

COMMENTARY

The *Perdition* affair

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Perdition, a play by a self-proclaimed Marxist, Jim Allen, might very well not have packed the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, where it was due to be staged this week. The cancellation of the production by the Theatre's Council none the less brings into focus the issue of what is acceptable as dramatization of historical events, "faction" in a word, and what is unacceptable distortion and lying.

At the centre of the play, whose script I have just read, is the fate of Dr Rudolf Kastner (here called Yaron), who was a Zionist leader in Budapest in 1944, and, as such, had to treat with the Nazis, often in the person of Adolf Eichmann, intent upon the deportation and mass-murder of the Hungarian Jews. As part of a deal imposed by Eichmann, Kastner arranged for a train of 1,684 Jews, including members of his own family, to leave for Palestine. Eichmann's offer was only one step in a cruel deception aimed at raising hopes that extensive bargains might be made, and Jewish lives saved thereby.

The play, which has the framework of a trial before a British judge, has no interest in depicting the position in which Kastner found himself, nor the choices confronting him. Its purpose is to link the Zionists to the Nazis as deliberate accomplices. Before and during the war, Zionists are portrayed as a special class of rich capitalists, who not only shared Nazi ideology but had a common interest with the Nazis in sacrificing the Jewish proletariat.

Historians, including Martin Gilbert and David Cesarini, have pointed out the numerous fabrications used by Allen in order to construct this tale of conspiracy. For instance, in the play Kastner approaches Eichmann to make a deal, rather than the other way about. Zionist leaders such as Ben-Gurion and Weizmann are accused of wanting to save only those Jews who might serve their political ambitions of creating a Zionist state. Zionists in Hungary are supposed even to have turned over to the

Nazis three agents from Palestine parachuted in to organize resistance. Historians, including the two already mentioned, and Jewish organizations have drawn these and other falsehoods to the attention of the Royal Court's Council, whose members did not seem to have realized, until then, quite what sort of an issue they were facing. The decision to withdraw the production was announced by the theatre's artistic director, Max Stafford-Clark, who nevertheless defended the play, accepting only that it might "cause great distress to sections of the community" — a euphemism in which lurks a further example of conspiracy theory, that this is all "censorship" and brought about by unduly anxious Jews.

The truly hidden agenda is that Israel and Zionism were first equated with Nazism in Moscow in the early 1950s, when Stalin and then his successors decided on a policy of backing the Arab states. Subsequent wars in the Middle East have made the equation a commonplace of Soviet propaganda. Massive Soviet energy has been put into re-writing Jewish history from the rise of Hitler onwards. If it could be shown that contacts between Jews and Nazis had not been acts of despairing expediency but positive collaboration, then clearly Israel could not be a legitimate refuge for Holocaust survivors.

The case of Dr Kastner is here frequently pressed into service. Lest anyone should still miss the point, the play concludes with a penitent Kastner/Yaron hoping that Israel will be dismantled and returned to the Arabs.

Many writers, Hannah Arendt prominent among them, have been hard on Kastner. When eventually he was brought to trial in Israel, it was said that he had "sold his soul to the Devil". Two survivors from Hungary shot him dead in the street. To extrapolate from this individual tragic fate that all Zionists are guilty is in itself a characteristic antisemitic generalization. No less antisemitic is the distortion whereby some Jews are made responsible for the mass murder of others. The decision not to stage *Perdition* indicates that such stuff is best left to the official Soviet agencies.