

Chavez and the Jews: A Sorry Tale

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By Ben Cohen

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Like one of those *telenovelas* that are so popular on Latin American television stations, the slow yet inexorable deterioration of Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez, was soaked in drama and cloying sentimentality.

Chavez died March 5 following a two-year fight with cancer. For most of that time, he claimed – falsely – to have been cured. But less than two months after winning a fourth term in last October's election, Chavez was spirited back to Cuba, where Fidel Castro's doctors treated him.

Now, Chavez's death affords the opportunity for a critical reassessment of his tenure. In his fourteen years in power, Chavez turned Venezuela into the Latin American hub of a global network of anti-American, authoritarian rogue states. There is scarcely a fellow dictator he didn't befriend. Some, like the Iraqi tyrant Saddam Hussein, are no longer with us. Others – among them Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe – remain alive and in power.

The closest relationship of all was the one forged with the Castro brothers in Cuba, Fidel and Raul, whose ailing economy is kept afloat by heavily subsidized oil from Venezuela, Latin America's biggest producer.

With allies like these, it should come as no surprise that Chavez became an arch-foe of Israel. In one of the last foreign policy statements he made before returning to the hospital in Cuba in December, Chavez denounced what he called the “savage” Israeli attack on Gaza. In 2009, on the previous occasion Israel responded militarily to Hamas rocket attacks from Gaza, Chavez told the French newspaper Le Figaro that Israel had launched a “genocide” against the Palestinians.

Such incendiary statements won Chavez the admiration of the Arab street. In 2006, during the conflict between Israel and Hizbullah in Lebanon, the Arab satellite network Al Jazeera praised Chavez for beating Arab leaders to the punch when he became the first head of state to condemn Israel’s actions. Similar words of admiration greeted his decision to expel the Israeli ambassador to Caracas in 2009.

In attacking Israel, though, Chavez inadvertently undermined the arguments of those who say anti-Zionism is one thing, anti-Semitism something else entirely. In many ways, Chavez’s attitude to Israel mirrored that of the Soviet Union. Just as the USSR marked its own Jews out as a fifth column during its decades-long propaganda campaign against Zionism, so did Chavez.

Before Chavez came to power there were 30,000 Jews in Venezuela. The community has now dwindled to fewer than 9,000. The Chavez years ushered in a set of new and frightening experiences for Venezuela’s Jews, from cartoons in the press that could have been lifted from the notorious Nazi newspaper Der Sturmer to the vandalism of the main synagogue in Caracas in 2009.

As a depressing summary by Tel Aviv University’s Kantor Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism noted last September, “Recent years have witnessed a rise in anti-Semitic

manifestations, including vandalism, media attacks, caricatures, and physical attacks on Venezuelan Jewish institutions.”

Members of the Venezuelan opposition I’ve spoken with over the past year have all remarked on the virulence of Chavez’s anti-Semitism. In 2012, Israel was temporarily displaced by the emergence of a domestic Jewish target in the form of the rival presidential candidate to Chavez – the youthful and energetic Henrique Capriles. While Capriles is a practicing Catholic, his mother’s family, the Radonskis, arrived in Venezuela after surviving the Holocaust in Poland. Other members of the family perished in the Nazi concentration camps.

In their attacks on Capriles, Chavez and his press lackeys referred to him with an array of derogatory terms – “gringo,” “bourgeois,” “imperialist,” and, above all, “Zionist.” There was no doubt that by “Zionist” the regime meant “Jew.”

Why did anti-Semitism become such a potent force in a country that eschewed it for so long? Some analysts regard it as the inevitable outcome of Chavez’s alliance with Iran, Hamas and Hizbullah.

Yet there is another factor. The main ideological influence on Chavez was a relatively obscure Argentinian sociologist, Norberto Ceresole. A Holocaust denier and all-round conspiracy theorist, Ceresole’s theories became the basis for what Venezuelans know as *chavismo*, the matrix of social institutions and values created by the Chavez regime. The first chapter of a book in which Ceresole extolled the virtues of such a system, under which the relationship between the “leader” and the “people” is privileged, was titled “The Jewish Problem.”