

Jewish-Arab Fraternity: Language, Symbol and Ritual in the Israeli Communist Party, 1948–1965

Amir Locker-Biletzki
University of Guelph

Abstract

The History of Communism in Palestine/Israel since its foundation in 1919 to the present day is hotly debated among Zionist, Palestinian, and cultural historians. The main issue in contention between the historians of the PKP (Palestine Communist Party) and MKI (Israeli Communist Party) was the relationship between Palestinians and Jews within the Party; this article wishes to add a new point of view to this debate. It argues that an examination of the language, symbolism, and rituals that the Jewish Communists developed to describe their Palestinian comrades and Palestinians at large resulted in the creation of an affirmative and positive view of them, but that at the same time, the Jewish Communists did not fully appreciate the power of Palestinian nationalism. This myopic understanding of Palestinian national feelings was one of the reasons underlying the 1965 split of the MKI and Banki (Young Israeli Communist League).

Introduction

Jewish–Arab fraternity was one of the main elements of Israeli Communist ideology. Jewish Communists defined it as joint political action of Arabs and Jews against reaction and imperialism, as well as personal and social interaction among people of both groups. This article deals with the way the Jewish Communists of the Israeli Community Party (MKI) perceived their Palestinian–Israeli comrades and Palestinians in Israel, from the foundation of the Jewish–Arab MKI and the State of Israel in 1948 until 1965, when the MKI was split, mainly across national fault lines.¹

¹ This article deals with Jews in Israeli Communism. Jewish Communists joined the Party from 1919 to 1965. They mainly consisted of European Jews (54.6 percent of Party members as of 1961). See Moshe Czudnowski and Jacob Landau, *The Israeli Communist Party and the Elections for the Fifth Knesset, 1961*

By analyzing the language, symbolism, and rituals that the Jewish Communists developed, this article will argue that, while the Jewish Communists developed an affirmative and positive view of their Palestinian–Israeli comrades, at the same time they did not fully appreciate the power of Palestinian nationalism and the effect of the *Nakba* (Arabic: “disaster,” the Palestinian name for the 1948 war) on their Palestinian comrades.² This myopic understanding of Palestinian nationalism was one of the reasons underlying the 1965 split of the MKI and Banki (Young Israeli Communist League).

The article moves along three thematic axes, all of which follow the history of the Party and Banki from 1948 to 1965. The first axis deals with the language created to describe Palestinians by the Jewish Communists. The second portrays the symbols used by the Jewish Communists to describe the link between Arabs and Jews. These sections will be followed by an analysis of the instructional material used by Banki to instill in its members the values of Jewish–Arab fraternity. We will argue that the instructors’ brochures used in this capacity were textual sites, where the language and symbolism of Jewish–Arab fraternity were applied to create solidarity between Arabs and Jews. The third axis will describe the rituals developed by the Jewish Communists to celebrate Jewish–Arab fraternity.

The scholarly effort dealing with Communism in Palestine/Israel is dominated by the analysis of relations between Arabs and Jews within the Communist Party. Zionist scholars and Palestinian nationalist scholars have debated those relations extensively. Both schools present contrasting arguments. Zionist historians argue that the turn of the Party towards Palestine’s Arabs failed.³ Palestinian historians claim that the Arabization of the Party produced a Palestinian

(Stanford: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, 1965), 19. There were also smaller groups of Iraqi Jews (11.4 percent from Asia according to 1961 statistics) and some Israeli born Jews. The Jewish Communists were, in the years 1919 to 1965, the majority of Communists in Palestine/Israel. Jewish Communists, despite the formal equality with the Arab members, were a hegemonic part of the Party and created their own cultural practices.

² The term *Nakba* was coined by Constantin Zureiq, a Syrian Professor at the American University of Beirut, in 1948. See Constantin Zureiq, “Mashma’ut Hasho’a Mehadash” [The New Meaning of Nakba], in Yehosafat Harkabi, *Lekah Ha’aravim Mitousatam* [The Arabs’ Lessons from Their Defeat] (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1969), 184-210.

³ For the principal Zionist historians who deal with the subject, see: Shmuel Dothan, *Adumim: Hamiflaga Hakomunistit Be’erets Yisra’el* [Reds: The Communist Party in Eretz-Israel] (Kfar Sava: Shvana Hasofer Publishing, 1991); Yehosua Porat, “Mahap Khanut Veterorizm Bemedinyut Hamiflaga Hakomunistit Hafalestinait (Pekepe), 1929–1939” [Revolution and Terrorism in the policy of the Palestine Communist Party (PKP), 1929–1939], in *The New East Quarterly of the Israel Oriental Society* 18 (1968): 255-67; Yehosua Porat, “Haliga Leshihur Le’umi (Atsabat Et-Tahrir El-Vatani): Tkumata, Mahuta Vehitparkuta (1943–1948)” [The National Liberation League is Rise, its Essence and Fall (1943–1948)], in *New East Quarterly of the Israel Oriental Society* 14 (1968): 354-66; Sondra Rubenstein, *The Communist Movement in Palestine and Israel, (1919–1984)* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1985); G. Z. Israeli, *Mapas–Pey.Ka.Pey.–Maki: Korot Hamiflaga Hakomunistit Be’ Yisra’el* [MPS–PKP–MKI: The History of the Communist Party in Eretz-Israel] (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1953); Walter Laqueur, *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1956).

nationalized Communism, a precursor of 1970s Palestinian nationalism.⁴ A third school of cultural historians argues that Palestinians and Jews were part of the shared political cultural discourse, which, although filled with schisms and misunderstandings, shared common concepts.⁵ This article wishes to take the work of the cultural historians and make it more nuanced, analyzing the cultural categories which Jewish Communists used to view their Palestinian counterparts.

It is important to place the discussion about the history of Arab–Jewish relations in the MKI within the historical context of Communist history from the early 1920s, the founding years of Communism in Palestine, to 1948. This was a troubled history. The way Jewish Communists viewed their Palestinian comrades had its roots in the Communism in Palestine of this period. Jewish Communists campaigned against the exclusion of Palestinians from the workplace and the economy.⁶ They struggled against the dispossession of Palestinians from their land.⁷ But despite their desire to forge alliances with the Palestinian national movement, Jewish Communists, in essence, viewed Arabs and Jews as part of a joint anti-imperialist struggle that surpassed their national identities.⁸ For instance, a 1932 booklet issued by the Palestine Young Communist League called upon Jewish youth to join forces with the Arab youth.⁹ Common interests necessitated joint struggle,

⁴ For the principal Palestinian historians see: Suliman Baashear, “The Arab East in the Communist Theory and Political Practice, 1918–1928” (PhD diss., University of London, 1976); Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party 1919–1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979). For a detailed survey of Palestinian scholars see: Eli Rekhess, “Yehudim Ve’arvim Bapekape: Sugiya Bahistoryografya Hafalastninit-Arvit Bat-Zmanenu” [Arabs and Jews in the PKP: An issue in contemporary Palestinian-Arab historiography], in *Zionism: A Literary Collection of the History of the Zionist Movement and the Jewish Yishuv*, ed. Matityahu Mintz (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1990), 175–86.

⁵ For the principal cultural historians see: Joel Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There? Marxist Politics and the Arab–Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel 1948–1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine 1906–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Avner Ben Zaken, *Komunizem Ke’imperializem Tarbuti: Hazika eyn Hakomunizem Ha’erets Yisra’eli Lakomunizem Ha’aravi 1919–1948 [Communism as Cultural Imperialism: The Affinities Between Eretz-Israeli Communism and Arab Communism, 1919–1948]* (Tel-Aviv: Resling Publishing, 2006).

⁶ See for example a handbill of the Jewish Section from the 1930s calling “to struggle against ‘the alliance for defending Hebrew products!’” in “Understanding between the Peoples,” Lavon Institute for Labour Research, IV-445-2.

⁷ For the Afula Affair and other struggles see: Fainhauz, Pnina, “Parashat Afula Vema’avak Hakomunistim Negeg Nishul Hafalahim” [The Afula Affair and the Communists’ Struggle against the Dispossession of the *Fellahin*], *Arakhim: The Theoretical Journal of the Israeli Communist Party (MKI)*, 3: 1973; Dothan, *Adumim*, 103.

⁸ For the attempts of the PKP to form alliance with parts of Al-Istiqlāl Party, see: Weldon C. Matthews, *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation: Arab Nationalists and Popular Politics in Mandate Palestine* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); Ruth Lubitz, *Baharti Lihyot Bema’avak [I Chose a Life of Struggle]* (Tel-Aviv: Hasher Publishers, 1985), 112.

⁹ Yad Tabenkin Archives, file 2. “The War of the Working Youth: The Palestinian Communist Youth League, October 13, 1932.”

with the text posing a rhetorical question: “Is it true that the paths of the Jewish and Arab youths are separate?... The fate of the masses of toiling Arab youth is your fate, his struggle your struggle, and his victory your victory.”¹⁰ This internationalist view, as subversive as it was to the ethnic order forming in Palestine, hindered Jewish Communists from fully engaging with Palestinian nationalism, as successive splits in the Party (1937–1940, 1943–1965) would show.

The Language of Jewish–Arab Fraternity

The 1948 Arab–Israeli War changed the demographic makeup of Palestine. In the conflict, the well-organized and well-funded Israeli armed forces managed to break the uncoordinated Palestinian resistance and to repel the invasion of the armies of the Arab League. In the wake of the Israeli victory in the war, the majority of the Palestinian population of Palestine was expelled beyond the borders of the Jewish State in what amounts to ethnic cleansing.¹¹ The Palestinians who remained in Israel became a minority in a Jewish state. Palestinian Communists lost their base of power within the Arab working class that dispersed beyond the borders. Loyal to the Soviet Union, the Arab Communists supported the UN Partition Plan and objected to the Arab States’ invasion of Palestine. For that position, they were persecuted in the territories under the Arab armies’ control. They fared no better at the hands of the new Israeli authorities. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) did not distinguish between Palestinians of different political leanings and arrested Arab Communists, at times re-arresting those who had been detained by the Arab armies.¹² After the British closed its newspaper and its power base was dispersed—branded as traitors by the Palestinians and suspected by the Israelis of subversion—the National Liberation League (NLL), which was the organization of the Palestinian Communists founded after the 1943 split from the bi-national Palestine Communist Party (PKP), sought to reunite with the Jewish Communists. Jewish Communists who had taken part in the Israeli war effort were now willing to restore the bi-national makeup of the Party.

The reunification of Arab and Jewish Communists sparked new discussions about Palestinians among the Jewish Communists. They spoke of the unification in the language of Marx–Leninist internationalism. At the celebratory Party Central Committee meeting marking the unification, all the speakers devoted their remarks

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ For detailed account of the events of the 1948 war and the expulsion of the Palestinians, see Benny Moris, *Leydata shel Be’ayat Haplitim Hafalestinim 1947–1949 [The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949]* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 1991).

¹² For detailed account of the persecution of the NLL and other Arab Communist Parties and their support for partition, see Ben Zaken, *Komunizem Ke’imperializem Tarbuti*, 153-214.

to attacks on Western imperialism. The issue of *Kol Ha'am* (*The People's Voice*, the Party's newspaper) on the day of the unification featured attacks against imperialism using similar Marxist internationalist language. The editorial titled "On the Agenda" accused the "British and American Imperialists, served by the reaction of the invading Arab States" of causing war.¹³ The act of unification was celebrated as part "of a joint and coordinated political struggle against the external imperialist enemy."¹⁴ The present bloodshed was to stand in contrast to the "daily and historical interest of both peoples."¹⁵

The same Marxist–Leninist language was used by the Jewish Party leaders in their speeches at the Central Committee Plenum of October 1948. In her opening speech, Politburo member Esther Vilenska stated that the unification was "symbolic of the great chance of Jewish–Arab victory over the imperialist enemy."¹⁶ In a lengthy speech entitled "The Road to Victory," Party general secretary, Shmuel Mikunis, placed the struggle in Palestine/Israel in its international context as part of the struggle between "the black forces of imperialism" and the "representatives of victorious Socialism and popular democracy." As for the 1948 war, "the events in Eretz-Israel from November 29, 1947 prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Anglo-American imperialism bears direct responsibility for the violation of peace and bloodshed."¹⁷ The Arab leaders of the unified Party, Emile Habibi and Tawfik Toubi, used the same Marxist–Leninist and internationalist language; clearly this discourse was shared by Arab and Jewish Communists.¹⁸

The use of Marxist–Leninist concepts was a continuation of elements that had been part of Communist discourse before 1948. This usage imparted the view that Arabs and Jews had a join common interest fighting imperialism beyond their national identities. However, despite its inclusionary assertions, this view disregarded but could not really mask the national agency of the Palestinian Communists joining the MKI. Behind the scenes of the unified party existed—as the historian Eli Rekhess described it—"deep political disputes" between the Palestinian and Jewish leaders that would tear apart Party unity.¹⁹ As early as 1951, Emile Habibi demanded that in the parts that Israel occupied beyond the 1947 Partition borders,

¹³ "On the Agenda, With the Unification," *Kol Ha'am*, October 22, 1948.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "The Internationalist Unification Convention of the Israeli Communist Party," *Kol Ha'am*, October 22, 1948.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ "The Road to Victory," *Kol Ha'am*, October 24, 1948.

¹⁹ For the speeches of the Arab leaders see: "The Internationalist Unification Convention of the Israeli Communist Party," *Kol Ha'am*, October 22, 1948; "On the Restoration of the Internationalist Unity to the Israeli Communist Party," *Kol Ha'am*, October 24, 1948; "The Internationalist Unification Convention of the Israeli Communist Party," *Kol Ha'am*, October 22, 1948; "The Greetings of National Liberation League in the Arab Parts of Eretz-Israel," *Kol Ha'am*, October 24, 1948.

“the MKI [would] continue to be named the National Liberation League,” thus retaining its separate Palestinian identity.²⁰

Nonetheless, despite the continued use of Marxist terminology to describe the relations between Arab and Jews, the 1948 war had changed the discourse. The first element to be added was advocacy on behalf of the Palestinian minority. The Communists in Palestine had been involved in advocating Arab rights since 1924.²¹ Yet until 1948, this advocacy had been on behalf of the majority of the country’s inhabitants, albeit one struggling against and increasingly powerful minority. The Palestinians who remained in Israel after the *Nakba* were reduced to the status of a humiliated minority ruled by a military government. Already in the early stages of the 1948 war, the Jewish Communists had shielded the Palestinians left in the new state’s territory.²² The advocacy for Palestinian–Israelis’ rights was more pronounced in the speeches made at the unity conference in Haifa. Resorting to the language of democratic civil rights, Vilenska’s opening speech vowed “to fight so the new state will wipe away every manifestation of discrimination from its boundaries, and will be a home and motherland to all its citizens regardless of race, nationality and faith.”²³ Mikunis did not shy away from condemning the Israeli government’s “antidemocratic policy against Israeli–Arabs,” blaming it for creating “ghettos for Arabs in the cities.”²⁴

The 1950s and early 1960s were marked by an intense public struggle by the MKI and Banki on behalf of the Palestinian–Israeli citizens.²⁵ The Palestinians in Israel in the aftermath of the 1948 war suffered from oppression in the form of military government. Stunned by military defeat and the results of ethnic cleansing, they were a persecuted, frightened minority in a state not of their own choosing.²⁶ In this oppressive context, the Communist Party treated its own members equally, according to the values of Jewish–Arab fraternity, and advocated on behalf of the

²⁰ Eli Rekhess, *Hami’ut Ha’aravi Be’ Yisra’el: Beyn Komunizm Lele’umiyut Arvit* [The Arab Minority in Israel: Between Communism and Arab Nationalism] (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing, 1993), 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²² On the attempt by Zionist colonizers to colonize Arab lands near Afula and the assistance the Communists gave the Arab peasants, see: Israeli, *Mapas–Pey.Ka.Pey.–Maki*, 31-34; Dothan, *Adumim*, 23.

²³ “To the Defenders! To the Youth! To the Masses of the Yishuv,” *Kol Ha’am*, April 26, 1948; “The Internationalist Unification Convention of the Israeli Communist Party,” *Kol Ha’am*, October 22, 1948; “Opening Speech,” *Kol Ha’am*, October 22, 1948.

²⁴ “The Internationalist Unification Convention of the Israeli Communist Party” *Kol Ha’am*, October 22, 1948; “The Road to Victory,” *Kol Ha’am*, October 24, 1948.

²⁵ “From its first day the MKI became a fighting opposition struggling for the defense of the civic rights of Israeli-Arabs,” writes Jacob Markovizky, *Hultsa Levana Ve’aniva Aduma: Lehitpahuta Umevukhote’a shel Tnu’at Banki (1948-1965)* [A White Shirt and a Red Tie: Banki Youth Movement (1948–1965)] (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2003), 93.

²⁶ For the state of the Palestinians in Israel after 1948 and the changes that followed in later years, see: Rekhess, *The Arab Minority in Israel*; Ilana Kaufman, *Arab National Communism in the Jewish State* (Jacksonville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

wider Arab populace in order to promote equality between Arabs and Jews in Israel. The Jewish Communists' main aim was to end the military government imposed on the Palestinian–Israelis after the 1948 war. Seeking to attract audiences outside the MKI and the Banki, and abiding by the rules of the Israelis political democratic system, the Jewish Communists phrased their appeals for Jewish–Arab fraternity in the language of civic rights.²⁷ In that sense, the Communists struggled to instill democratic values within Israeli democracy. At the same time, they appealed to Jewish morality and historical sensibilities after the Holocaust.

Wall posters and handbills from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s reveal the use of language about democratic and Jewish values in the day-to-day struggles of Banki and the MKI. Handbills appealed to democratic sensibilities by describing the arbitrary arrests of Arabs and the disruption of their daily lives. A 1955 handbill of the Israeli Young Communist League told the story of Reziek Abdu, a twenty-year-old from Nazareth, who was arrested, not given a trial at first, and remained incarcerated even after a court found him not guilty.²⁸ The handbill sharply criticized the use of British Emergency Laws used to put down the “struggle of the masses of the people and youth against the British mandate government.”²⁹ One of the high points of the Communist struggle on behalf of the Palestinian–Israelis came at the time of the 1956 Kafr Qasim massacre, which occurred in the context of the 1956 Sinai Campaign, when Palestinian–Israelis were placed under curfew. A group of workers who worked in the fields of the village Kafr Qasim were not informed about the curfew hour and arrived late; they were killed by an Israeli border police unit. At first the Israeli authorities tried to cover up the event, but the massacre was disclosed to the public by Party leader Tawfik Toubi in a Knesset speech, tens of thousands of copies of which “were distributed by Banki members across the country, in houses and public places.”³⁰ A wall poster a year later called for a public rally in commemoration of the massacre. The massacre also served to highlight other wrongs done to the Palestinian–Israelis. A handbill of the Israeli Young Communist League entitled, in allusion to the biblical story of Cain and Abel, *The Blood Cries Out from the Ground*, condemned the government’s failure to investigate a series of Arab children’s death from discarded ammunition against the backdrop of “the horrible murder trial in Kafr Qasim.”³¹

²⁷ “The Movement needed to act as part of a wider protest front, which would be shared by intellectuals, social and economic figures, who were not necessarily identified with the views of Communist Party,” writes Markovizky, *Hultsa Levana Aniva Aduma*, 97.

²⁸ Yad Tabenkin Archives, “Why is Reziek Abdu still in Jail? The Israeli Communist League, June 13, 1955.” Documents from the Yad Tabenkin Archives without file numbers are not catalogued and were given to the author by the archive director.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Markovizky, *Hultsa Levana Aniva Aduma*, 103.

³¹ Yad Tabenkin Archives “The Blood Cries out from the Ground, November 17, 1957.” Not catalogued.

The May Day 1958 clash in Nazareth between Arab demonstrators and the Israeli police was another notable event in the Communist struggle on behalf of Palestinian–Israelis. Led by the local Communist branch, the demonstrators marched without the permission of the military government authorities and were attacked by large police forces. The mass arrests and widespread repression that followed were strongly condemned by Jewish Communists, and again they used the language of democratic rights and Jewish morality in their struggle. A wall poster from May 1958 tried to debunk the official version of the events in Nazareth. It ended with a cry appealing to Jewish collective memory of the Holocaust and national pride: “Jews! Will you sit quietly by while the persecution of the Arabs continues? Will the Jewish people who came out of the ghetto—agree to a ghetto for the Arabs? The detainees must be returned to their families! The military government that shames our national honour must be abolished! Jew, speak up!”³²

Jewish Communists’ advocacy on behalf of Palestinian–Israelis continued well into the late 1950s and the early 1960s (and persists to the present day). A 1962 handbill that called for a meeting of Jewish and Arab youth asserts that “the campaign to end the military government is getting wider and stronger than ever.”³³ By that point the Communists, using language that was shared by a wide range of Israelis, had managed to mobilize parties from the left and right to agitate for the abolition of the military government. The civic democratic concepts that Jewish Communists used as the language of struggle against the treatment of Palestinian–Israelis had, as in the case of the use of Marxism–Leninism, created a positive view of Palestinian–Israelis. However, this language also masked Palestinian nationalism. The limitation of this discourse can even be seen through literature. In the novel *A Locked Room*, a young Arab Communist becomes disillusioned with the Party’s stand on Palestinians. In an argument with his local branch secretary, which effectively brings his membership in the Party to an end, he says: “The Arabs in Israel are not Blacks who want equal status with the white man!” He accuses the Party of “disregarding the national aspect; the Arabs in Israel are part of a people that were driven out of their land, whose lands were stolen, so that they became a people of refugees.”³⁴

The Symbolism of Jewish–Arab Fraternity

The first symbolic expression of Jewish–Arab fraternity in the post-1948 era appeared in an article in *Kol Ha’am*. It was a handshake motif symbolizing the joining together of the Arab and Jewish Communists, under the distinctly Communist

³² Yad Tabenkin Archives, File 17-18, “The Truth about Nazareth, Tel-Aviv, May, 1958.”

³³ Yad Tabenkin Archives, “Public Appeal to the Secondary Students!” Not catalogued.

³⁴ Shimon Ballas, *Heder Na’ul [A Locked Room]* (Tel-Aviv: Zmora-Bitan Publishers, 1980), 123.

symbols of the Hammer and Sickle and the Red Star. The captions, in Arabic and Hebrew, provided the local context: “The Unification of the Jewish and Arab Communists.”³⁵

The foremost symbol of Jewish–Arab fraternity from the 1950s to the mid-1960s was the Jewish–Arab duo, an image consisting of figures of an Arab and a Jew shaking hands or standing shoulder to shoulder. Its root lay in Soviet Socialist realism, one example of which is Vera Mokinah’s 1936 statue *The Industrial Worker and the Kolkhoz Worker*.³⁶ The statue juxtaposes two opposites, city and country, industry and agriculture, man and woman, uniting them under the symbol of the Hammer and Sickle. The Jewish Communist model adapted the same motif to the local Israeli landscape, depicting the Palestinian either dressed in traditional Arab peasant clothing or marked by just a *keffiyeh* and the Jewish figure dressed in European style. The image of the Arab and the background in which it is portrayed might be construed as paternalistic and Orientalist.³⁷ However, this image of the traditional *keffiyeh*-clad Palestinian was to also be part of Palestinian national iconography. For example, a Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) poster from 1980, issued in Lebanon for Land Day, depicts a Palestinian peasant traditionally dressed with a *keffiyeh* and holding a pickaxe; the background is terraced village representing the landscape of rural Palestine.³⁸ Although a direct influence is hard to establish, it is not impossible that some Communist images were shared between Palestinian nationalism and Communism.

As early as 1947, in a Banki poster for a youth meeting for joint Jewish–Arab action against the British, the Jewish–Arab duo appears hacking their way through British barbed wire. The Arab is dressed in traditional Arab peasant garments. The Jewish figure is wearing European clothes.³⁹

In a wall poster announcing Banki’s national peace camp in 1951, the centre of the picture is occupied by three figures. Two are manifestly Jewish, and the third is an Arab wearing a *keffiyeh*.⁴⁰ A photograph taken in Ramla in 1951 provides another take on the motif of the Jewish–Arab duo. It again shows two men, one an Arab wearing a *keffiyeh*, the other a Jew dressed European-style. The two are photographed

³⁵ See “On the Agenda, With the Unification,” *Kol Ha’am*, October 22, 1948.

³⁶ There were interchanges between Soviet Socialist–Realist art and Israeli art created in Leftist–Zionist circles and the kibbutzim. See Tami Michaeli, ed., *Ta’amula Vehazon: Omanut Sovietit Ve’Yisra’elit 1930–1955 [Propaganda and Vision: Soviet and Israeli Art 1930–1955]* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1997), 4.

³⁷ For the formalization of the concept see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). For the way Said applied it to Palestine, see Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

³⁸ Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (New York: I. B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2009).

³⁹ Banki and MKI poster collection, Yad Tabenkin Archives, File 17-18.

⁴⁰ Yad Tabenkin Archives, “Be Ready for Banki’s National Peace Camp on Mount Carmel, September 28, 1951–October 2, 1951.” Not catalogued.

from below, blowing trumpets, two Red Flags waving above them.⁴¹ The influence of Soviet artistic motifs is evident in the heroic stance of the two figures, which is reminiscent of A. Rodchenko's 1930 Socialist-Realist photograph of "The Pioneer Trumpeter."⁴²

The fusion of Soviet and local symbolism is perhaps best illustrated by a 1953 postcard that was distributed for the Bucharest Festival of Students and Youth. It shows an Arab and a Jewish figure, contrasted by their dress. The Jewish youth is holding the national flag.⁴³ Below them appear idealized scenes of settlements with water towers, tents and palm trees. The Jewish-Arab duo is stretching out their hands over a globe to a group of youths dressed in clothes representing the world's continents. Behind them wave flags adorned with the peace dove and the symbol of the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY), and banners with the words *Peace* and *Friendship*. Jewish-Arab fraternity had become an integral part of Communist internationalism.

The symbolic language created by the Jewish Communists to signify their alliance with Palestinian-Israeli Communists contained many diverse, sometimes contradicting motifs. Orientalist elements obscured the Palestinian as the carrier of modern secular nationalism. They reduced him to the image of the traditional peasant in contrast to the advanced European Jew.⁴⁴ At the same time, alongside the Orientalist elements, other images of the Jewish-Arab duo presented the Palestinian as youthful, modernized and dynamic. These showed him as part of an egalitarian alliance of Jews and Arabs. As was the case of the language used by the Jewish Communists, the symbolism of Jewish-Arab fraternity married together an affirmative and egalitarian view of Palestinians while blurring their national agency.

Language and Symbolism: Arabs in the Eyes of Jewish Communists

Jewish Communists conversed with their Palestinian comrades in the language of Marxist internationalism. To advocate the case of the oppressed Palestinian minority in Israel to wider audiences, they used the language of Jewish historical sensibilities and democratic civic rights. At the same time, to the Jewish

⁴¹ Photograph courtesy of Mr. Yoram Gozansky, February 23, 2009.

⁴² "Exhibition: 'Alexander Rodchenko – Revolution in Photography' at Fotomuseum Winterthur, Zurich," *ArtBlart.com*, accessed April 7, 2013, <http://artblart.com/2011/08/09/exhibition-alexander-rodchenko-revolution-in-photography-at-fotomuseum-winterthur-zurich/>.

⁴³ The "Blue and White" was used in order to signify Israel as it merged into internationalist world Communism. Undoubtedly there was a contradiction inherent in the fact that an Israeli flag was depicted alongside descriptions of the very people on the ruins of whose society Israel came to existence. However, as in the case of the traditional Arab garb, this was meant to signify an Israeli locality outside of its Zionist context.

⁴⁴ For the way the contrast between the European Jew and the Oriental Palestinian was constructed see Said, *The Question of Palestine*.

Communists, especially in the Banki, attempts at understanding Arabs were an important part of their educational work. In instructors' brochures created in the aftermath of the 1956 Sinai campaign in January 1957, young Jewish Communists were encouraged to learn about and discuss the Palestinian people. These documents were sites where the elements of the language and symbolism of Jewish–Arab fraternity found expression.

The cover of one brochure, entitled *We and Our Neighbours*, showed another variation on the theme of the Arab–Jewish duo.⁴⁵ They held each other's shoulders and shook hands, symbolizing the unity of Arabs and Jews. The background consisted of a Jewish settlement and an Arab desert dwelling. It displayed all the elements of Communist symbolism. The Jews were European and urbanized, while the Arab was depicted as a desert dweller on a background of tents. The egalitarian stand of the meeting of the two opposites was also shown in the stance of the two archetypal figures shaking hands and holding each other's shoulders. The brochure itself was made up of three stories dealing with Jewish–Arab relations from the pre-1948 period to the then-current struggle against the military government. Each story was followed by points for a discussion after reading. The brochure ended with a discussion about the future way to peace.

The aim of the brochure was not only "to give deep and convincing explanations of the reasons for the conflict and the way to peacefully resolve it," but also "to root out from children's hearts the fear, hate and nationalistic arrogance toward the Arab people and nurture in their hearts friendship, trust and the desire for peace," to be achieved by studying the history and current affairs of the Palestinians.⁴⁶ In recounting the history of the clash between Arabs and Jews in pre-1948 Palestine, the brochure reverted to the language of anti-imperialism. Jewish–Arab relations in the pre-1948 era had been "neighbourly and friendly."⁴⁷ The conflict in 1948 was not fuelled by the peoples themselves, but by the "British who set Arabs and Jews against each other."⁴⁸ As the two oppressed peoples' struggle for freedom intensified, a solution had been offered in the form of the UN Partition Plan. The 1948 war was described, again in anti-Imperialist terms, as an attack "by the Arab States that were incited and organized by the British... that wanted to prevent the Jews and Arabs from establishing their own independent states."⁴⁹ Thus the text

⁴⁵ "We and our Neighbours" was the name of a series of instructors' brochures used to help Banki members to understand the Arab peoples in the neighbouring countries. See Yad Tabenkin Archives, File 31, March 1957, "We and our Neighbours, The Egyptian People", and "We and our Neighbours The Jordanian People, October, 1957", Lavon Institute for Labour Research, IV-104-85-7;. There was no evidence in the archive of brochures dealing with Lebanon, Syria, North African or Arab states.

⁴⁶ Yad Tabenkin Archives, File 24, "Instructors' Brochure, We and our Neighbours the Arab Eretz-Israeli People."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

made use of the language of Marxist–Leninist concepts to describe the history of the Palestinian–Zionist conflict.

In regards to the massive ethnic cleansing of Palestinians during the war, imperialism and the Israeli government were projected as the culprits. “Who caused most of Israel’s Palestinians to flee or be deported from the country during the war?” the brochure asked, and in answer it laid the blame squarely on “the English and the Arab rulers who incited them to flee and leave the country, and also the government of Israel that was interested in their departure.”⁵⁰ The mass deportation of Palestinians was perceived by the Jewish Communists as “a disaster for us Jews and for the Arab people” that created the refugee problem, a huge obstacle to Arab–Israeli peace. Despite the sympathetic tone struck in the brochure towards the plight of the Palestinians, the text did not refer to the national agency of the Palestinians, who were referred to, in what amounted to a gross denial, as the “Arab Eretz-Israeli People.”⁵¹

The third discussion in the brochure deals with the military government. Here, in an internal document that was not intended for public consumption, Banki members use the language of appeal to Jewish sensibility. The military government was called a ghetto, and the policy toward the Palestinian citizenry of Israel described as “oppression, terror,”⁵² refuting its contribution to Israel’s security. The last discussion as concerned with peace, citing the conditions that would enable peace, the end of military government, and a “severing of the connections with the enslavers and oppressors hated by the peoples of the Middle East.”⁵³

Jewish–Arab Ritual⁵⁴

A 1962 Banki document stated that “the big national festivals of Jewish and Arab youth have become a fine tradition; they demonstrate the desire for fraternity and peace.”⁵⁵ Jewish–Arab fraternity was manifested, then, not only in the political struggle, but in rituals as well, like Party conferences and Jewish–Arab friendship festivals. In contrast to state sponsored rituals, these rites demonstrated the unity of the struggle among Palestinians and Jews and desire for Arab–Israeli peace. Starting

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ I define ritual in accordance with the theories of Victor Turner and Edith Turner. They viewed ritual as a social process, that takes its participants outside of the social order functioning as a way to elevate social tensions. See: Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969); Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

⁵⁵ Yad Tabenkin Archives, “National Festival of Jewish and Arab Youth, Haifa, July 6–7, 1962.” Not catalogued.

in the late 1940s, in the aftermath of the 1948 war, Jews and Palestinians engaged in performative events that tried to bond together both peoples.

There is no evidence of ritualistic activity manifesting Jewish–Arab fraternity in the underground era, during the years 1921–1941, when the Communist Party was deemed illegal and persecuted by the British and Zionists, and in the years leading up to 1948. The first documented mass ritual concerning Arabs and Jews was the unification ceremony in Haifa on October 22, 1948. The ceremony itself was not elaborate, consisting of speeches made to receive applause from the audience. The May Theater in Haifa was bedecked with Communist Red Flags; on either side of the stage stood the Israeli national flag and Red Flags. Between portraits of Lenin and Stalin stood the symbol of the convention, “a friendly handshake of brave hands—a symbol of friendly fraternity, the Hammer and Sickle.”⁵⁶ The hall was also decorated with slogans of Stalin and various others “that set the appropriate atmosphere for the important historical event.”⁵⁷ Despite its importance in the Party’s collective memory, however, the unification ceremony did not give rise to any ritualistic tradition among the Jewish and Arab Communists.

The first Jewish–Arab youth festival took place in 1949 on Mount Carmel overlooking Haifa. It lasted for five days and included sports events and exhibitions on such themes as Banki’s history, the achievements of the U.S.S.R., and the casualties of the 1948 war. The high point of the festival was a joint march of Arab and Jewish youths, the biggest in the country to that date.⁵⁸

The next well-documented festival celebrating Jewish–Arab fraternity was held in April 1955 in Tel-Aviv, against the background of escalating border skirmishes between Israel and its neighbours that led to the 1956 Sinai Campaign. It was an elaborate enterprise whose aim was “to instill among youth the idea of fraternity and friendship,” and extensive preparations for it took place.⁵⁹ A series of artistic balls were held in Arab and Jewish towns, including choirs, dance troupes, and local festivals that included sports events and artistic performances. The preparations included public meetings at workplaces and schools where the idea of the festival was explained. Organizers and Jewish youth also travelled to Nazareth and to Arab villages, and badges emblazoned with the festival symbol were distributed. The mass nature of the event is evident from the fact that around 12,000 people participated in the pre-festival ball and another 20,000 received the badges.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ “The Foundation of the International Unity of the Israeli Communist Party,” *Kol Ha’am*, October 24, 1948.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Leah Babko, interview by Amir Locker-Biletzki, Tel-Aviv, February 12, 2009.

⁵⁹ Yad Tabenkin Archives, File 1, “The Festival of Friendship.”

⁶⁰ The number of participants is derived from the Communist daily, *Kol Ha’am*, but under the military government, it is highly unlikely that the numbers were that high. However, the sheer volume of coverage the festival was accorded in *Kol Ha’am* indicates that it was an important mass event.

The festival itself began on Monday, April 4, 1955, when the participants, Jews and Arabs, congregated in Tel-Aviv. A rally was held in the evening, to which torch rallies came from all over the country. The next day was dedicated to movies and an afternoon ball, consisting of artistic performances and songs by the Party's choirs. In the evening the festival participants sailed on the Yarkon River and held a bonfire party on its banks. The last day of the festival started with sports events followed by a symposium, entitled *Culture in the Service of Peace*. The festival ended with a march to Independence Park.⁶¹

Two photos of the marches held during the festival adhere to what had become the conventions of Jewish Communist representation of Jewish–Arab fraternity. The first showed a group of two young men and two young women standing in front of banners. The men were wearing *keffiyehs*, and the women were garbed in European clothes. One man was holding a peace dove in one hand and the symbol of the festival in the other. The symbol consisted of two profiled figureheads, one an Arab wearing a *keffiyeh*, the other a Jew. A second photo showed young men and women marching past watching bystanders. The group in the foreground consisted of four young Arabs, three of them dressed in traditional peasant clothing; the fourth was dressed in the Banki uniform and playing a flute. Behind them, a group of Jewish girls were holding up a banner.⁶²

These series of images represented the idealized symbolic image that the Jewish Communists had created in regards to Palestinians. The symbolic world these images created made Arabs and Jews, young men and women, into harmonious partners in the struggle for peace. These images presented a vision that Communists had of a society where Arabs and Jews lived in peace, a projection of the future as it was depicted in the images. The photographs, as well as other visual images, also showed the stereotypical way Palestinians were perceived, as traditional and peasant in contrast to the modernized European Jew. At the same time, though, some of these images presented the Arab as proud, young, and dynamic. In all the images derived from the friendship festival, there was an attempt to present the national agency of Palestinians as separate from the partnership with Jews. As with other cultural practices of the Jewish Communists, the affirmative view of Palestinians was intermingled with a great deal of stereotyping.

⁶¹ Yad Tabenkin Archives File 1; "The Jewish Arab Youth Festival"; Published in, *Kol Hanoar*, April 1955,

⁶² The Central Committee of the Israeli Communist Party, *Mima'arakhot Hama'avak beyn Ve'ida leVe'ida May 1952- May 1957*. [*The Campaigns of Struggle between Conference and Conference, May 1952–May 1957*]. (Unspecified printer, 1957). (In the author's possession)

Interestingly, however, the brochure produced for the festival made a conscious effort to avoid Communist language and to demonstrate the wide-ranging support of artists and intellectuals. Although some of the signatories to the festival manifesto were identified Communists, others were not. The manifesto itself was worded in terms of Israel's enlightened self-interest "to break the wall of isolation enclosing it."⁶³ The brochure stressed the historical cases of coexistence of Muslims and Jews, paralleling current Arab and Jewish relations. It also quoted a decorated Jewish 1948 war veteran and an Eastern Orthodox priest in support of the ideas of Israel–Arab peace and Jewish–Arab fraternity.

Jewish–Arab *Communitas*⁶⁴

The rituals that enshrined Jewish–Arab fraternity in the MKI and Banki were meant to bond together Arabs and Jews. The symbolism of Communist Jewish–Arab fraternity was filled with representation of bonding. As we have seen, the Jewish–Arab pairs so prevalent in the Communist literature were often depicted shoulder to shoulder, holding each other's shoulders or shaking hand.

The group bonding of Arabs and Jews is clearly evident in a wall poster produced for the 1955 festival, which showed a group of Arab and Jewish youths of mixed gender. The Arabs were identified by their *keffiyehs* and head coverings. All were standing in a close group, bonded together as one.⁶⁵ In this poster, a rare representation of a mixed-gender group of Arabs and Jewish youth, the artist Gershon Knispel presented his subjects distinctively by the *keffiyehs* worn by the Arab figures. However, at the same time, they were presented as young and modernized. Another poster produced for May Day 1954 features three figures, two men and a woman. The two men repeated the motif of the often seen Jewish–Arab duo, one of them bareheaded, the other wearing a *keffiyeh*. In allusion to proletarian internationalism, all three figures carried work tools in their hands. Above them, a banner in Hebrew and Arabic proclaimed *Long Live May Day 1954*, a red Hammer and Sickle flag waving beside it. These posters clearly showed how the Jewish

⁶³ Yad Tabenkin Archives, File 1, "The Festival of Friendship."

⁶⁴ The concept of *communitas* is derived from the British anthropologist Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94–131. It is used here as an interpretive concept to analyze the effects of the rituals performed by Jews and Arabs between 1948 and 1965.

⁶⁵ Tamar Gozansky, and Angelika Timm, eds. *Be'ad Haneged!: Hamiflaga Hakomunistit HaYisra'elit 1919–2009 [Against the Mainstream!: The Communist Party of Israel (CPI) 1919–2009]* (Tel-Aviv: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2009), 64.

Communists codified the *communitas* of Arabs and Jews: Jews and Arabs were bonded together despite their external differences. This *communitas* also originated from the bond between workers, as codified in terms of proletarian internationalism.

The rituals that were performed and the language used to describe them also expressed Jewish–Arab *communitas*. The immediate *communitas* formed between Arabs and Jews at the April 1955 festivals was expressed enthusiastically: “Together we marched; together we sang; together we laughed, joked, found joy in our youth; our arms came together in dance and our legs danced jointly at the same pace; looks of joy and enthusiasm infused with brotherhood were exchanged.”⁶⁶ The more ritualistic activity that took place during the festival was also meant to create *communitas* among the participants, the bonfire and regatta on the river serving as good examples. In the words of *Kol Hanoar*, the newspaper of Banki, “With the flow of the Yarkon, the tunes of our Jewish–Arab songs and the echo answered back in tunes that blended together.”⁶⁷ The marches that opened and closed the festivities were also portrayed in terms of *communitas*: “There was joy in our joint march, a feeling of strength, pride and readiness; joy—for having met like that, together, without barriers, excited, thrilled.”⁶⁸

Communitas arose from a state of liminality between and betwixt the social hierarchy.⁶⁹ Suitable conditions for a state of liminality were created in the rituals surrounding Communist Jewish–Arab fraternity. The sites of the festivals in 1949 and 1955, Mount Carmel and the Yarkon River respectively, placed the participants at the liminal margins of the urban centres and outside the social order these implied. The participants’ status within Israel’s social structure was also liminal. The Jewish Banki members were marginalized in Jewish–Israeli society, suspected and despised as the left-wing other. The Arab members of Banki were alienated from Israeli society as the Palestinian other, connected to the enemy beyond the territorial borders of the state. This meeting of the marginalized was meant to alleviate the continued tension between Arabs and Jews within Israel and in the region. The escalating conflict along the borders was constantly contrasted to the festival atmosphere: “Night after night the borders are set on fire; the fire of guns and mortars, mines and grenades, the fire of hate and alienation... but on a spring day, a bright spring day, joyful and promising, on this day—another fire was lit along the land’s borders, in all four directions: the fire of friendship and peace.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Yad Tabenkin Archives, File 1, “The Jewish–Arab Youth Festival”; Published in, *Kol Hanoar*, April 1955.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ The term is derived from Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94-131.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

A rare photo from the 1949 Jewish–Arab Friendship Festival showed the MKI general secretary, Shmuel Mikunis, seated among a group of Arab and Jewish youth. To the unknowing onlooker, the participants may have looked the same. One boy was playing a flute. Others were dressed in the Banki uniform. One girl who was looking straight at the cameras wore a *keffiyeh*.⁷¹ In many ways this photograph represented what the Jewish members of MKI and Banki tried to create: a bond between Jews and Arabs that would transcend the national identities of Palestinian–Israelis and Jewish–Israelis.

Conclusion

Between the years 1948 and 1965 Jewish Communists developed cultural practices that were to shape their view of Palestinian–Israelis. In language, symbol and ritual, the Jewish Communists developed a positive and affirmative stereotype of Palestinian–Israelis. Fusing together local Israeli, Jewish, and Marxist–Leninist elements, the Jewish Communists created an image of the Palestinian as a traditional peasant as well as a modernized youth. They used a language of Marxist–Leninist concepts to describe Palestinians as partners in an anti-imperialist struggle. They celebrated their alliance with Palestinian–Israelis in rites that were meant to bond Arabs and Jews beyond their national identities. The Palestinians and the Arab peoples at large were a subject of study, mainly in the Banki. Instructors’ brochures that were used to further the intellectual understanding of Arabs were textual sites where the symbolism and language of Jewish–Arab fraternity were used as tools to create a political understanding of and solidarity with the Palestinians. However, despite the affirmative view of Palestinians by the Jewish Communists in all their cultural practices, they did not fully comprehend the experience of loss of a homeland. The *Nakba* was blamed on British imperialism and, to an extent, the Israeli government. But its impact on shaping Palestinian nationalism, and indeed Palestinian agency as such, were absent from the Jewish Communists’ awareness.

In the end, the misunderstanding of Palestinian nationalism was at the heart of the 1965 split of the MKI. This split was a part of a general breakup of Marxist organizations in the Middle East. The Zionist Marxist United Workers Party (MAPAM) and the Egyptian Communists, as well as the MKI, could not contend

⁷¹ Gozansky and Timm, *Be’ad Haneged!*, 28.

with the allure of nationalism, so their organizational integrity was compromised.⁷² After the 1965 split, as the Jewish MKI disintegrated into the Zionist left, the predominately Palestinian–Israeli New Communist List (RAKAH) brought to the fore the process the MKI started in the 1950s, forming the Palestinian–Israelis into an ethno-national community.⁷³ With the stress on Palestinian–Israelis as the base of Communism in Israel, Jewish–Arab fraternity became less pronounced in RAKAH ideology, and a more attentive approach to Palestinian nationalism appeared. Indeed, the Communists were among the first in Israel to make contact with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1970s.

Department of History
University of Guelph
2010 MacKinnon Extension
50 Stone Road East
Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1
alockerb@uoguelph.ca

⁷² See Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There?*, 204-255.

⁷³ For that process see Kaufman, *Arab National Communism in the Jewish State*; for a detailed history of RAKAH see Rekhess, *The Arab Minority in Israel*.