

ATLANTA JEWISH TIMES

May 2, 2003

"What Europeans Don't Understand"

By Kenneth W. Stein

Reports of the Atlantic alliance's demise over the Iraq war have been greatly exaggerated. European and American relations are deeply institutionalized, their economies are intertwined and they remain united in defending human rights.

The immediate tension can be reduced in a collaborative rebuilding of Iraq and in cooperation elsewhere. That includes vigorously pushing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to an amiable outcome, collaborative undertakings in the developing world, sustaining the war on terrorism, stabilizing weak economies, curbing disease and eliminating weapons of mass destruction.

However, each side of the Atlantic needs to adjust to its vision in this post-Cold War world and understand the other better.

Europeans do not comprehend that the United States, the most powerful economic and military power on earth, senses anxiety after Sept. 11, 2001.

And most Americans don't understand that Europe's profound military weakness makes cooperation the preferred means to solve problems.

In addition, many Europeans are still anxious about the territorial appetites that led to two world wars. That's why Europe's increasing integration is about more than economies and borders-- it's the ultimate safeguard against future aggression.

For all of that, the audiences I encountered during a recent two-week lecture tour in France and Italy had a selective memory of their own colonial pasts and the origins of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

When I reminded them that America never had a colonial past, and that it was European imperialism that stifled nationalist development in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, they were dismissive.

At the same time, most Europeans make no distinction between "Zionism," "Jewish," or "Israel," so anti-Israeli feeling is easily transferred

into anti-Jewish sentiment.

Many Europeans feel that Israel is responsible for the Palestinians' misery even though they have no idea how or why the June 1967 war started or ended.

They equate "Zionism" with West Bank settlers without realizing that the term defines the Jewish struggle for national liberation.

For many European university audiences, in fact, the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict begins with the first Palestinian uprising in 1987. They know little about the origins of the Zionist-Arab conflict other than what they get from the Palestinian narrative-- i.e., Jews pushed Arabs off their land.

Some Europeans also want to forget earlier generations who were Fascists and Nazis; they prefer to focus on the "victimizer" today rather than remember who victimized whom more than half-a-century ago.

When I told European audiences how Palestinian Arabs helped Zionism by selling their land-- and about the mistakes that Arab leaders made in mismanaging the first war against Israel-- I got blank stares.

At Italy's University of Messina, the school's president admitted that "European students have no idea the United Nations called for a two-state solution in 1947, and that the Arabs of Palestine and surrounding Arab states rejected the idea."

For people who remember their own history in seeking to avoid World War III, Europeans have selective recall about facts that get in the way of ideology or philosophy. But history is the way things were, not the way some want it to be.

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