Why do so many Europeans reject America's view of the Middle East?

By Michael Elliott, columnist, Time Magazine (Apr. 29, 2002)

As a teenager growing up in Britain, I remember saying prayers at our church for the safety of Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War. For my friends and me, Israel's great Defense Minister, the one-eyed Moshe Dayan, was an authentic hero. One night, I remember, the BBC aired a tribute to Dayan using as a sound track the Who's I Can See for Miles, which we thought was pretty cool. In the late '60s spending time on a kibbutz was a fashionable way for European teens to bridge the gap between school and university. As far as I could judge as a young man, widespread European sympathy for Israel--the sense that Israelis were the good guys in the Middle East--extended through the horrors of the Munich massacre in 1972 and the October War of 1973.

Yet now the streets of Europe are filled with rallies that support the Palestinians and condemn Israel. Listening to a radio broadcast on BBC World last week, I was struck by an anchor's air of incomprehension at a demonstration in Washington in support of Israel: Weren't the Americans, she asked a correspondent, really rather "simple" when it came to the realities of the Middle East? Many American Jews, not surprisingly, are furious at the European response. For nations responsible for the Holocaust to ignore the horrors of suicide attacks on Israeli targets, to shut their ears to the hate for Jews that spews from the Arab media, seems unforgivable. American Jews ask why European peace activists go to Ramallah and Nablus rather than Netanya and Jerusalem. In an essay in the New York Observer, Ron Rosenbaum wrote wrenchingly of a "dynamic" that "suggests that Europeans are willing...to be complicit in the murder of Jews again."
Why do Americans and Europeans see the tragedy of the Middle East in such different ways? In one view, the root cause lies in reactions to the attacks of Sept. 11; Americans have developed a deep hatred of terrorism and identify the Palestinian suicide bomber as a species of the same genus as an al-Qaeda mass murderer. But this tale is deeper and darker than that. In any event, all five of the largest West European countries--Germany, Britain, France, Italy and Spain--have good reasons of their own to detest terrorism.

A possible explanation for European support of the Palestinian cause is that Europe's media have long been better than their U.S. counterparts at covering the misery of Palestinians. I would date the growth of European sympathy for the Palestinian cause to Israel's 1982 incursion into Lebanon, and especially to the massacre by Israel's Lebanese allies of Palestinian refugees in the camps of Sabra and Shatila--an outrage for which an official Israeli inquiry held Ariel Sharon indirectly responsible. Sharon, ever since, has been a hate figure for the European left. Europeans who grew up after 1945 have developed a loathing for those who seek to prosecute political ends by military means. Sharon's willingness these past weeks to send tanks into refugee camps--whatever the provocation--touches too many raw nerves.

There's more. To an extent that few Americans understand, modern Europeans have a deep sense of guilt about their colonial adventures. (Indeed, they have much to feel guilty about.) Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth, a chilling catalog of French atrocities in Algeria and a cry to listen to those denied a voice, is one of the post-1945 era's most influential European books. All this has had an effect. It was easy for Europeans to be on the side of Israel when, as in 1967 and 1973, it seemed to be fighting a defensive war against those who wished to eliminate the Jewish state. But as Jewish settlements grew in the West Bank, Europeans became uneasy. Israel seemed to be adopting a
policy of colonization that to modern European eyes was not just morally reprehensible but also bound to end in tears.

Clearly, for some Jews these rationalizations are beside the point. Europeans, they argue, are just plain anti-Semitic. They naturally "portray Jews as the real villains," says Rosenbaum; they always have, always will. Well, I just don't believe this about the post-1945 generations of Europeans, though I suspect that's because I don't want to. But, undeniably, past European anti-Semitism has had a bitter effect on present European attitudes. Put at its crudest, most Europeans know very few Jews; they killed too many of them. In America there is a thriving community for whom the survival of Israel is a passionate commitment; in Europe there isn't. No number of school lessons or church sermons about the Holocaust can overcome that humdrum truth.

So why do Europeans and Americans see the Middle East in such different ways? Above all, because the shadow and shame of the Holocaust reaches out of the past and lays a cold hand on our present understanding. All the prayers in the world won't make that grim truth go away.