



Results of Study on “How to Reframe Israel/Palestine for Progressive Students”

Led by Qualitative Analysis Professionals, Dina Shulman and Marc Engel, August 8–10, 2016, in Cambridge, MA. **Report by Jonathan Carey, jc@bluestarpr.com, 415-543-6300**

Goal: To identify messages that may persuade Progressive college students to disengage from, or oppose BDS, academic boycotts, and anti-normalization efforts against Israel on campus.

Participants: Twenty Progressive students, selected from a pool of 170 students, split into four groups, with two groups of non-Jews (African American, Latino and LGBTQ) and two groups of Jewish students. Participants were pre-qualified as political progressives from universities diverse in location, rank, and size, e.g., Oberlin, Michigan State, UC Davis, and Princeton. Students were active leaders in student government, affinity groups, and chapters of movements, like Black Lives Matter. Students had toured Israel with the David Project and were exposed to multiple perspectives. Many students reported that they had friends active on opposing sides of the BDS issue, which, especially for the non-Jews, had sparked their interest in the Israel-Palestine trip.

Themes tested: See *Appendices* for full text of original and revised messages based on the following themes:

1. Palestinians share at least some responsibility for their plight.
2. Many Israelis want to end the occupation without compromising their security.
3. Israel is often singled out for condemnation. It should be judged by the same standards and laws as we judge every other country—no better, no worse.

Summary of Findings:

1. One-sided statements were perceived to be biased and not credible.
2. Messages that highlighted terrorism and acts of violence were tuned out, even if the underlying facts were accepted.
3. Messages highlighting economic injustice, corruption and wealth inequalities were seen as interesting and thought-provoking.
4. Most non-Jewish students filtered messages about Israel or Palestine through their peoplehood before they evaluated them.
5. No participant challenged Israel’s right to exist.
6. The term “Intersectionality” was widely supported, however messages that adhered to the concept, but were not labeled as “intersectional” were unanimously rejected.
7. Messages that suggested both sides had contributed to the ongoing conflict were seen as novel, trustworthy, and credible – and therefore potentially effective.
8. Decade-old, previously effective BlueStarpr.com messages remain effective.

Discussion of Findings:

1. One-sided statements were perceived to be biased and not credible.
 - a. Participants were quick to label certain messages as one-sided, then down vote them as “incomplete” oversimplifications of a nuanced and complex situation. For example, students mentioned and dismissed these popular arguments:
 - i. “Palestinians want to destroy the only democracy in the Middle East.”
 - ii. “Israel left Gaza and got rockets as thanks.”
 - b. Jewish participants reported that one-sided, pro-Israel messages seemed to trigger one-sided Palestinian responses as if both sides were reciting from a team script. For example, when a pro-Israel student says “Palestinian schools teach kids to hate Jews,” a Palestinian advocate responds, “Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians.”
 - c. Non-Jewish participants appeared to become more disengaged when one-sided statements were discussed as measured by body language and number of contributions to the conversation.
2. Messages that highlighted terrorism and acts of violence were widely tuned out, even if the underlying facts were accepted at face value. Students seem to withdraw from the conversation and noted feelings of sadness when violence was mentioned, no matter the source or the victim.
3. Participants were interested in, and seemed receptive to, messages that highlighted issues of economic injustice, corruption and wealth inequalities, e.g., “Palestinian leaders, among the 1% of the wealthiest Palestinians, control 80% of the power and wealth in Gaza and the West Bank. Wealth inequalities also contribute to Palestinian suffering.” This seemed to be the only area when one-sided messages worked at all.
4. Most non-Jewish participants preferred to filter messages about Israel or Palestine through their peoplehood before they evaluated them. For example, one African American woman reacted to the statement, “Jews, a minority group that has suffered centuries of discrimination, want a single nation where they are the majority and are safe from persecution,” by saying, “So what? No one gave us our own country after we were freed as slaves in 1865. When do we get our own nation?” Sometimes, students rejected whole statements when one or two “trigger” words in a message connected to an unresolved issue for their people. However, all of the Jewish students and one non-Jew, a Latino student leader at UC Davis, evaluated the messages without filtering. Note: this insight may be one of the most important of the study: messages that test well with Jews or Jewish funders may not be effective with non-Jewish audiences.
5. No participant challenged Israel’s right to exist, even when invited to do so. Complaints about Israel were filtered through their personal narrative as an American with complaints, i.e., “America has problems, too, but that doesn’t mean I am going to move to Africa or challenge the US’s right to exist.”

6. “Intersectionality” as a term was widely supported when probed, however messages that adhered to the concept, but were not labeled as “intersectional” were rejected by nearly all participants. Attempts to link persecuted peoples in a common struggle against a common obstacle were rejected. In addition, participants were quick to note that as an outsider with “privileges” not shared by the afflicted people, that they had no right to impose their will or solution on the situation, but instead should remain on the periphery and function as a supportive outsider. (Note: in the conflict between Israel and Palestine, participants nearly unanimously held the contrary view that the conflict would not end without outside intervention. The next finding may be a potential cure.
7. Messages that acknowledged that **BOTH** Israelis and Palestinians had played a role in the conflict were seen as trustworthy and credible. Based on participant feedback, we revised the original statement during the sessions from:
 - a. “Palestinians share at least some responsibility for their plight.” to an interim version:
 - b. “Palestinians are suffering due to the actions of Israelis and Palestinians.” to a final version:
 - c. **“Palestinians are suffering due to the actions of Israeli leaders and Palestinian leaders,”** which was widely supported by Jewish students tested.

Participants speculated that most pro-Palestinian hardliners would be caught off guard by this remark and have no immediate response towards the speaker. This insight also leads us to the real possibility that a pro-Palestinian student who eventually rejects this statement and asserts that Israel is 100% responsible for Palestinian suffering, might in turn be dismissed as biased and “one-sided” by a progressive millennial audience. Therefore, this message may work because it reinforces what most uninvolved students may want to believe about Israel/Palestine:

- a. **No helpless victims here:** Palestinians have the power to improve their own lives.
- b. **No ruthless oppressors here:** Israelis recognize that their own actions and policies may have (inadvertently) harmed Palestinians.

This message does not come without potential pitfalls. Even if this message is proven to work well on campus, some pro-Israel students may be afraid to utter it in public because of the extreme hostility they may face. Some Progressives students may be afraid that if they admit that the creation of, and defense of Israel has negatively impacted Palestinians, they will be immediately attacked by pro-Palestinian students. Also, some Jewish students may not believe that admitting to Israel’s culpability at any level will stop pro-Palestinian students from blaming 100% of the conflict on Israel.

However, a wide-scale test of this approach still seems worthwhile. Imagine if it can be proven that most “uninvolved” students find Jews and Israelis who admit to dual

responsibility as more trustworthy, likeable, and humane? And, Palestinians who deny this dual responsibility as biased, closed-minded and therefore, less trustworthy?

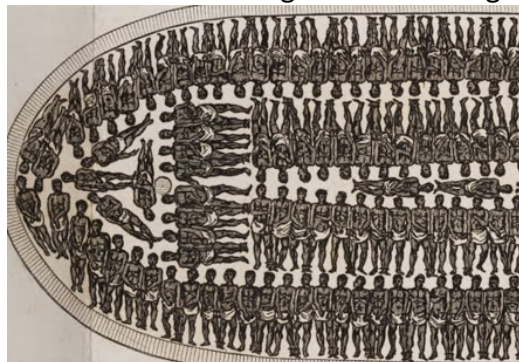
Contradictory information can be jarring. It encourages us to engage in a new way. Creativity in this process comes when we try to resolve this “error”. Humans remember and react to novelty while we tune out the mundane. This shift may lead to dramatically different conversations on campus.

In ways that may mirror the role the jury plays in a trial, uninvolved students will realize that they have to decide on a narrative to support, then apportion liability before they award potential damages. In this way, rather having a campus discussion on “how to punish” an Israel assumed to be 100% guilty, the conversation may shift to a previous phase to discuss who is a more credible narrator and how to apportion blame and responsibility. A student council hearing on “How much should each side shoulder the blame?” is likely to be a long conversation that cannot get resolved quickly, unlike a relatively quick evening debate on whether to pass BDS and punish Israel through anti-normalization effort, or academic boycotts.

Proposed Ideas for Further Consideration:

1. **Comprehensive follow-up research study.** Qualitative Analysis Professionals, Dina Shulman and Marc Engel, who volunteered their time for this study, are eager to continue work on this project in order to refine our initial findings. While many millions of dollars are spent each year to support pro-Israel education and advocacy, there is often some trepidation to allocate resources to test effectiveness of a powerful non-profit’s approach through a randomized control study of a design similar ones required in medical research. However, without a randomized experiment, we will never be able to determine whether their intervention may cause more problems than doing nothing, or whether it may create new, unanticipated problems, or even if there are cheaper alternatives that work better.
2. **Media development.** In order to determine whether previously effective messages and approaches are still effective with Progressive students, the follow-up study might include newly-created short videos and online media based on the initial findings of this study. Some ideas for development may include:
 - a. Jews and Israelis are proud of Israel, Zionism, the national liberation movement for the Jewish people, while we acknowledge that other people may have inadvertently suffered – or been left behind. **“Palestinians are suffering due to the actions of Israeli leaders and Palestinian leaders**
 - b. Highlighting aspects of the central narratives of the Progressives we are trying to reach: African Americans, Latinos, LGBTQ people and other minorities – and then drawing a parallel for how the Jewish narrative may be similar. For example:

- i. The Book of **Exodus** is a central text for both African Americans and Jews, influencing political movements, liturgy, song, and celebrations. Exodus has sustained hope and a sense of possibility in the face of insurmountable evil. Today's Progressive youth are invited to bridge the gap between past and present, to move from stranger to chosen, to build group identity. Many African Americans may see themselves as the descendants of a people who were forcibly kidnapped, enslaved, yet still living among their former "Egyptian" captors in white America. Furthermore, Harriet Tubman is called the Moses of her people.
- ii. "Refugee" like struggle to improve the lives of their children. A large migration of African Americans began during World War I, hitting its high point during World War II. During this Great Migration, Black people left the racism and lack of opportunities in the American South and settled in northern cities such as Chicago, where they found work in factories and other sectors of the economy.
- iii. Many Israel supporters are frustrated that few people want to know the history of the conflict. Yet, how many Jews know much about Emmett Till? (See Appendix for more on Till) Other potential analogies to explore: Slave ship conditions vs Holocaust. Black lives Matter vs. the Maccabees, one of the original freedom fighting organizations.



- iv. Resiliency in Latino culture vs. Israeli “Startup” Nation. Latinos are well knit within the fabric of American culture. Latino critical theory (LatCrit), and Chicano epistemologies as a theoretical framework, the book unveils how differing layers of oppression shape the lives of these boys of color through the intersections of race, gender, and class. Contrary to majoritarian assumptions, cultural deficit models, and their society’s low expectations, research reveals how participants used their cultural capital as a foundation to develop resiliency.

In Israel, entrepreneurs take risks and learn from failures. Why not, “Israel failure week” when we give students a chance to share and learn from each other’s failures. Take people out of their comfort zone and help them develop the psychological tools that are so vital in the real world. No matter the situation, blaming people for failures makes them less accountable. Holding people accountable is a different matter. Then the conversation shifts to incremental changes on how to avoid mistakes. Increasing punishment doesn’t reduce mistakes, it only makes the party bury the information deeper.



*“In “hyper-entrepreneurial” countries such as **Israel**, Taiwan, and Iceland, early business failures are common. And the famous J-curve of returns is ideology among venture capitalists everywhere: Failures come early; successes take time. Early failures are important because they generate systemic learning about where opportunities are (and are not) and how to address them, and they quickly free up people, capital, and ideas for more-promising projects. Rapid failure functions like the draft of a chimney: The fast exit of failures sucks in new entrants. Yet many policy makers who encourage entrepreneurship as a strategy for economic development treat low failure rates as a sign that their policies are working. They should be looking for lots successes and failures, although the former should, of course, outweigh the latter, in sheer numbers, in impact, or in both.*

Appendix 1.

Written Statement as of 8/8/16

STATEMENT 'C1'

Palestinian leaders have worked against the long term good of their people for nearly a century.

Their decisions to use violence and obstruction as primary political tools have often led to setbacks for their people in the end.

Fatah, (the Palestinian leadership) on its Facebook page, brags how 170,000 Palestinians have sacrificed their lives in attacks that have led to the deaths of 11,000 Jews plus thousands of Palestinians, Lebanese, Jordanians, Egyptians, and Americans.

Palestinian leaders encourage individual acts of violence by naming streets and city parks after attackers and by providing economic support to families while attackers serve time in foreign jails.

Palestinian leaders seem to place destroying Israel over the progress of their people. The Palestinian struggle for human rights could include the gain of their democratic rights in Jordan and the repeal of Apartheid laws in Lebanon, issues not on the agenda of any current Palestinian leader.

Palestinian leaders often try to prevent normalized relations between their people and Israelis. Palestinians who speak with, or who have economic dealings with Israelis, may be tortured to confess to being "infiltrators or collaborators," then imprisoned or publicly executed without trial.

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Place yourself in the shoes of a Palestinian leader think whether you would have used similar strategies to promote your cause – and to advance your peoplehood.

Progressive counter-argument:

Because Israel is far stronger, Palestinian actions are of no consequence. Israel has one of the strongest armies in the world and is not seriously threatened by Palestinian violence.

Written Statement as of 8/8/16

STATEMENT 'M1'

Many Israelis want to end occupation of the Palestinians and ensure peace and security for both people.

There may be reasons for Israeli security concern: After Israel withdrew from Gaza, it experienced thousands of rocket and tunnel attacks. After Israel signed the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians, it was targeted by thousands of bus and cafe bombings.

Jews, a minority group that has suffered centuries of discrimination, want a single nation where they are the majority and are safe from persecution.

Some people believe that global action should force Israel to withdraw its forces immediately without considering either the security risks to its 8 million citizens or whether a withdrawal may increase the odds that Palestine becomes a police state or is captured by terrorists.

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Imagine you are political leader in Israel. You think there is a small chance of peace negotiations succeeding, but history is not on your side. After unsuccessful negotiations and renewed violence, the general public grows wary. Meanwhile, most voters seem to be more concerned about the Israeli economy, government bureaucracy and overcrowded schools. What would you do?

Imagine what it would feel like to be a Palestinian with full control of your land. Imagine what it would feel like to be an Israeli and feel confident that your family will be as safe, if not safer, than you are today.

Progressive counter-argument:

Palestinian leaders cannot stop individual acts of violent protest until the unjust occupation ends. Israel uses terror as an excuse to delay negotiations and to grab more Palestinian land.

Written Statement as of 8/8/16

STATEMENT 'R1'

Israel is often singled out for condemnation. It should be judged by the same standards and laws as we judge every other country—no better, no worse.

Israel has acted in violent, racist and oppressive ways. But in many respects their actions pale in comparison to the United States, whose wars and policies have brought widespread death and destruction to millions of people in the Middle East.

We should attack all racist and oppressive power structures and violence, wherever they exist, not just in Israel.

The emphasis on Israel is confusing and sometimes seems unfair.

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Progressive counter-argument:

Americans should oppose Israel specifically, because the country was founded on an exclusive and racist ideology and it continues to ethnically cleanse Palestinians from their land today.

Appendix 2.

Revised Statements tested on 8/10/16

M2. Palestinians are suffering due to the actions of Israeli leaders and Palestinian leaders.

R2. The majority of Israelis want to end the occupation in a way that ensures peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians.

C2. Israel is often singled out for human rights violations. We should attack all racist and oppressive power structures and violence, wherever they exist, not just in Israel.

Alternatives Tested:

- 66% of Palestinians give a positive evaluation to the status of democracy and human rights in Israel. (taken from this poster) <http://www.bluestarpr.com/poster/palestinians-on-israeli-democracy/>



- The majority of Israelis are native to the Middle East and North Africa and came to Israel as refugees after being kicked out of their homes.
- The top 1% of Palestinians control 80% of the wealth of the Palestinians. There are thousands of multimillionaires and even some billionaires.
- Hamas's millionaire leaders don't launch their rockets from their luxury condos on the beach. They shoot rockets out of hospitals, schools and slum houses to get the most media attention when Israel fights back.

Appendix 3. Anne Frank compared with Emmett Till.

Till's murder remains a powerful symbol among many African Americans. More than 3,000 African Americans were killed by extrajudicial violence throughout the South between 1876 – 1950s. Emmett Till was an African-American teenager who was lynched in Mississippi at the age of 14 after reportedly flirting with a white woman.



Till's mother insisted on a public funeral service with an open casket to show the world the brutality of the killing. "The open-coffin funeral held by Mamie Till Bradley exposed the world to more than her son Emmett Till's bloated, mutilated body. Her decision focused attention not only on American racism and the barbarism of lynching but also on the limitations and vulnerabilities of American democracy."

Tens of thousands attended his funeral or viewed his casket and images of his mutilated body were published in black-oriented magazines and newspapers, rallying popular black support and white sympathy across the U.S. Intense scrutiny was brought to bear on the condition of black civil rights in Mississippi, with newspapers around the country critical of the state.

Although initially local newspapers and law enforcement officials decried the violence against Till and called for justice, they soon began responding to national criticism by defending Mississippians, which eventually transformed into support for the killers.

In September 1955, Bryant and Milam were acquitted of Till's kidnapping and murder. Protected against double jeopardy, Bryant and Milam publicly admitted in an interview with *Look* magazine that they killed Till. Till's murder is noted as a pivotal catalyst to the next phase of the Civil Rights Movement. Events surrounding Emmett Till's life and death, according to historians, continue to resonate. Some writers have suggested that almost every story about Mississippi returns to Till, or the region in which he died, in "some spiritual, homing way".

Appendix 4. "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto" (1949) by W. E. B. Du Bois

W. E. B. Du Bois narrates how in the course of his travels in Europe, especially in Germany and Poland, before and after the Second World War, he came slowly to the awareness that racism is not necessarily a question of color, as it is in the US. After his visit to the void where the Warsaw ghetto had been razed by the Nazis, he acquired a larger and less parochial view of racism and, under that head, of the black American question.

I have visited Poland three times. The first, 59 years ago, when I was a student at the University of Berlin. I had discussed with my colleague Stanislaus von Ritter Estreicher. I told him about the racial issue in America that seemed then to be the only race problem and the most important social issue in the world. He said, "You know nothing of true racial issues." Then he began to speak to me of the Polish problem, especially those who had been integrated into the German empire; their limited education; the refusal to let them speak their language; the reduced number of careers that they had the right to follow; continuous insults which were the subject of their culture and family life.

I was surprised because, at that time, race issues were central to my color questions, related primarily to slavery in the United States and almost slavery in Africa. I promised that upon returning from my summer vacation, I would stop to visit him in Krakow, Poland, where his father was a librarian at the university.

W. E. B. Du Bois' Discovery of the Jewish question

I visited southern Germany through Switzerland and Italy, and then via Venice and Vienna, through Austria and Czechoslovakia, I arrived in Poland. During this trip, I was faced with a new race problem. Starting from Budapest, Hungary I had crossed to a small town in Galicia, where I intended to spend the night. The driver looks at me and asks me if I wanted to stop "unter die Juden [2]" the Jews "[NdT]". I was a little puzzled, but I said "yes." **It has thus made a small Jewish hotel in a narrow street, away from the central road. There I became aware of another problem of race and religion that I knew and that was the treatment and segregation of large numbers of people.** I picked my way towards Krakow, making me more and more of the problems affecting the two human groups; then I returned to college, very thoughtful about my own problem of race and its place in the world.

Gradually, I became aware of the Jewish question in the modern world and a bit of its history. In Poland I have learned very little because the university teachers and students were barely aware of this problem, the ways in which it influenced them the meaning he gave to their lives. In Germany I saw this question constantly resurface, but repressed, rarely mentioned. I remember a time in a small town where I had gone for a company visit. A German student was with me and when I realized that there was something that was wrong, he reassured me: **"They think I'm Jewish. It's not against you, it's me,"** he whispered. I was surprised. I never thought a manifestation of racial prejudice could be anything other than color prejudice. I knew the young

Du Bois continued

man was a pure German, and yet his dark eyes and her beautiful face aroused the suspicion of our friends. So I began to explore this new phenomenon which I had experienced.

Thirteen years later, I still crossed Poland and Warsaw. All was dark literal and spiritual perspective. Hitler had the power in Germany, where I remained five months and I felt the storm coming. I passed through Warsaw to go in the Soviet Union exactly three years before the horror that has befallen this city.

However, in Berlin, before I left, I felt something on the Jewish question and the importance it had acquired since my student days. I went one day to the Jewish quarter and I walked into a bookstore. Soon after, a man entered the room and asked me what I wanted. I mentioned some titles and laminated some of those he mentioned me. He said nothing, me neither. I felt his suspicion and finally I came out. I went that evening to a teacher. There were some Americans and many Germans. The curtains were carefully drawn and then the teacher began to speak. He defended the Nazi program broadly - employment, housing, road networks; but he admitted that he was ashamed of the treatment of Jews, at least some of them. He accused some but he had some Jewish friends and was ashamed of the way they were treated.

Then at midnight, I went to Poland. It was dark, not only because of the smoke, but also in the soul of the people who spoke softly while we drove slowly in the dark along the train platforms.

And finally, three years ago, I went to Warsaw. I knew something of the disorder of the world: the scream and gunshots racist riots Ku Klux Klan; the threat of the police and the courts; the abandonment and destruction of the human habitat; but nothing in my most vivid imagination could equal what I saw in Warsaw in 1949. If I had not seen it, I would have said it was impossible that a civilized nation with religious sentiments deep and prominent religious institutions, with its literature and art, can reserve for its similar treatment had been Warsaw. It was a complete destruction, planned total. Some streets were so obliterated that it was necessary to use photographs taken in the past to understand what had been their location. And nobody mentioned the number of deaths, the total amount of destruction, the crippled and crazy, widows and orphans.

True, the amazing thing was that in the midst of all these war memories and destruction, people were rebuilding the city with a simply incredible enthusiasm. A city and a nation was literally being resurrected. Then, one afternoon, I was taken to the former ghetto. I knew very little history, even though I had visited the ghettos in many parts of Europe, including Frankfurt. Here there was not much to see. There was a complete and total vacuum, and a monument. And the monument was still re-surface racial and religious issue that had so long formed my own particular problem and separated. Gradually, watching, reading, I restored this extraordinary history of resistance to oppression and evil, in total despair moments, with enemies all around: a resistance which involved the death and destruction for hundreds and hundreds of human beings; a deliberate sacrifice of their lives for a greater ideal and with the awareness that this sacrifice would be in vain.

Du Bois continued: A broader view of Negro question

The result of these three visits and, especially, the show of the Warsaw ghetto, it was not until a clearer understanding of the Jewish problem in a world more real and complete understanding of the Negro problem. First, the problem of slavery, emancipation, caste in the United States was no longer in my head, a unique and separate thing, as I had seen for so long. It was not a matter of color or physical or racial characteristics - what was for me a particularly hard thing to find, since over a lifetime the question of the color bar (color line) was a real cause and efficient misery. It was not a matter of religion. I had known of several kinds of religions - I sat in Shinto temples in Japan, in Baptist churches in Georgia, in the Catholic cathedral of Cologne, the Westminster Abbey in England. No, the issue of race that interested me was crossing the physical barriers, barriers of color, creed, status; it was rather a question of cultural training, perverted education, human hatred and prejudice that touched all sorts of people and doing infinite harm to all men. Thus the Warsaw ghetto helped me out a certain provincialism to a broader conception of the ways that the fight against racial segregation, against religious discrimination and oppression of the poor had to evolve so that civilization can spread and triumph in the world.

I remembered, now, my friend Stanislaus. He was long dead, dead for refusing to be an indicator serving the Nazis in Poland conquered. He gave his life for a great cause. A cause that eventually became wider. How he understood that behind the Polish problem there was the Jewish problem and that this constituted a crime against civilization? I do not know.

I now remember another scene, there are a half-century Poland. A religious scene in a Catholic church. The peasants stood knee each other close. They were completely covered by a powerful hierarchy. And today they are released from such bondage, they fought, fought. They see the light?

Translated from French by Eleni Varikas

Notes

[1]The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto , in Eric J. Sundquist (ed.), The Oxford WEB Du Bois Reader , Oxford University Press, 1996 [1949], p. 469-472.

[2]"The Jews" [NdT]. summary

French

W. E. B. Du Bois, "Le Nègre et le ghetto de Varsovie (1949)", *Raisons politiques* 1/2006 (no 21), p. 131-135

URL : www.cairn.info/revue-raisons-politiques-2006-1-page-131.htm.

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