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Book Review

The Siege: the Saga of Israel and Zionism

Conor Cruise O'Brien

New York: Touchstone Books/Simon & Schuster, 1986.

T*he Siege* is a masterfully written and well-documented popular history of a conflict that has spanned much of the twentieth century and may persist for much of the twenty-first. The author, Conor Cruise O'Brien (1917-2008), was an important Irish politician, historian, journalist and writer. He dates his initiation into the controversies surrounding the Arab-Israeli conflict to 1956, when he was a member of the Irish delegation to the United Nations, seated between the representatives of Israel and Iraq. O'Brien's Irish background features prominently in personal comments made throughout the book and may have a lot to do with his sensitivity to the Jewish experience.



In describing the origins of modern Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel, O'Brien draws a direct line between antisemitism and the urgency that characterized the efforts to create a Jewish state. He clarifies two critical points. First, the Age of Enlightenment that led to Jewish emancipation also led to a shift from religious antisemitism to a racist form, which is much more deadly. Second, the early Zionist leaders, including figures such as Hertzl, Jabotinsky, Weizmann, and Ben Gurion, understood that assimilation was not a solution to antisemitism and that more than half of the Jews in the world, specifically those residing in Eastern Europe, were in imminent physical danger.

While much of the book's 798 pages (including index and notes) is a chronological description of the historical and political events that took place before and after the creation of Israel, the book also includes three distinct chapters. One of these, 'Holocaust in Mind,' notes that the Holocaust was not an aberration but rather the result of a deep-seated disease. Moreover, there are no guarantees that it will not happen again, under the right conditions. In another chapter titled 'The Second Israel,' O'Brien comments that, with the exception of the Holocaust, the history of antisemitism in Muslim and Christian lands were not very different. Moreover, the establishment of Israel resulted in the expulsion of virtually all of the Jews of the Arab world, mostly to Israel, where today they make up a little more than half of its Jewish population. In the third and largest of these chapters, 'The Shirt of Uthman,' O'Brien describes the Palestinian experience, focussing on three populations - those Palestinians in Israel, those in Gaza and the West Bank, and those in the surrounding Arab States.

In the prologue, O'Brien defines the siege as "...the play of forces *around* the Jews, around the Zionists, and then around the Israelis: the siege in fact." In fact, the siege is evident again today, from the alt-right through chants like "Jews will not replace us," as stated at the alt-right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, and from the far left, where Israel is described as nothing less than a white European colonial enterprise.

The Siege should be required reading for anyone interested in Zionism, Israel and antisemitism. Sadly, as far as I have been able to learn, it is out of print. However, copies may be available in libraries and from used book sites.

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