningen av den ikke-vestlige verden 1902–2002* (Oslo: Unipub, 2008), 151.

¹³ Åsmund Borgen Gjerde, 'Den pro-sionistiske vendingen: Norske sosialdemokrater, Holocaust og sivilisasjonen, 1942–1947', *Historisk tidsskrift*, 100, 2 (2021): 149–64.

¹⁴ See e.g. Unsigned editorial, 'Israel', *Arbeiderbladet*, 19 May 1948, 4; J.S., 'Forlik eller rasestrid i Palestina', *Arbeiderbladet*, 20 Nov. 1948, 16; Aase Lionæs, 'Da jødene vendte hjem', *Arbeiderbladet*, 21 Dec. 1948, 4, 6.

¹⁵ On the period up until and including the 1956 Suez crisis, see Waage, *Norge*. Karl Emil Hagelund argues that the entire generation of post-war labour leaders, which dominated the party well into the 1960s, idealised Israel. Karl Emil Hagelund, *Israel – elsket og hatet: Norske holdninger gjennom 35 år* (Oslo: Gyndendal, 1983), 24–7. A longtime leader of the social democratic trade union movement published an idealising account of Israel in 1965: Konrad Nordahl, *Israel, en demokratisk utpost i Midt-Østen* (Oslo: LO, 1965). Articles idealising Israel were published regularly in *Arbeiderbladet* through the 1950s and 60s.

leader. The five-member board of this association featured one communist and no-one associated with the Labour Party leadership.¹⁶ Bang-Hansen belonged to the left-wing faction of the Labour Party.¹⁷

In the immediate post-war era, the left/right divide within the movement and party had been redrawn. It was no longer a question of whether the movement should pursue power through revolutionary or parliamentary strategies, but of whether it was right for Norway to join a Western alliance against the Soviet Union. The right-wing faction prevailed in February 1949, when the Labour Party congress voted to join NATO. In 1952, the left-wing faction would found a dissident newspaper, *Orientering (Briefing)*, challenging the party leadership and providing the loosely organised dissidents with a new informal name, 'the *Orientering* circle'.¹⁸

Having published his first novel in 1938, Bang-Hansen was one of the younger writers associated with the 'culture-radical' movement of the interwar period. The term 'culture-radical' in Scandinavian history refers to artists and intellectuals who saw themselves as rebels for individual autonomy against conservative traditions. In the interwar period they considered their own cause as parallel to that of the labour movement. Several labour leaders, however, disagreed, leading in the 1930s to the near-exclusion of these 'bourgeois intellectuals' from the pages of the labour press.¹⁹

Prior to his escape to Scotland in 1943, Bang-Hansen had been involved in resistance activities and aided Jews in crossing the border to neutral Sweden.²⁰ As peace arrived, Bang-Hansen and numerous other novelists set out to investigate the psychological roots of Nazism. Challenging the general tendency to merely locate guilt in a German Nazi Other, the novelists examined the violence, oppression and mendacity of bourgeois society, thus creating an urgent sense of a civilisation imperilled, the threat coming not from an external enemy but from within itself.²¹

During his stay in Israel, when Bang-Hansen tried to make sense of the conflict by placing it in a historical context, he adhered closely to the Zionist narrative of how Jews had brought civilisation and progress to an area where the Arab inhabitants had lived as 'unenlightened peasants' who believed 'in the religion of fate, and [that] fate cannot be altered'. After recounting how Jewish immigrants had extinguished malaria, created industry and increased food production, Bang-Hansen summarised their efforts as 'turning the desert into an oasis'.²²

In an April 1949 *Arbeiderbladet* article, by then probably having finished his third post-war novel, in which violence incessantly threatens to punctuate the calm of post-war life,²³ he looked back at his experiences of the previous summer. 'Might it be,' he asked, 'that the most peculiar social experiment of our time is to be found in the Middle East?' Answering in the affirmative, he described the experiment in question as a 'push to advance democracy among millions of exploited, impoverished people in colonial countries'. The experiment was Israel.²⁴

The article revolved around a conversation between Bang-Hansen and 'a young man in a Jewish village' near the Egyptian border, during the July 1948 ceasefire. The conversation had left Bang-Hansen embarrassed, but also with new insights about the nature of the Israeli experiment. Less than ten years ago, the village had been 'a piece of smoking hot desert'. Since then, 500 immigrants had transformed it into a 'model farm', producing 'cattle of such quality that American agricultural experts visit in order to study them'. Less than a kilometre from the village stood a former

¹⁶ Hilde Henriksen Waage, *Da staten Israel ble til: Et stridsspørsmål i norsk politikk, 1945-49* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1989), 183.

¹⁷ Sigurd Evensmo, *Ut i kulda* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1978), 216; Eirik Wig Sundvall *Gerhardsens valg: Arbeiderpartiets tunge avskjed med Sovjetunionen 1917-1949* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2016), 192.

¹⁸ Birgitte Kjos Fonn, *Orientering: Rebellenes avis* (Oslo: Pax, 2011).

¹⁹ Haakon Bekeng-Flemmen, 'Kulturradikalismens tidlige begrephistorie', *Arr - idéhistorisk tidsskrift* 24, 3/4 (2012): 61-71.

²⁰ Øystein Rottem, 'Odd Bang-Hansen', in Jon Gunnar Arntzen, ed., *Norsk biografisk leksikon bind 1* (Oslo: Kunnskapsforlaget, 1999), 212-13. On the culture-radical movement, see Leif Longum, *Drømmen om det frie menneske: Norsk kulturradikalisme og mellomkrigstidens radikale trekløver: Hoel - Krog - Øverland* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1986).

²¹ Leif Longum, *Et speil for oss selv: Menneskesyn og virkelighetsoppfatning i norsk etterkrigsprosa* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1968), 21-79.

²² Odd Bang-Hansen, 'Ørken og oase', *Arbeiderbladet*, 9 Jul. 1948, 2.

²³ Odd Bang-Hansen, *Møllen og lyset* (Oslo: Tiden, 1949).

²⁴ Odd Bang-Hansen, 'FN, Norge og Israel', *Arbeiderbladet*, 26 Apr. 1949, 4-5.

British police fort, which the villagers had helped build. Despite this history, when the British had left mandate Palestine, they had opened the back gates of the fort to Egyptian artillery. Seeing this, the villagers evacuated their children. When Bang-Hansen arrived in July 1948, after the first round of fighting, the village had been bombarded beyond recognition, the cattle mostly dead, ‘a Spitfire, shot down with a rifle’ lying in a ditch.²⁵

The frequently breached ceasefire was scheduled to end in four weeks. In spite of this, the young man said, the villagers had decided to bring their children back home. Bang-Hansen and the other visitors were horrified, pleading with him not to subject the children to such danger and to the trauma of seeing their homes reduced to rubble. These children, the man responded, had never seen anything but their own little idyllic village paradise. Thus, they knew nothing of what it meant to be a Jew. He agreed Israel should strive to be a place where Jews were free from danger and persecution. Yet he argued this was a task for the next generation. Only by experiencing life as a Jew would the children gain the determination and ability needed to build this state. Realising the young man was right, Bang-Hansen felt embarrassed about having tried to lecture him on shielding the children.²⁶

Even though the words ‘civilisation’ and ‘progress’ do not appear, these seem to be key themes of Bang-Hansen’s article. As Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden have observed, ‘the underlying principle [of ideas of civilisation] can be seen as degrees of separation from “nature”. . . . There was a direct link between the place on this spectrum and the level of civilisation.’²⁷ This entails that whenever people and societies are evaluated in terms of degrees of separation from nature – a separation achieved through the ability to control, exploit or cultivate external or internal nature rather than being at nature’s mercy – we may talk about an idea of civilisation, regardless of whether the word ‘civilisation’ is used. To the degree that socialist ideas of progress and civilisation have been distinct, this has been by equating the process of separating from nature with moving toward a socialist society, or at least toward greater degrees of equality and justice.²⁸

One possible way of reading Bang-Hansen’s article is to see it as the author constructing an Israeli Jewish identity belonging to a sphere of its own, an identity seemingly cleansed of the anxiety and ambiguities haunting so many socialists and intellectuals after the war. This interpretation emerges from examining how Bang-Hansen contrasted the image of the Israeli Jew with three distinct Others, each dichotomy contributing in a different way to establishing a particular view of civilisation.

First, there is the conventional othering of Arabs. After arriving in Palestine, the Jews gave water to the Arabs of Palestine, freed them from the plague of malaria, gave them tariff wages on equal footing with their own, gave them education and medical aid. Yes, they even gave them the strangest thing this winter – something of which they had never even heard before – they gave them the right to vote.²⁹

The Jews, then, despite their hardships, came with progress and civilisation and offered it to the Arabs, too primitive and ignorant even to have heard of democracy. Analysed by itself, or in conjunction with his article of the previous year, Bang-Hansen’s portrayal of the Arabs seems to suggest that he saw the Arab-Israeli conflict through a conventionally Orientalist lens, as a clash of civilised European Jews with barbaric oriental Arabs. Other parts of his article, however, complicate this picture.

Second, Bang-Hansen constructed the image of the Israeli Jew in contrast with the British. If any nationality was seen to embody the idea of a superior civilisation, it was the British. Yet to Bang-Hansen, British civilisation had degenerated. By recounting how the British left the police fort to the Arabs, he gave readers a reminder of how the British had betrayed the Jews, not only failing

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, ‘Civilisation and the Domination of the Animal’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 42, 3 (2014), 752.

²⁸ Åsmund Borgen Gjerde, ‘“The Omnipotence of Spring”: Ideas of Progress in Norwegian Socialism before 1940’, in Stefan Arvidsson, Jacob Benes and Anja Kirsch, eds., *Socialist Imaginations: Utopias, Myths, and the Masses* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 167–94.

²⁹ Bang-Hansen, ‘FN’.

to aid them but going so far as to aid their adversaries. The grounded Spitfire pointed in the same direction but could be seen to signal much more than that the British had failed the Jews by giving military aid to the Arabs. Any reader would be familiar with the Spitfire and the role of its heroic pilots in the Battle of Britain, the few to whom ‘never . . . was so much owed by so many’, in Churchill’s famous phrase.³⁰ The Spitfire, then, seems to have symbolised the decay of civilisation, in its British version. A vital symbol of the ‘finest hour’, when the United Kingdom alone held fast against the forces of barbarism and tyranny, the Spitfire now lay shamefully broken, shot down while used against the victims of those barbaric forces.

By contrast, in emphasising that the superior Spitfire had been shot down by a simple handheld weapon, Bang-Hansen conveyed a sense of the heroic nature of the Israeli Jews, their ability to achieve the miraculous. These Jews were largely defined by representing the ideals of civilisation, as the contrast with the Arabs unambiguously demonstrated. Yet this was a far cry from the decaying civilisation of the British. It was a pure, untainted civilisational ideal, capable of the miraculous, having survived Nazi barbarism’s attempt at extinction. Israeli Jews, then, not only represented civilisation; they represented civilisation as it should be, a civilisational ideal on behalf of which real enthusiasm and idealism was possible.

Third, the Israeli Jews were contrasted with the largely nondescript visitors, represented by Bang-Hansen himself. From Bang-Hansen’s encounter with the young Jewish man emerged a contrast between subjectivities that differed from the contrast produced by the dichotomies between Jews and Arabs, Jews and the British. At first, Bang-Hansen and the other visitors had been condescending, imploring the young Jew to grasp a basic value of civilisation and humanity: the preciousness of a child’s life, which must be protected at all costs. Yet it turned out that true understanding belonged not to the visitor but to the Jew. From his encounter with this Israeli Jew, then, the visitor had been elevated, had gained access to a higher form of understanding. He had gained an insight into the kind of essential, human truth that seemed unattainable in the works of Bang-Hansen and other radical novelists. Whereas true humanity generally seemed unattainable, the ideals of civilisation tainted by war and genocide, there was a sense, then, in which Israel stood for such otherwise elusive humanity, thus reaffirming the viability of civilisation.

Humanitarianism, Civilisation, Humanity

Unlike previous pro-Zionism founded on European responsibility,³¹ Bang-Hansen admired Zionism for its own decisive role in preserving civilisation, thus lifting this responsibility off European shoulders. In fact, Bang-Hansen stated clearly that ‘Israel carries that burden, fulfils those commitments that lay on the whole world after Hitler’s war’.³² This suggests his idealisation of Israel contained an inclination toward ‘repressing’ the Holocaust, in the sense of allowing oneself not to struggle with some of its potential implications. If Israel fulfilled the ‘commitments that lay on the whole world’, then others might not need to.

This latter observation brings to mind the ‘repression hypothesis’ of Holocaust memory. Proponents of this hypothesis argued that the Holocaust had been psychologically repressed from direct, conscious consideration due to guilt and other painful feelings.³³ However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, several scholars became critical of the repression hypothesis, which is now largely

³⁰ In a speech to the House of Commons, 20 Aug. 1940.

³¹ See especially these commentary articles, all in *Arbeiderbladet* by foreign affairs editor John Sannes: ‘Pisk, hat og hevn’, 2 Jan. 1947, 12; ‘Zion-drøm og bitter virkelighet’, 3 Jan. 1947, 12; ‘Deling av Palestina’, 6 Jan. 1947, 12.

³² Bang-Hansen, ‘FN’.

³³ Important early iterations of this hypothesis were: Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (Munich: Piper, 1967), see e.g. 16; Theodore Adorno, ‘What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean? (Originally given as a lecture in 1959 and published in German in 1963 as “Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit?”)’, in Geoffrey Hartman, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 114–29.

discredited.³⁴ The ‘repression’ that seems to take place in Bang-Hansen’s article, however, is of a distinctly different kind from that described in psychoanalytic terms by proponents of the repression hypothesis. It was not the product of psychological mechanisms. For Bang-Hansen it seems that idealisation of Israel served as a tool with which to ‘repress’ the Holocaust in a way that allowed him to re-affirm optimistic ideas about civilisation and progress. In April 1949, he was the first Norwegian social democrat to propose these ideas. Bang-Hansen’s article did not set a precedent, at least not immediately. For seven months after its publication, no other article idealising Israel was published in *Arbeiderbladet*. Then, an accident happened.

At the Grefsrud camp south of Oslo, the humanitarian organisation *Europahjelpen* (*Aid for Europe*), with close ties to the labour movement, hosted Jewish children from Arab countries to prepare them for resettlement in Israel. As *Arbeiderbladet* described the purpose of the camp: ‘At Grefsrud, half-wild refugee children are transformed into happy, healthy and social-minded children, eager to learn.’ On 15 November 1949, the first sixty children left Grefsrud for Israel. Their replacements were due to arrive from Tunis on two separate flights. The first, carrying twenty children, arrived before noon on 20 November.³⁵

The second plane, due to land the same day, lost radio contact over Moss and never landed at Fornebu airport.³⁶ A large-scale search operation ensued, and the accident dominated news even before the plane had been found. After two days, the plane was found at Hurum by electrician Thoralf Hagen and woodsman Hilding Martinsen, both of whom had volunteered to search. All aboard were dead – twenty-six Tunisian Jewish children, four Dutch crew members and three nurses, from Israel, Tunisia and Norway – except the twelve-year-old boy Isaac Allal.

Just after the plane had been found, an *Arbeiderbladet* editorial, also noting the miracle of Isaac Allal, wrote of the crew and the nurses that they ‘died as servants to compassion and humanism in a time of barbarism’. Barbarism, the opposite that defined civilisation, also became the opposite that defined humanity, thus welding civilisation and humanity together.³⁷ The editorial pleaded with readers to learn from the tragedy: ‘We simply cannot forget that the accident occurred during a magnificent feat of humanitarianism, performed by people who believe this has use and purpose, even though there is no end to the want and poverty. There may be reason for us to ask: what do we do, each one of us?’³⁸ *Arbeiderbladet* would soon produce its own answer to this question.

On the Saturday after the accident, *Arbeiderbladet*’s front page declared: ‘We will erect a memorial for the victims. A hand of friendship from the Norwegian people to 100.000 homeless in Israel. Help children born in concentration camps who have lived their entire lives behind barbed wire.’ *Arbeiderbladet* would organise a fundraising campaign to build ‘Kibbutz Norway’, which would house new immigrants to Israel.³⁹

The editorial on the same day, titled ‘A memorial – to the aid of those who are alive’, explained why the effort would make a difference in Israel:

So long as the refugees do not have places to live, they cannot embark on steady jobs. The solution that offers itself is to provide homes and land for the homeless. This tiny strip of land on the edge of the Mediterranean still offers many opportunities that have not yet been exploited. The land of Israel has been mismanaged for centuries and large swathes remain deserts. But when this

³⁴ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), see esp. 2–3; Jeffrey C. Alexander, ‘On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The Holocaust from War Crime to Trauma Drama’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5, 1 (2002), 5–85; Anthony D. Kauders, ‘History as Censure: “Repression” and “Philo-Semitism” in Postwar Germany’, *History & Memory*, 15, 1 (2003), 97–122.

³⁵ Unsigned, ‘Et hardt slag for barnekolonien på Grefsrud’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 22 Nov. 1949, 7.

³⁶ Unsigned, ‘25 flyktninge-barn og 6–7 voksne omkommet ved flyulykke i går kveld’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 21 Nov. 1949, 1, 8.

³⁷ This is not unique in the history of ideas of civilisation. See Cudworth and Hobden, ‘Civilisation’, 751–2; Brett Bowden, *The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³⁸ Unsigned editorial, ‘Når et fly styrter’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 23 Nov. 1949, 4.

³⁹ Unsigned, ‘Vi vil reise ofrene et minnesmerke’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 26 Nov. 1949, 1, 14.

dry and poor land is brought under culture, it may flourish like a garden, to the amazement of any stranger who sees it. The results achieved in the many Jewish agricultural colonies remind one of the old tale of the land flowing with milk and honey. Coming this far has cost immeasurable toil, often involving the loss of human life. But the homeless are happy to be able to embark on this toil. Through desert land lies their path to a free and safe existence.⁴⁰

The civilising effort was referenced here by describing how ‘large swathes remain deserts’ and would be ‘brought under culture’. By stressing how heroic the civilising effort was, how it gave livelihoods to homeless Jews, and contrasting this with the supposedly uncivilised history of the area under Arab rule, the editorial reaffirmed the power and viability of civilisation itself. And similarly to Bang-Hansen, the editorial depicted civilisation in the sense of human dignity as intertwined with civilisation in the sense of cultivating nature. This is illustrated in the sentence: ‘Through desert land lies their path to a free and safe existence.’

The fundraising campaign became a massive success, largely due to the efforts of Haakon Lie, on whose initiative it had been started.⁴¹ Haakon Lie was the party secretary, one of the most influential people in the labour movement until his retirement in the late 1960s and a leader of the party’s dominant anti-communist, pro-NATO faction.⁴² In December 1949, Lie travelled to Israel to meet Israeli leaders and prepare the erection of ‘Kibbutz Norway’. In an *Arbeiderbladet* interview upon his return, he related the practical outcomes of his journey before giving his own account of current events in Israel and their broader meaning. He praised the Israeli efforts in taking in refugees ‘who now come from primitive conditions in the Orient’. In doing so, the Israelis had ‘shared everything with [the refugees]. They have shown a solidarity the likes of which are unknown.’ Lie observed that ‘the practical Jews from Europe have for a long time now been building the country and developing the agriculture . . . transforming colonies into model farms . . . but the flow of refugees have come at such a speed that they cannot organise it all as well as they themselves would like . . . Only where the Jews settle is the soil grown.’⁴³ Praising Israeli humanity and praising Israeli civilisation seems to have been one and the same thing for Lie.

Arbeiderbladet continued to stress how the ‘memorial’ of ‘Kibbutz Norway’, which eventually became ‘Moshav Norway’, was less about death in the past than about life in the future. It continued to invoke the narrative of Israelis civilising the barren desert to explain why this initiative was bound to become a success. And it continually stressed how the workers of Norway contributed to the fund-raising and how they empathised both with the Jewish children who had died and with the Israelis toiling for a better future.⁴⁴ Several articles recounted how Norwegian workers voluntarily worked overtime, or contributed from their limited wages, to be able to contribute to the fundraising.⁴⁵

The guilt-ridden Europe of previous pro-Zionist writings, obliged by its past sins and failures to support Zionism, was now absent. It was replaced by an Israel that proved all by itself that the path toward justice and emancipation went through the hard labour of cultivating the desert, bringing it ‘under culture’. These texts thus implicitly painted a new picture of civilisation, no longer burdened by the recent failure to uphold civilisational standards but marching together with the victims of the civilisational breakdown toward a future of emancipation, equality and justice.

The aid campaign for Israel had been a spontaneous reaction to the accident, but the narrative around the campaign quickly took on a character that made it unclear exactly who was aiding whom. The Norwegians seemed to benefit as much as the Israelis, if not more, from being allowed

⁴⁰ Unsigned editorial, ‘Et minnesmerke – til hjelp for dem som lever’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 26 Nov. 1949, 4.

⁴¹ Waage, *Norge*, 21–32.

⁴² Hans Olav Lahlum, *Haakon Lie: Historien, mytene og mennesket* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2009).

⁴³ Unsigned article, ‘Norge skal bygge et nytt småbrukersamfunn i Israel’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 20 Dec. 1949, 1, 9.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Unsigned, ‘Hva er en kibbutz?’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 28 Nov. 1949, 8; Editorial, ‘Håndslag’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 29 Nov. 1949, 4; Unsigned, ‘Nobel og genial idé sier professor Valentin’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 30 Nov. 1949, 1.

⁴⁵ Unsigned, ‘Vi vil skape Kibutz Norge: Innsamlinger i by og bygd’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 29 Nov. 1949, 1, 10; ulf., ‘Vi vil gi noe som kan leve og gro sier arbeiderne på Fossum trevarefabrikk’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 1 Dec. 1949, 3.

to participate in their endeavour to create civilised life in the midst of the barren desert. The narrative spun around the aid campaign could be seen in relation to the literary tradition of European protagonists coming to new realisations about themselves through encounters with ‘the East’. As Edward Said wrote of Nerval and Flaubert, ‘the Oriental pilgrimage was a quest for something relatively personal’.⁴⁶ To be more precise, however, Norwegian social democrats came to new realisations not so much through their own encounter with ‘the East’ as through the Zionist encounter with it. The realisation they came to was that ‘civilisation’, the idea that had justified colonialism and structured so much of European life, could overcome any obstacle.

Jewish Outpost of Civilisation

In spring 1951, Martin Tranmæl embarked on a journey to Israel. Tranmæl had been the key ideologue of the Norwegian labour movement throughout most of the first half of the twentieth century. He led the revolutionary faction that assumed control of the Labour Party in 1918, making it the most radical of Europe’s major labour parties.⁴⁷ And he similarly became an ideological leader of the rightward turn in the early 1930s, which set the party firmly on a parliamentary rather than revolutionary course.⁴⁸ During the German occupation, which several younger labour leaders spent participating in resistance activities and/or in German captivity, Tranmæl maintained an influential role from his exile, alongside numerous other Norwegians, in Stockholm.⁴⁹ Aged seventy-one during his 1951 visit, Tranmæl had recently retired from the editorship of *Arbeiderbladet*, the position from which he had influenced the development of the movement so heavily since 1921.⁵⁰ The Labour Party executive committee had decided to send Tranmæl to Israel with the goal of strengthening ties between the two countries’ labour movements. In connection with his visit, Haakon Lie wrote to Reuven Burstein of Histadrut that Tranmæl, ‘has been the outstanding leader of our movement and is still a member of our executive committee. He has, I suppose, played the same role in Norway as your Berl Katznelson.’⁵¹

Running through all four articles *Arbeiderbladet* published from Tranmæl’s journey was the narrative of how Zionists and the Israeli state had brought civilisation and progress to a heretofore uncivilised part of the world.⁵² Tranmæl began his first article with these lines:

Hitler and his supporters waged an outright war of extermination against the Jews. Before and during the war, six million were gassed to death or murdered by other means. Six million, that is twice as many as the entire population of Norway. When a crime reaches such dimensions, we struggle to grasp its horror and its reach. But the Jewish people has survived everything, and it is now building its own national home.⁵³

⁴⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978/2003), 180. See also e.g. Ali Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). On Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot), Zionism and ‘the East’, see Edward W. Said, ‘Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims’, *Social Text*, 1, 1 (1979), 7–58. For a specifically Norwegian perspective on this phenomenon, see Terje Tvedt, *Verdensbilder og selvbilder: En humanitær stormakts intellektuelle historie* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2003).

⁴⁷ Jorunn Bjørgum, *Martin Tranmæl og radikaliseringen av norsk arbeiderbevegelse 1906–1918* (Oslo: Acta Humaniora/Universitetsforlaget, 1998). For a shorter account in English, see Francis Sejersted, *The Age of Social Democracy: Norway and Sweden in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 122–71.

⁴⁸ Per Maurseth, *Arbeiderbevegelsens historie i Norge 3: Gjennom kriser til makt, 1920–1935* (Oslo: Tiden, 1987), 532–78; Bjørn Gunnar Olsen, *Tranmæl og hans menn* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1991), 257–355.

⁴⁹ On the Labour Party during the occupation, see Vidar Haugen, *Det norske Arbeiderparti 1940–1945: Planlegging og gjenreising* (Oslo: Tiden, 1983); on Tranmæl and other exiles in Stockholm, see esp. 63–90.

⁵⁰ Bjørnsen, *Arbeiderbladet*, 267–8.

⁵¹ Haakon Lie to Reuven Burstein, 22 Nov. 1950, The Norwegian Labour Movement Archives (ARBARK), DNAA, AAB/ARK-1001, Da-l0036, folder ‘Internasjonalt utvalg’.

⁵² In addition to the three cited below, see Martin Tranmæl, ‘Grunnlaget for det nye Israel’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 12 May 1951.

⁵³ Martin Tranmæl, ‘Det nye Israel’, *Arbeiderbladet*, 8 May 1951.

Following these lines, he did not return to the topic of the genocide in any of his articles from the journey. While it is common to explain post-war support for Israel as a response to the Holocaust, it is less common to reflect on or to explicate what precisely this means.⁵⁴ In Tranmæl's writings, it is surely not the case that he induced readers to view Israeli Jews as weak, defenceless victims, thus deserving of care and support. Rather, the end of the quote, and, in fact, practically everything else Tranmæl wrote about his journey, induced readers to admire Israeli Jews for their own ability to overcome adversity, for building a national home, destined to become a beacon to the world.

As he argued in one article, 'even we in Europe may have something to learn from this society that has emerged with such unique force in the midst of the greatest of difficulties and pressures'.⁵⁵ Tranmæl did not explicate exactly what Europeans should learn from Israel. The quote may of course be read as a mere admonition to Europeans to work as determinedly to rebuild their continent as the Israelis had in building their state. However, another article from Tranmæl's journey suggests he had a less concrete meaning in mind:

Adversity, mockery, sorrow, suffering and abuse have hardened and incited the [Jewish] people such that it now goes to its historical mission with clenched teeth . . . Much is thus at stake – for themselves and for our civilisation, of which the Jews now form such an important outpost.⁵⁶

Tranmæl failed to explicate the precise meaning of his assertions. However, his failure to identify their logic does not make them any less significant. Rather, this indicates that at the core of his beliefs was a presupposition of a connection between the viability of civilisation itself and the fate of Jews and Zionism. More than anyone else, the Israelis, to Tranmæl, proved not only that the idea of civilisation was a noble one, but that men could create progress no matter the adversaries. In doing so, the Israelis of Tranmæl's imagination also freed Europeans themselves of the responsibility of having to ensure the survival of civilisation by ensuring the survival of Jewry. Similar to those by Bang-Hansen, Lie and the many other writings published in association with the aid campaign, Tranmæl implicitly argued that the Israelis had lifted the burden of responsibility for civilisation's survival from European shoulders.

Civilisation and Cold War

As Hilde Henriksen Waage notes, it was only after the November 1949 airplane accident that general support for Zionism and Israel gave way to widespread idealisation of the new state in the Norwegian labour movement.⁵⁷ It clearly was not the example of Bang-Hansen that inspired some of the most powerful people in the movement to idealise Israel, even though he had been the only person to do so before the accident. The party leadership worked tirelessly to lessen the influence of the left-wing faction he belonged to.⁵⁸

To the extent that Waage explains the passage from support to idealisation of Israel, she does so as a 'conversion' triggered by the accident and its aftermath. She terms some of the most ardent supporters 'the newly converted ones'. As the focal points of this group she identifies Martin Tranmæl and Haakon Lie.⁵⁹ They were involved in a 'love affair' with Israel that had 'no room for all the problems that had been created in the Middle East as a consequence of the founding of the new state'.⁶⁰ This was unlike foreign minister Halvard Lange, who was less enthusiastic about Israel and 'had seen all the

⁵⁴ See notes 5, 6 and 7.

⁵⁵ Martin Tranmæl, 'Hva er Histadrut?', *Arbeiderbladet*, 18 May 1951.

⁵⁶ Martin Tranmæl, 'Det nye Israel tar form', *Arbeiderbladet*, 11 May 1951.

⁵⁷ Waage, *Norge*, 20.

⁵⁸ For a concrete example related to the foreign affairs coverage in *Arbeiderbladet*, see Stein R. Helland, 'Kapitalismens hoyborg – eller demokratiens garanti? En analyse av Det norske arbeiderparti og holdninger til USA, 1945–1949', MA thesis ('hovedoppgave'), University of Trondheim, 1978, 65–6, 86–7. More generally, see Kjos Fonn, *Orientering*.

⁵⁹ Waage, *Norge*, 36.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

problematic sides to such a state'.⁶¹ The difference between, on the one hand, foreign minister Lange and the foreign affairs bureaucrats, and, on the other hand, 'the newly converted ones' Waage largely portrays as one between rational realism and irrational semi-religiosity.⁶² Rather than go into any detail about the merits and problematic aspects of Waage's explanation, I want to suggest here that other explanatory paths emerge from seeing the close readings given above in connection with aspects of the historical context.

As I argued above, the early idealising accounts – by Bang-Hansen and later by more prominent members of the labour movement – portrayed Israel as proving the viability of civilisation. Idealisation thus implicitly shifted the responsibility for the future of civilisation from Europeans themselves to the Israelis. Thus, while there may seem to be little difference between, on the one hand, founding support for Israel on notions of the guilt and fragility of civilisation, as previous pro-Zionist writings had, and, on the other, idealising Israel, the two lines of argument in fact implied contrasting depictions of European civilisation and those who identified with it. The former was inherently self-reflexive and self-critical, whereas the latter was compatible with civilisational triumphalism.

In one sense, then, the turn toward idealising Israel practically explains itself: given the widespread anxiety about the viability of civilisation that existed in Norway and elsewhere during the post-war era,⁶³ a message about how Israel proved the viability of civilisation was bound to have considerable appeal. For, despite worries over its viability, 'civilisation' remained central to how numerous Europeans made sense of their world.⁶⁴ This is evident, not least, in the new manifesto of principles adopted at the February 1949 Labour Party congress, where commitments to concrete socialist politics were largely absent but appeals to progress through a process of 'man expanding his command of nature' were central.⁶⁵ Another decision at the 1949 congress may have contributed to making the concept of civilisation even more vital to the Norwegian labour movement than before: the decision for Norway to become a founding member of NATO.

From its independence in 1905, Norway's foreign policy followed an isolationist and neutralist line.⁶⁶ This foreign policy line was continued by the Labour government from 1935.⁶⁷ The neutralist line had been based on the assumption that the United Kingdom would come to Norway's aid in case of need. The German occupation of Norway in April 1940 was perceived as evidence for the failure of neutralism.⁶⁸ The exiled government in London then followed a policy of alliance with the United Kingdom and the United States until 1944, when this policy was replaced by the so-called 'bridge-building policy'. This policy saw the United Nations as the guarantor of Norwegian independence and security. However, the UN could only play this role if the major powers cooperated to allow it to do so. Hence the need for Norway to attempt acting as a 'bridge builder' to facilitate such cooperation.⁶⁹ While this entailed a balancing act between the Soviet Union and the Western powers, Helge Pharo has argued the Norwegians always had a back-up plan in the likely event of the failure of bridge

⁶¹ Ibid., 391.

⁶² See the above as well as Waage, *Norge*, 10–11, 388.

⁶³ Gjerde, 'Den pro-sionistiske'.

⁶⁴ Prasenjit Duara, 'The Discourse of Civilization and Decolonization', *Journal of World History*, 15, 1 (2004), 2; Peter Watson, *The Modern Mind: An Intellectual History of the 20th Century* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 245; Jeffrey Alexander and Piotr Sztompka, 'Introduction', in Jeffrey Alexander and Piotr Sztompka, eds., *Rethinking Progress: Movements, Forces, and Ideas at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 1; Williams, *Keywords*, 102–4; Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1980/1994), 297–8.

⁶⁵ Det norske arbeiderparti, *Grunnsyn og retningslinjer: Vedtatt på Landsmøtet 1949* (Oslo: Arbeidernes aktietrykkeri, 1949), 2.

⁶⁶ Olav Riste, 'Ideal og egeninteresser: Utviklinga av den norske utanriks-politiske tradisjonen', in Sven G. Holtsmark, Helge Ø. Pharo and Rolf Tamnes, eds., *Motstrøms: Olav Riste og norsk internasjonal historiskrivning* (Oslo: Cappelen, 2003), 53–88.

⁶⁷ Tore Pryser, *Arbeiderbevegelsens historie i Norge 4: Klassen og nasjonen (1935–1946)* (Oslo: Tiden, 1998), 214–23.

⁶⁸ Riste, 'Ideal', 65.

⁶⁹ Jakob Sverdrup, *Norsk utenrikspolitikkens historie, bind 4: Inn i storpolitikken, 1940–1949* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1949), 201–34.

building. The back-up plan was a Western alliance, and as events through 1947 and 1948 made bridge building seem increasingly incredulous, the back-up plan would lead Norway to become a founding member of NATO.⁷⁰

When the Labour Party congress voted for NATO membership, on 19 February 1949, this was highly problematic from the perspective of the movement's recent ideological past: as recently as March 1947, the *Arbeiderbladet* foreign affairs editor John Sanness, placed in this position largely due to his loyalty to the party leadership,⁷¹ had portrayed the United States as *the* prime example of unbridled capitalism.⁷² Later that year, Arne Ording, one of the Labour Party's major foreign policy strategists, conveyed a similar sentiment to an American journalist.⁷³ In a discussion with members of the Labour leadership during summer 1947, Ording urged the others not to underestimate the anti-Americanism within the Labour Party.⁷⁴ As American cultural exports flooded Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War, the *Arbeiderbladet* editorial had considered this a threat to the intelligence of Norwegian workers.⁷⁵ Even after the party left the Leninist third international in 1923, it had been common for its leaders to maintain a favourable view of the Soviet Union.⁷⁶ In June 1945, Labour prime minister Einar Gerhardsen, foreign minister Trygve Lie and Martin Tranmæl had participated in the founding of a Norwegian-Soviet friendship association.⁷⁷

Against this background, entering into a US-led alliance against the Soviet Union would require some justification. Helge Pharo argues the Labour Party leadership knew perfectly well that NATO membership would provoke strong protests from within the party.⁷⁸ According to him, 'The decision to become a founding member of NATO left deep wounds in the Labour Party.'⁷⁹ Labour leaders admitted that NATO membership was a product of necessity: German occupation and post-war Soviet expansion had demonstrated the necessity of a powerful ally willing to commit to the country's defence.⁸⁰ However, appealing to necessity was combined with appealing to more lofty ideals. At the 1949 congress, foreign minister Halvard Lange invoked notions of a shared Western civilisation: 'The only natural thing for Norway is to seek association with the Western powers, with whom we share so much in common in cultural matters, in our views of the value of the individual, in political traditions and institutions, and with whom we have such strong economic ties.'⁸¹ Referring to a shared culture, a shared view 'of the value of the individual' and a shared political tradition with 'the Western powers' is equivalent to referring to a civilisational bond. Construing the entry into a Western alliance as a logical consequence of Norway's role as a part of Western civilisation was not unprecedented. During a 1946 meeting at the British embassy in Oslo – attended by Haakon Lie, among others – Arne Ording had equated the possibility of Norway joining a Western alliance with confirming its belonging to Western

⁷⁰ Helge Pharo, 'Gru og glede: Marshallplanen og Keralaprosjektet som merkesteiner i norsk historie', in Dag Harald Claes, Knut Heidar and Cathrine Holst, eds., *Politikk i grenseland: Festskrift til Øyvind Østerud* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2014), 312–28. See also Sverdrup, *Norsk*, 277–341.

⁷¹ Helland, 'Kapitalismens', 64–6, 86–7.

⁷² John Sanness, 'Stormaktskamp og samfunnsstrid', *Arbeiderbladet*, 26 Mar. 1947, reprinted in John Kristen Skogan and John Sanness, eds., *Utsyn og innblikk: Artikler av John Sanness* (Oslo: Tiden, 1983), 154–7.

⁷³ Pharo, 'Gru og glede', 318.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁷⁵ On this editorial and similar contemporaneous criticisms of American cultural influence, see Hans Fredrik Dahl, *Norsk idehistorie, bind 5: De store ideologienes tid, 1914–1955* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2000), 428–33.

⁷⁶ Trond Nordby, *Karl Evang: En biografi* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1989), 42; Ingunn Rotihaug, 'For fred og vennskap mellom folkene': *Sambandet Norge-Sovjetunionen 1945–70* (Oslo: Institutt for forsvarsstudier, 2000), 6.

⁷⁷ Rotihaug, *Sambandet*, 6.

⁷⁸ Pharo, 'Gru og glede', 316.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁸⁰ Lahlum, *Haakon Lie*, 274; Olav Njølstad, *Jens Chr. Hauge – Fullt og helt* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2008), 405–425; Einar Gerhardsen, 'Tilslutning til Atlanterhavspakten', in Olaf Solumsmoen and Olav Larssen, eds., *Med Einar Gerhardsen gjennom 20 år* (Oslo: Tiden, 1949), 70–3.

⁸¹ Det norske arbeiderparti (DNA), *Protokoll over forhandlingene på det 33. Ordinære landsmøte 17–20. Februar 1949 i Oslo* (Oslo: Arbeidernes aktietrykkeri, 1950), 117–34.

civilisation.⁸² After the decision to join NATO, leading Labour figures began denouncing the Soviet Union in terms invoking images of a barbaric threat to civilisation, e.g. by comparing the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany.⁸³ Ideas of civilisation also played a similar role, justifying picking sides in the Cold War, in other parts of Europe and within other political currents.⁸⁴

Ideas of civilisation, then, came to the rescue when social democrats needed to defend and make sense of a decision that could appear to be driven by pure necessity. By no means, however, is this to suggest the appeal to civilisation was either completely novel or purely instrumental. Ideas of civilisation had circulated within the Norwegian labour movement from its beginning.⁸⁵ Anxiety about the future of civilisation was a major factor behind the pro-Zionist turn from 1947.⁸⁶ From 1949, thinking with the Jewish state became a powerful way of reaffirming civilisation's viability.

Shortly after members of the labour movement began idealising Israel, they and others took the initiative in establishing a Norwegian programme for development aid. Helge Pharo has argued that this programme came about in part because the dominant pro-NATO faction wanted to add a 'positive element' to foreign policy as a contribution toward mending the rift that had been created by NATO membership and the increase in military expenditures that followed the onset of the Korean War.⁸⁷ My argument here is not intended to suggest that similarly 'cynical' motivations lay behind the idealisation of Israel. Rather, it appears that left-wingers such as Bang-Hansen, as well as mainstream labour leaders such as Lie and Tranmæl, were similarly invested in ideas of civilisation, and similarly found idealisation of Israel to be ideally suited to the 'work' of re-affirming civilisation's viability.

In her book *Our American Israel*, Amy Kaplan argues that at the beginning of the Cold War, thinking about Israel served a similar function for American liberals as to what I have identified among Norwegian social democrats. Thinking about Israel 'restored moral clarity'.⁸⁸ Americans, according to Kaplan, similarly to accounts by Michelle Mart and Shaul Mitelpunkt, saw in Israel sometimes a mirror image of the United States itself, sometimes an ideal image of what it could become.⁸⁹ What Norwegian social democrats saw in Israel was not a mirror image of Norway or some similarly clearly defined geographical unit, but rather an ideal image of the more abstract unit of (Western) civilisation. To be more precise, they saw the victims of civilisation's breakdown proving the viability of the same civilisation that had victimised them,⁹⁰ proving that no matter how great the obstacles, nothing could stop the forward march of civilisation.

I have suggested in this final section that discursive changes related to NATO membership and the onset of the Cold War contributed to widespread idealisation of Israel, which served to reinforce belief in the viability of civilisation. This is not to say, however, that NATO membership 'caused' such idealisation. Rather, NATO membership became an additional factor contributing to the already existing desire to be free of the nagging doubts about civilisation's viability that had plagued the labour movement for several years and in several ways. This is shown not least by the case of Odd Bang-Hansen,

⁸² Quoted in Arne Ording and Gerd Mordt, *Arne Ordings dagbøker: Bind II, 24. Juli 1945 - 4. April 1949* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2003), 199.

⁸³ Gerhardsen, 'Atlantehavspakten'; John Sanness, 'Stalin 70 år' (originally published in *Arbeiderbladet*, 21 Dec. 1949), in Skogan and Sanness, *Utsyn*; Unsigned editorial, 'Det lysner igjen', *Arbeiderbladet*, 24 Dec. 1949, 4.

⁸⁴ See e.g. Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁸⁵ Gjerde, 'Omnipotence'.

⁸⁶ Gjerde, 'Den pro-sionistiske'.

⁸⁷ Pharo, 'Gru og glede', 326–8.

⁸⁸ Amy Kaplan, *Our American Israel: The Story of an Entangled Alliance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 39.

⁸⁹ Michelle Mart, *Eye on Israel: How America Came to View Israel as an Ally* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006); Shaul Mitelpunkt, *Israel in the American Mind: The Cultural Politics of US-Israeli Relations, 1958–1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁹⁰ Before and during the Second World War, Norwegian social democrats had considered Nazism a break with, and an assault upon, civilisation. Upon discovering, in 1946, that antisemitism had lived on in liberated Europe, they began to see antisemitism not as something external to civilisation but as something internal to it, which civilisation needed to atone for in order to have a future. Gjerde, 'Omnipotence', 179–85; Gjerde, 'Den pro-sionistiske'.

who belonged to the left-wing faction of the party, which opposed NATO membership, yet was also the author of the first text to idealise Israel.

Conclusions

Recent years have seen the beginning of a 'Jewish imperial turn' in historical scholarship. The turn has largely been a reaction against the absence of Jewish topics in imperial history, against the absence of imperial perspectives in Jewish history and against what its proponents have considered an absence of critical perspectives in histories of Jewish–Muslim relations.⁹¹ Thus far, the volume of scholarship identified with this turn is modest. The predominant focus has been on the French Empire and its afterlife in the relationships between Jews, Muslims and the state in France. Its main contribution has been to reveal a number of complexities regarding these relationships, and regarding the relationship between colonialism and Jewish issues, that previous scholarship had been blind to.⁹²

In ending this article, I want to suggest that it too may be considered part of a more broadly conceived Jewish imperial turn, even though Norway was not an empire and had a Jewish population of less than 1000 people.⁹³ This notwithstanding, the topic of this article is intimately related to colonialism. This is because of the essential role ideas of civilisation played in shaping the Norwegian labour movement's representations of Israel. The main theme in the literature on the history of the idea of civilisation is its role in legitimising colonialism.⁹⁴ Its impact in Europe beyond the empires has hardly been explored. This article has revealed that the idea of civilisation, which had been shaped by colonialism, was centrally important to the labour movement in a small state on the periphery of Europe. Shortly after Israel's founding, ideas about the Jewish state were put to work to preserve the idea of civilisation, which not only legitimised colonialism, but also formed a key part of how the Norwegian labour movement understood itself and its role in emancipating the workers and marching toward socialism.⁹⁵

Acknowledgements. For comments on previous drafts of this article, and suggestions for how to improve it, I want to thank Christhard Hoffmann, Jan Heiret, the Bergen research group for transnational history, *Contemporary European History* editor Ludvine Broch and five anonymous reviewers for *Contemporary European History*.

⁹¹ The 'Jewish imperial turn' was first named as such in Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff and Maud S. Mandel, eds., *Colonialism and the Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017). The introduction by the editors sets out the rationale for the announced turn.

⁹² All three editors of *Colonialism and the Jews* specialise in French history and previously published books that may be considered part of the turn, before it was named: Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Maud Mandel, *Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Ethan B. Katz, *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jew and Muslims from North Africa to France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁹³ On the Jewish population before the Holocaust, see Oscar Mendelsohn, *Jødenes historie I Norge gjennom 300 år. Bind II* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1986), 201. On the almost 800 Norwegian Jews murdered as part of the Holocaust, see Bjarte Bruland, *Holocaust i Norge: Registrering, deportasjon, tilintetgjørelse* (Oslo: Dreyer, 2017). There has been some debate over Norway's relationship with European colonialism. As Norway was governed by the Danish monarchy, and then by Sweden from 1814 until independence in 1905, some have argued Norway's position had more in common with the colonised than the colonisers. For the opposite argument, that 'Norway cannot wash its hands of its imperial European past', see Iver B. Neumann, 'Imperializing Norden', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 49, 1 (2014): 119–29.

⁹⁴ Peter J. Bowler, *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Thomas C. Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997); Ziauddin Sardar, Ashis Nandy and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Barbaric Others: A Manifesto on Western Racism* (London: Pluto, 1993); Sophie Bessis, *Western Supremacy: The Triumph of an Idea* (London: Zed, 2003); Alastair Bonnett, *The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 38; Bowden, *Empire*; Andrew Linklater, *The Idea of Civilization and the Making of the Global Order* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020).

⁹⁵ Det norske arbeiderparti, *Grunnsyn*; Gjerde, 'Omnipotence'.

Cite this article: Gjerde ÅB (2024). Thinking with the Jewish State: The Norwegian Labour Movement, Israel and 'Civilisation', 1949–1951. *Contemporary European History* 33, 84–97. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777321000679>