

Why I Fled Trump's America

New Zeteo contributor and fascism expert Jason Stanley's powerful essay on what growing up as a son of Holocaust survivors has taught him about the dark moment we're witnessing today.



JASON STANLEY

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Note from our Editor-in-Chief:

*Jason Stanley, a former professor of philosophy at Yale University and best-selling author of two books on fascism, has joined **Zeteo** as a new contributor. His provocative first piece for us, below, reveals why he has left the United States and Yale for Canada and the University of Toronto, and why he considers Israel's actions in Gaza a "permanent stain" on his religion. You won't always agree with everything Jason (or I) say – and that applies to all of our contributors here at **Zeteo!** – but our goal is to publish the world's leading thinkers and essayists, people who spark good-faith debates and discussions. Jason is certainly one of them. Jason's new piece is available in full to our **paid** subscribers, so if you haven't already, please do **upgrade** from free to **paid** today to read the entire essay, and to help support independent journalism.*

- Mehdi



Protesters march from The City College of New York City to Columbia University, demanding "liberty, solidarity, and accountability" from their universities in response to the Trump administration's attacks on April 25, 2025. Photo by Leonardo Munoz/AFP via Getty Images

In March 2025, I decided to depart the United States to move north to Canada, joining the faculty of **the Munk School at the University of Toronto**. I did not want to move from where I taught, at Yale University, or New York City, where I lived half the time. But what pushed me over the edge was Columbia University's decision to agree to the Trump administration's demands over charges of "antisemitism." Columbia's deal with the Trump regime threatened to be a model for the capitulation of American universities to fascism. Columbia's decision was cowardly and, of course, ineffective, but it was in keeping with the university's deference and cowardice in the face of backlash against supposed antisemitism; earlier in the year, Columbia **forced Katherine Franke, one of its more distinguished faculty members** in the law school, into "accelerated retirement" over comments on television about Columbia's anti-war protests. Columbia's decision this week **to settle with the Trump administration for \$200 million over allegations of antisemitism** has only solidified my decision.

I am Jewish. My identity was formed by the experiences of my refugee parents. My father arrived in New York City from Berlin at the age of 6 on August 3, 1939, barely making it out of Germany before the war broke out, having experienced the horrors of Kristallnacht. Though my father came from a prominent German family, this did not protect him, nor did it protect the numerous non-Jewish Social Democratic opponents of the Nazis. I thus knew from an early age that fascism does not only come for the marginalized, it also (as we now are starting to see) comes for its better-placed

scapegoats and opponents. My family history enabled me early on to recognize what was happening in the United States, and to narrate to myself a likely future path.

Unlike my father's family, my mother's family were always destitute peasants. My great-grandmother, Necha Epelbaum, orphaned at the age of 6, was married off before she was a teenager. After a life of hardscrabble poverty, she, along with six of her children and almost all of her grandchildren, was murdered by the Nazis (some, including her, in the gas chambers of the Sobibor death camp). My grandparents, Lejb and Alta Czesner, along with my mother and aunt, somehow managed to escape the fate of the rest of their family. In 1940, my heavily pregnant grandmother, my aunt, and my grandfather were deported by Stalin's regime. My mother was born along the way. After five years in a Siberian labor camp, she was repatriated to Poland in 1945, where she met her father by accident on the train.

..... 4 Mordko Josef "Ela" Czesny b: Abt. 1872 in Sobibor (Wlodawa), Poland d: unknown
..... + Necha Epelbaum b: Abt. 1878 in Poland d: Abt. 1942 in Sobibor Death Camp
..... 5 Estera Bajla Cesny b: 1901 in Chelm, Poland d: 1939-1945 in Europe
..... 5 Dworja Czesny b: May 14, 1902 in Chelm, Poland d: 1939-1945 in Europe
..... 5 Rosza Czesny b: 1903 in Chelm, Poland d: 1939-1945 in Europe
..... 5 Szewja Czesny b: 1904 in Chelm, Poland d: 1939-1945 in Europe
..... 5 Moszko Ela Czesny b: Feb. 23, 1907 in Chelm, Poland d: 1939-1945 in Europe
..... 5 Memka Rosza Czesny b: Abt. 1909 in Poland d: 1913 in Chelm, Poland
..... 5 Fajwel Czesny b: May 25, 1913 in Chelm, Poland (lived in Wlodawa) d: 1939-1945 in Europe
..... + Chana (unknown)
..... 6 Henocho Czesner (not confirmed) b: in Wlodawa d: at Sobibor
..... 6 Aszer Hersz Czesner (not confirmed) b: in Wlodawa d: at Sobibor



..... 5 Lejb Czesner b: Abt. 1915 in Chelm (lived in Krylow) d: unknown (Holocaust survivor)
..... + Alta Czesner
..... 6 Perla Czesner b: 1930 in Krylow, Poland d: Aft. 1945 (lived at Targowa 64 in Warsaw)
..... 6 Chana Czesner b: 1938 in Krylow, Poland d: Aft. 1945 (lived at Targowa 64 in Warsaw)
..... 6 Sara Czesner b: 1940 in Krylow, Poland d: Aft. 1945 (lived at Targowa 64 in Warsaw)
..... 5 Dawid Czesny b: Aft. 1913 in Chelm d: Abt. 1939 in Chelm

Part of my mother's family tree, which includes a photo of my grandfather, who, along with his wife (and first cousin), my grandmother Alta, were the only Holocaust survivors of their generation of the family. My mother is Sara Czesner.

Post-war Warsaw was a terrible place for returning Jews. When my friend Marci Shore asked my mother if she missed the beauty of the Polish language, my mother reminisced about the frequency with which Poles on the streets of Warsaw would spit into her 8-year-old face.

All Jews have a history of oppression; for countless centuries, we were rendered second-class citizens and worse in Christian Europe. But my parents had deep trauma, which manifested in myriad ways. My father's anxiety was so profound that I don't recall him taking a single trip out of our home state during my entire childhood. The Holocaust impacted me indirectly, via my parents, and via the loss of almost my

entire family. My Jewish identity is inextricably tied to my parents' experience in Europe, and the fate of my family in the European Holocaust.

Because I am first and foremost my parents' child, my closest felt bond is with other groups facing oppression because of who they are. As the German historian Harald Jähner *has written*, we Jews do not count those who were killed in World War II; we count those who survived.

When I hear Palestinians today speaking about the loss in their families, it is immediately familiar – the loss of homes, and the almost complete annihilation of individual families – *that* is the language I grew up hearing, and *that* is how I initially recognized, on a visceral level, *before the academic scholarship*, that we are witnessing a genocide. Today, it is the Palestinians who face the extermination we endured. Many American Jews, especially in younger generations, recognize this as well. By protesting Israel's actions, they are defending my religion against a permanent stain.



Pro-Palestine Jews held an Emergency Solidarity Shabbat at Washington Square Park to directly uplift the demands of the students of New York City and around the world on Friday, May 3, 2024, in New York, United States. Photo by Selcuk Acar/Anadolu via Getty Images

This is not to say that I accept all aspects of the critiques of Israel's war against the Palestinian people. The importation of the American categories of race into the conceptualization of the conflict antagonizes otherwise sympathetic American Jews – in fact, it antagonizes me. Except in some deeply abstract way, where race is simply a

word we use to describe power relations, it is not just absurd, it is *counterproductive* to regard Israeli Jews as the same as white Americans and Palestinians as the same as Black Americans (even if we set aside the fact that the majority of Israeli Jews are not by any stretch of the imagination white). Once, I picked up one of my sons together with a Palestinian friend of mine – awestruck, he whispered to me, “She looks like your sister!” This is the point worth emphasizing - Jews are from Palestine. Israeli Jews are committing a genocide against their own cousins.

We Jewish people have many centuries of experience living in countries defined by a religion not our own. It is for this reason that Jewish people embraced liberalism as a political philosophy. Liberalism, which rejects the whole concept of a nation tied to a religion or race, allows us to live safely in lands dominated by Christianity. The Nazis murdered countless religious Jews, including my Polish family. But in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler does not target religious Jews, or the idea of a Jewish national state. Instead, Hitler condemns Jews as the force behind what we now call “globalism” – behind liberalism, communism, capitalism, and all other political philosophies that he took to oppose German nationalism. After Hitler took power, his National Socialist government **partnered with Zionist organizations** to facilitate sending German Jews to Palestine. It was Jews as the force behind globalism, it was Jews as the force behind liberalism, it was Jews as the force behind labor unions, that Hitler viciously denounced. It is this Judaism, the Judaism of the liberal tradition, that I embrace as my own. It is this Judaism that was the Nazi’s primary target.

Nor were the Zionists the dominant force in pre-Holocaust Europe. In Poland, the Jewish Bund provided **a powerful socialist and anti-nationalist countermovement** to Zionism, as Molly Crabapple documents in a powerful forthcoming book on the movement.

As a member of a people for whom liberalism provided freedom from religious domination, I am sympathetic to this political philosophy. However, liberalism is an ideal theoretic philosophy, and we live in a non-ideal world. Ideally, there should be no state tied to a religious (or racial) identity. However, I recognize that in a world in which there are many states tied to religious identities, there is certainly a good case that it is morally and politically acceptable to have a state tied to my religion. This is ultimately a philosophical dispute between ideal theory and non-ideal theory in political philosophy. It also comes with obvious costs; if Israel can be a Jewish nation, why can’t the United States be a Christian one?

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... all of this helped drive me away from my home.

My own academic work leans towards non-ideal theory. But I am sympathetic with Jewish people who are guided by liberal ideals. I am sympathetic with Jewish objections to *any* state that is tied to a religion or a race. We were, after all, targeted by the Nazis for embracing such liberal ideals. Rejecting liberal ideals smacks too much like defeat. More importantly, one can, like me, see the moral and political acceptability of a Jewish state in a non-ideal world, and yet be utterly horrified by its actions. This was a view shared by many of my Jewish students at Yale. That is why there have been **many Jewish students** in the protests against Israel's genocide in Gaza. At Yale, Jewish students held Passover Seders in the encampments. These protests pitted young Jews against other young Jews. History reveals that this is not the first time this has happened.

But what about the Anti-Defamation League's **declarations that the encampments were antisemitic**? No doubt there was some antisemitism among some protesters – there is *always* antisemitism. But the ADL does not speak for American Jews, and it certainly does not speak for the many younger American Jews who reject Israel's war, and American support for it, **nor for the 38% of American Jews under 40 who consider Israel an Apartheid state**. The Anti-Defamation League **has backed** the Trump regime's cynical use of antisemitism to attack democracy, and **so has fostered antisemitism in the United States**. History will remember the Anti-Defamation League, and in particular its director, Jonathan Greenblatt, as among the foremost contributors to the legitimization of American fascism. When universities signaled agreement with the Trump regime that expression of support for the Palestinian people facing genocide was tantamount to antisemitism, I was horrified at this attack on my own people by institutions meant to support us.

It is antisemitic to hold that Jews who believe Israel is an apartheid state are antisemitic. It is antisemitic to describe young Jews who refuse to allow their religion to be besmirched by a genocide as antisemitic. It is antisemitic to hold that Jews who reject Zionism are antisemitic. These are all antisemitic actions, directed against a substantial portion of American Jews, especially younger ones. The antisemitism of the Trump regime, the antisemitic actions of the Anti-Defamation League – a propaganda organization for genocide and fascism – and the support of these actions and attitudes by universities, perhaps the most Jewish of American institutions, all of this helped drive me away from my home.

Jason Stanley, the author of **Zeteo's** new column, **Fascism Watch**, is the Bissell-Heyd-Associates Chair at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of

Toronto. He's also the author of seven books, including *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* and *Erasing History: How Fascists Rewrite the Past to Control the Future*.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of Zeteo.

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A great read from Jason Stanley, who ties his departure from the US to not just Trump 's fascism, but also its cynical use of claims of antisemitism to crush university independence, with the assistance of the ADL.

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I am not Jewish, but I felt the power of this piece very profoundly. Thank you for joining Zeteo- we all need to hear your voice.

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