
Hugo Chávez's Jewish Problem

Travis Pantin

IN DECEMBER 1998, preaching a gospel of socialist revolution that had gone blessedly unvoiced in the decade following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Hugo Chávez won a landslide election for the presidency of Venezuela. At the time, his governing philosophy, dubbed “Chávismo,” seemed unlikely to amount to more than a historical and geographical anomaly—a temporary reversal in a region that appeared to have decisively rejected Marxist nostrums.

Nearly another decade has passed since Chávez's ascension. He has suffered a few setbacks in the intervening years, notably a temporary ouster in a 2002 coup and a defeat in a referendum last year that, if passed, would have effectively made him dictator for life. His propensity for wild rhetoric and diktats—as when he created a new time zone by fiat in December 2007, moving the clocks in Venezuela back a half-hour to address the inability of his countrymen to arrive promptly at appointments—has led to questions about his emotional and mental stability. It has also made it easier for Western policymakers to discount the seriousness of his oft-stated goal of fomenting violent political change throughout Latin America.

But to dismiss Chávez as a lunatic is to wish away his proven political skill. He is, without question, a powerful figure—and one who, thanks to a

quirk of geography, is also in possession of dangerously large amounts of oil. His government claims to control over 100 billion barrels of proven reserves, by far the largest of any country in the Western hemisphere. Although estimates vary, at current production levels and prices Venezuela's oil revenues may top \$250 million daily.

Unlike Fidel Castro, who as a client of the Soviet Union had to apply to his patron for funds, Chávez is thus free to indulge his ambitions. “In Venezuela we have a strong oil card to play on the geopolitical table,” he told the Argentinian newspaper *Clarín* in 2005. “It is a card,” he added, “that we are going to play forcefully against the nastiest country in the world, the United States.”

To this end, Chávez has made common cause with FARC, a narco-terrorist group working tirelessly to overthrow the legitimately elected democratic government of Colombia, Washington's closest ally in South America. No less ominously, he has aligned his government with regimes and terror groups that would otherwise seem to hold little attraction for a Spanish-speaking country on South America's northern coast. These include Libya—which awarded Chávez the al-Qaddafi International Prize for Human Rights, named for the country's dictator—as well as Syria, Hizballah, and Hizballah's patron Iran. Virtually alone among world leaders, Chávez is an impassioned defender of Tehran's right to pursue nuclear technology and has even hinted he would be willing to finance it.

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As this list may suggest, there is something else, aside from simple anti-Americanism, at work in Chávez's foreign policy. He and his supporters are in the grip of another age-old obsession, albeit one with a few indigenous twists: an obsession, that is, with the supposedly excessive power of world Jewry, and in particular of Venezuela's few, prosperous, and increasingly imperiled Jews.

VENEZUELA'S JEWISH community, amounting to less than 1 percent of the country's total population of 26 million, is among the oldest in South America, dating back to the early 19th century. During the struggle for independence from Spain, the fugitive revolutionary Simón Bolívar found refuge among a group of Venezuelan Jews, some of whom later went on to fight in the ranks of his liberating army. Today, the majority of the country's Jewish population is descended from an influx of European and North African immigrants who arrived during the years surrounding World War II. Most reside in the capital city of Caracas, comprising a tightly knit community made up of roughly equal numbers from Ashkenazi and Sephardi countries of origin.

Venezuelans pride themselves on living in an ethnic and religious melting pot. Their homeland, unlike its neighbors Argentina, Paraguay, and Chile, has no history of having harbored Nazi fugitives. Before Chávez came to power, members of the Jewish community reported little animosity from either the government or the populace, and sharply anti-Zionist rhetoric was relatively uncommon. Nor did Venezuela's fifteen synagogues (all but one of them Orthodox) experience much of the anti-Semitic vandalism common in other Latin American countries with tiny Jewish populations. The Hebraica center—its building functions as a lavish social hub, elementary school, country club, sports facility, and gathering place for Caracas Jewry—was largely left in peace.

No longer. Since Chávez took the oath of office at the beginning of 1999, there has been an unprecedented surge in anti-Semitism throughout Venezuela. Government-owned media outlets have published anti-Semitic tracts with increasing frequency. Pro-Chávez groups have publicly disseminated copies of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the early-20th-century czarist forgery outlining an alleged worldwide Jewish conspiracy to seize control of the world. Prominent Jewish figures have been publicly denounced for supposed disloyalty to the "Bolivarian" cause, and "Semitic banks" have been accused of plotting against the regime. Citing sus-

picious of such plots, Chávez's government has gone so far as to stage raids on Jewish elementary schools and other places of meeting. The anti-Zionism expressed by the government is steadily spilling over into street-level anti-Semitism, in which synagogues are vandalized with a frequency and viciousness never before seen in the country.

The details are arresting.

- Graffiti, often bearing the signature of the Venezuelan Communist party and its youth organization, have appeared on synagogues and Jewish buildings, with messages like "MATA NIÑOS" ("child killers"), "JUDIOS AFUERA" ("Jews get out"), "JUDIOS PERROS" ("Jews are dogs"), and swastikas linked to stars of David by an equals sign.

- Sammy Eppel, a columnist for the independent Caracas newspaper *El Universal*, has documented hundreds of instances of anti-Semitism in government media. To take one particularly noxious example, in September 2006 *El Diario de Caracas*, until recently one of the country's most important papers, published an editorial containing these fiery words:

Let us pay attention to the behavior of the Israeli-Zionist associations, unions, and federations that are conspiring in Venezuela to take control of our finances, our industries, commerce, construction—which are infiltrating our government and politics. Possibly we will have to expel them from our country . . . as other nations have done.

- On television, Mario Silva, the host of a popular pro-Chávez show called *La Hojilla* ("The Razor Blade"), has repeatedly named prominent Venezuelan Jews as anti-government conspirators and called on other Jews to denounce them. "Rabbi Jacobo Benzaquén and Rabbi Pynchas Brener are actively participating in the conspiracy in conjunction with the media," Silva has said. "So as not to be called an anti-Semite," he added, "I repeat that those Jewish businessmen not involved in the conspiracy should say so."

- Armed government agents have conducted two unannounced raids on the Hebraica club during the past five years. The first occurred during the early morning hours of November 29, 2004, when two dozen men wearing masks invaded the elementary school just as pupils were arriving for class. In the second, which came shortly after midnight on December 2, 2007, government agents broke through the front gate and disrupted hundreds of celebrants at a wedding party in the nearby synagogue. In each case, allegedly, the agents

were looking for weapons and other evidence of “subversive activity.”

- The last few years have seen the creation of a terrorist group in Venezuela calling itself Hizballah in Latin America. The group has already claimed responsibility for placing two small bombs outside the American embassy in Caracas in October 2006—one of them, it is thought, intended for the embassy of Israel. Although neither of the two bombs detonated, the group’s website hailed the man who planted them as a “brother mujahedin” and has urged other, simultaneous attacks throughout Venezuela in solidarity with Hizballah in Lebanon.

In this connection, although there is no direct evidence linking Chávez with Hizballah in Latin America, the group’s website has featured words of praise for him, and the feeling may well be mutual. Not only has Chávez repeatedly expressed support for Hizballah in general, but (according to Venezuelan newspapers) he paid \$1 million to print posters of himself with Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah to be displayed at a Hizballah rally in Beirut.

IN SO FAR AS there is a rationale behind any of this, it would seem to form a part of Chávez’s general view of the world. According to that view, the United States has coopted both Europe and Israel into a transnational enterprise whose purpose is to exploit and impoverish the world’s less developed but resource-rich countries. Jews, especially but not exclusively in the form of the state of Israel, are an integral part of this enterprise. In a July 2006 interview with the Arab TV network al-Jazeera, Chávez elaborated upon the relation between the U.S. and Israel:

The greatest menace to the future of humanity is the United States, and one of its instruments of aggression in [your] part of the world is the state of Israel. . . . The Secretary of State has said that that [the U.S.] will change the map of the Middle East. This plan was made in advance and in great detail in the Pentagon, except that Israel is the executor. . . . They want to transform the map of the Middle East in order to guarantee the dominance and control of the largest reserves of oil and energy in the world.

As an alleged oppressor of the Palestinian Arabs, Israel has its own place of special infamy in Chávez’s world view. This latter theme has served him particularly well in his efforts to mobilize the

sentiments of his rural constituents. Thus, during a 2005 speech marking Columbus’s discovery of the Americas, Chávez likened the plight of Venezuela’s Indians to that of Palestinians. Reminding his listeners of how their ancestors had been “murdered in their land” by “governments, economic sectors, and great land estates,” he thundered: “You were expelled from your homeland, like the heroic Palestinian people.”

All of these elements seem entirely derivative of Marxist-Leninist theorizing, with a strong admixture of post-colonialism à la Franz Fanon and Fidel Castro. But Chávez is not just another Latin American leftist on the Castro model. While the Cuban dictator may be his most important political influence, his greatest intellectual debt is to the Argentinian writer and thinker Norberto Ceresole: a man not of the Left but of the populist Right, a Holocaust denier, and a sworn enemy of Israel and the Jews.

Born in 1943, Ceresole was one of the leading spokesmen for the radical populist government of the Argentinian president Juan Perón. Later, in the guise of a political theorist, he argued that the only appropriate leaders for Latin American nations were *caudillos*: nationalist, militarist, and charismatic strongmen capable of ushering in a “post-democratic” age in which the region’s people would become effortlessly at one with the generals who would direct every aspect of society. Led by a group of such *caudillos*, a confederation of Latin American fascist states would then be in a position to beat back American global hegemony.

Ceresole reportedly traveled with Chávez during his initial bid for power. After the latter’s 1998 victory, he published a celebratory volume, *Caudillo, Army, People: The Venezuela of President Chávez*. The second chapter is entitled “The Jewish Question and the State of Israel.” In it, Ceresole espoused a “new revisionism” that defined the Holocaust as a “myth” and Israel as a global menace:

The existence of this political enterprise—Israel: a power concentrated in the monopoly of monotheism and implemented through an army, police forces, jails, tortures, assassinations, etc.—seeks to consolidate itself through a series of ideological manipulations in the bosom of the hegemonic power of the United States, which seeks to be accepted as the ruler of the world by any means, even generalized terror, and dissuasive and persuasive practices.

It was for this reason, according to Ceresole,

that one of the greatest threats to the Chávez regime lay in Venezuela's "Jewish financial mafia." Indeed, the Venezuelan Jewish community as a whole was to be considered guilty of race-based hostility to Chávez's redemptive nationalist movement.

THE INGENIOUSNESS of Ceserole's doctrine, as filtered through the sensibility of Hugo Chávez, resides in its blending of Marxist economics with two venerable anti-Semitic traditions. The first, still powerful in South America, derives from Catholic teachings about the historic Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. The second, encapsulated most notoriously in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, has flourished in both rightist and leftist variations throughout modern European history, resurfacing in our own time in the fulminations of extreme anti-Zionists. Chávez drew on both traditions in an address he delivered on Christmas Eve in 2004. Here he spoke ominously of certain "minorities, the descendants of those who crucified Christ," who had "taken possession of the riches of the world."

But there was an added element at play in this passage, which has to be quoted in full to be properly appreciated:

The world has enough for everybody, but it happened that some minorities—the descendants of those who crucified Christ, the descendants of those who ejected Bolívar from here and who crucified him in their own way in Santa Marta, over in Colombia—took possession of the riches of the world. A minority appropriated the world's gold, the silver, the minerals, the waters, the good lands, the oil, and has concentrated the riches in a few hands.

Like most of its South American neighbors, Venezuela is a nation of economic extremes. There are a small number of extraordinarily well-to-do families—the "white oligarchs"—and an enormously large population of very poor people, partly or wholly native-American, with few prospects of economic advancement. Since his ascension to power, Chávez has been engaged in a policy of forcible redistribution, nationalizing industries and large farms and turning their proceeds over to social programs aimed ostensibly at ameliorating the condition of the poor.

In common with most such efforts at top-down nationalization and redistribution, however, this one has been a grotesque failure. A country bringing in at least \$1.75 billion a week in oil revenues

suffers from chronic food shortages, including in such staples as coffee and sugar. Even the oil business, now run by Chávez cronies rather than by professionals, is nowhere near as profitable as it might be. And so the inequities persist, and with them the need to identify scapegoats that can divert attention from Chávez's culpability and allow him to maintain his iron grip.

Chávez often speaks of Jesus Christ as the first true socialist, whose agenda he, like Bolívar before him, is fulfilling. In so doing he draws upon another Latin American trope, this one of more recent vintage. The "liberation theology" that emerged in Catholic circles in Brazil in the 1960's provided a theological justification for radical social change; proponents of this quasi-Leninist doctrine use the phrase "Christ killers" to refer to the capitalists who allegedly block the fulfillment of their revolutionary vision. In this sense, Chávez's Christmas 2004 speech, adroitly weaving together the teachings of liberation theology with local political history, appealing to a legacy of deep economic resentment that he himself has greatly exacerbated, and evoking the incendiary motifs of the world's oldest hatred, made up a perfect storm of demagogic rhetoric.

IT IS helpful to keep this background in mind in evaluating the response of Venezuela's Jews to the outrages, physical and verbal, that have been perpetrated against their community. Reaction to the Christmas 2004 speech provides an illustration.

As it happens, one unequivocally strong protest emanated from the Simon Wiesenthal Center in distant Argentina. "In your words," read a statement addressed to the Venezuelan president,

we find two central arguments of anti-Semitism: the canard of the decide and the association of Jews with wealth. . . . Our center condemns your anti-Semitic statements. Such offense to universal values demands an immediate and public apology.

But this protest itself drew a protest—from, in fact, the head of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela. "We believe the president [in his speech] was not talking about Jews," wrote Fred Pressner in a letter to the Wiesenthal Center. Rather, Pressner went on, seizing on the speech's artful ambiguities, Chávez was referring to the "white oligarchy." Still worse, according to Pressner, was the fact that the Wiesenthal Center, by acting "without consulting us, on issues that you do not know or understand," had "interfered in the

political status, in the security, and in the well-being of our community.”

Unquestionably, the Venezuelan Jewish community is in a very difficult situation. There had already been something of a split earlier in 2004 following the first raid on the Hebraica club. While some had reflexively tried to downplay the significance of the incursion, Pynchas Brener, the country’s chief Ashkenazi rabbi, demurred, pronouncing the raid a “direct aggression” by the state heralding an “important shift” in relations. “There is not a single Jewish family in Caracas that was not affected,” Rabbi Brener said.

Nor was there any equivocation on Rabbi Brener’s part in the wake of the second raid on the Hebraica club in December 2007. This was particularly ominous, he averred, because of the timing: the raid took place on the day before the Venezuelan electorate was scheduled to vote on a constitutional referendum that, if passed, would allow Chávez to retain office indefinitely. In light of the ruling party’s well-documented eagerness to blame its political troubles on Jewish machinations, the raid could have been a fishing expedition—a hunt for prospective “evidence” pointing, in the event of the referendum’s failure, to a conspiracy on the part of the country’s leading Jews.

Shortly after this second raid, indeed, Pressner’s organization abandoned its own previous calls for moderation. “We denounce this new and unjustifiable act against the Venezuelan Jewish community,” it declared in a forceful press release, “and express our profound indignation and repulsion.” For his part, Rabbi Brener proclaimed that the purpose of the raid “was just to scare the daylights out of the Jewish community, to convince us not to vote and to keep a low profile.” But, he added defiantly, “since the Holocaust we don’t scare easily.”

Neither, of course, does Venezuela’s president. Although the government acknowledged that the search for evidence of “subversive activity” at Hebraica was fruitless, and although the referendum did narrowly fail, Chávez has vowed to achieve his constitutional reform—that is, to create his dictatorship—by other means.

ONE-THIRD OF Venezuela’s Jews have fled the country by now, and those who remain are in a state ranging from discomfiture to terror. When asked why they stay, some wealthier Jews say that the answer is economic. “The problem . . . is that you could never live like this anywhere else,” the owner of a Caracas textile plant told a reporter from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. “Nobody here really wants to go to Israel. You would need to have ten times as much money to live this way.” Others, less well off, are similarly reluctant, and offers by the Israeli government to ease the process of *aliyah* have so far met with few takers.

The stated reasons are many. Even amidst all their trouble, it has been pointed out, Venezuela’s Jews retain a workable relationship with the Chávez government. Jewish journalists can still speak out. Nor have Jewish business been targeted for expropriation by Chávez’s redistributionist policies. Jews can still travel freely, and anti-Semitic violence has not touched many of them personally. So they hold out, bearing the yoke of economic and political harassment and hoping for change.

Are they right to do so? History suggests that once anti-Semitism becomes an instrument of state policy, the possibility of violence can never be discounted. For centuries, moreover, anti-Semitism has waxed and waned with fluctuating business cycles. With both the ailing economy and Chávez’s social programs dependent almost entirely on oil revenues, a drop in prices could trigger widespread animosity against the “Semitic banks” that members of Chávez’s party have repeatedly denounced for every passing ill. A major event like a military strike on Iran by the United States or Israel might similarly serve as justification for seizing the assets of Venezuela’s Jewry. In the meantime, as the numbers dwindle, and many of the richest depart, it is becoming increasingly difficult to care for the Jewish poor, who make up a full 25 percent of the community.

Caught in a vise between an all too realistic fear and a possibly illusory hope, one of South America’s most productive and peaceful minorities awaits the future in grim expectancy.