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HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

The Nakba and the Legacy of the Israeli Historians' Debate

›1948‹ is a key concept in Israeli identity discourse. A signifier of the violent clashes that took place at the end of the British Mandate in Palestine (between the fall of 1947 and the spring of 1949), it encompasses both the foundation of a democratic Jewish nation-state and the destruction of numerous Palestinian communities during the Israeli ›War of Independence‹ and thereafter. The Nakba, the Palestinian catastrophe, could not be overlooked by Israel's ›generation of 1948‹ and those that succeeded it: it was present in the deserted fields and houses now occupied by Israelis, in the names of the streams, hills and roads Israelis now visited during military drills or school field trips, and in the frequent encounters with Arab ›infiltrators‹ who sought to return to their abandoned homes and lands.¹ The mass expulsion and the killings of Arab civilians by Jewish forces were regularly discussed and debated by Israeli politicians, intellectuals, journalists and artists in the ensuing decades.² Yet with few exceptions, Israeli historians and politicians have seemingly effortlessly merged these atrocities with a commonly accepted ›narrative‹ by, for example, attributing them to rogue, marginal, right-wing militias; depicting cases of expulsion as sporadic and spontaneous events; or justifying them as ad hoc measures taken against the initiators of the violence during the war.³

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- 1 For the myth-enshrouded ›generation of 1948‹, see Emmanuel Sivan, *Dor Tashach. Mythos, Dyokan ve Zikaron [The Generation of 1948. Myth, Portrait and Memory]*, Tel Aviv 1991. For recent scholarship on the silent presence of the Palestinian past in Israel, see Alon Confino, *The Warm Sand of the Coast of Tantara: History and Memory in Israel after 1948*, in: *History & Memory* 27 (2015) issue 1, pp. 43-82.
 - 2 Amal Jamal/Ephraim Lavie (eds), *Ha'Nakba Ba'Zikaron Ha'Israeli [The Nakba in Israeli Memory]*, Tel Aviv 2015.
 - 3 Arguably the most curious exception to this rule is the early study by Israel Beer, *Bitchon Israel. Etmol, Hayom, Machar [Israel's Security. Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow]*, Tel Aviv 1966. Beer, who was also a convicted Soviet spy, claimed that the 1948 war had been initiated by British colonial interests, to which the Zionists willingly adhered.

In the latter 1980s, however, several publications by academic and non-academic historians sought to challenge this consensus. The timing of this challenge was not arbitrary. Thirty years after the events, between 1978 and the mid-1980s, Israeli archives released hitherto classified documents related to the war and its aftermath. In addition, the highly controversial war against militias of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (‘The First Lebanon War’), initiated by the right-wing Likud government in 1982, and the 1987 Palestinian *Intifada* in the West Bank and Gaza (which Israel had occupied in 1967), had apparently prepared the Israeli public for more critical voices.⁴ These revisionist⁵ ‘New Historians’ did not form a homogenous group in terms of interests, methodology, or ideology. Their arguments spanned various aspects of Israeli history of the 1940s and the 1950s, including the maltreatment of Arab civilians, the poor decision-making of the military leadership, Israel’s obstructionist diplomacy, and the manipulative utilization of the Holocaust. Their different foci notwithstanding, these studies culminated in a set of claims that clearly demonstrated the weaknesses of the Zionist historiography of ‘1948’.

The subversive potential of the new historiography was immediately evident in the early works of the three most influential revisionist scholars, Ilan Pappé, Benny Morris, and Avi Shlaim. Published in 1988, their respective early studies highlighted the coordination between the Zionist leadership and the British authorities in the months leading up to the war, depicted a policy of expulsion planned and directed by the Jewish leadership, and accused Israel of having consistently obstructed attempts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict with the Palestinians.⁶ The subversive nature of these studies was not lost on many other historians and intellectuals, who accused the revisionists of having ‘conveniently’ ignored the contexts in which the events played out, of downright

4 See the survey in Mordechai Baron, Ha’Historiographia Ha’Israelit shel Ha’Sichsuch Ha’Yehudi-Aravi [The Israeli Historiography of the Jewish-Arab Conflict], in: *Zion* 74 (2009), pp. 311-337, here pp. 319-321.

5 In contrast to the traditional use of the term ‘revisionist’ in Israeli politics – a label attached to the supporters of the right-wing opposition leader Ze’ev Jabotinsky prior to 1948 – contemporary scholars use the term to indicate the aspiration of the ‘New Historians’ to ‘revise’ or ‘correct’ the established historiographical assumptions regarding ‘1948’ (and thereby to undermine the political premises of the Zionist mainstream; see Yaakov Shavit, Leumiut, Historiographia ve Revisia Historit [Nationalism, Historiography and Historical Revision], in: Pinchas Genosar/Avi Bareli [eds], *Iyyunim Betkumat Israel. Ha’Zionut – Pulmus Ben Zmanenu [Israel Studies. Zionism – A Contemporary Debate]*, Sde Boker 1996, pp. 321-336).

6 All three studies were initially published in English. Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan. King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine*, Oxford 1988; Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Cambridge 1988 (translated into Hebrew in 1991); Ilan Pappé, *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, New York 1988. These studies were promptly followed by a few other significant publications in Hebrew (some of which had appeared in English before), such as Simha Flapan, *Leidat Israel – Mythos ve Metzuiot [The Birth of Israel – Myth and Reality]*, Tel Aviv 1989; Uri Milstein, *Ha’Historia shel Milchemet Ha’Atzma’ut [The History of the War of Independence]*, 4 vols, Tel Aviv 1989–1991; Tom Segev, *Ha’Milion Ha’Shvi’i [The Seventh Million]*, Jerusalem 1991. For a general survey of the contours of the debate in the 1990s, see the special issue of *History and Memory* 7 (1995): Israeli Historiography Revisited.



An Arab resident of the Beer Sheva region (today southern Israel) talks with a Jewish member of the Kibbutz Mishmar HaNegev in November 1947, a few weeks before the outbreak of the 1948 war. Mishmar HaNegev was founded in 1946 on lands that were purchased from Arab landowners to settle Holocaust survivors and to prevent the designation of the area as ›Arab‹ in the partition plans. The photographer, Hans Pinn, was born in Berlin, emigrated to Palestine in 1938, and served in a photo unit of the British Army in World War II. After the war he worked as an independent photojournalist for various Israeli and international newspapers. Two more photos by him can be found in Annette Vowinckel's article in this issue, pp. 572-573.
(Hans Pinn [1916–1978]/Israeli Government Press Office)

falsification, and even of ›a suicidal impulse‹.⁷ Anita Shapira, one of the prominent Zionist historians of the period, pointed to the anachronism embedded in the ›post-Zionist‹ scholars' tendency to view the young State of Israel as a powerful aggressor. Shapira impressed upon her readers that this was not merely an academic debate, but rather an endeavor to revise Israeli memory and politics. The true objective of the New Historians, she maintained, was to undermine the Jewish identity of the State of Israel; therefore, while their archival findings may be important, their politics skewed their conclusions.⁸ And, in a development reminiscent of the West German *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s, the ›historians' quarrel‹ in Israel rapidly spilled over into the popular press, which furiously debated the political implications of the revisionists' arguments.

In 2018, thirty years after the groundbreaking publications of 1988 and seventy years after Israel's Declaration of Independence, I was approached by the editors of this special issue to initiate a discussion that would evaluate the impact of the abovementioned debate on current Israeli historiography. Seeking to include a variety of approaches to the challenge of the New Historians, I contacted several scholars who currently write about ›1948‹ from the perspectives of different generations and different ideological ›congregations‹: mainstream Zionists, critical Zionists, non-Zionist Jews, and Israeli-Arab historians.⁹ As expected, I received a variety of responses. Some of these took the form of more or less creative explanations as to why the scholar could not participate in the project *at this particular time*, while others plainly stated their lack of interest. With very few exceptions, the scholars I approached declined my invitation. Further correspondence with them produced the following assertions: the discoveries of the New Historians are now dated; more important, their ambition to generate a candid discussion of Israel's past is incompatible with the current, radicalized version of Israel's national identity and its political discourse. This observation is not unfounded. Yet, notwithstanding the recent efforts of the Israeli regime to suppress the memory of the Nakba and its victims, several trends in contemporary Israeli historiography (and culture) distinctly correspond with the ›new‹ historiography of the latter 1980s. Thus, in lieu of a roundtable discussion, the following is an incomplete survey of current approaches among Israeli historians to the study of ›1948‹ that seek to confront or elaborate on the arguments of the revisionists.¹⁰

7 Shabtai Tevet, Ha'Historionim Ha'Chadashim ve Ha'Toamlanim Ha'Yeshanim [The New Historians and the Old Propagandists], in: *Haaretz*, 9 May 1989; Efraim Karsh, *Fabricating Israeli History: The ›New Historians‹*, London 2000 (published in Hebrew in 1999); Aharon Megeed, Yetzer Ha'Hitabbut Ha'Israeli [The Israeli Suicide Drive], in: *Haaretz*, 10 June 1994.

8 Anita Shapira, *Politika ve Zikaron Kollektiv* [Politics and Collective Memory], in: Yechiam Weitz (ed.), *Ben Hazon le Revisia. Me'a Shnot Historiographia Zionit* [Between Vision and Revision. A Hundred Years of Zionist Historiography], Jerusalem 1997, pp. 367-391, here pp. 370, 373. See also Anita Shapira, *The Debate over the ›New Historians‹ in Israel*, in: Eliezer Ben-Rafael et al. (eds), *Handbook of Israel. Major Debates*, Berlin 2016, pp. 888-908.

9 In referring to Arab scholars who live, work and publish in Israel, labels such as ›Israeli-Arab‹ or ›Palestinian‹ have ideological baggage. I use the label ›Israeli‹ merely to note their relations to the Israeli (Hebrew) historiography and public discourse.

10 I refer here mostly to studies that have been published in Hebrew. The few exceptions, which were published in English, were nonetheless presented to the Israeli reader through book reviews, interviews with the authors, or essays in the popular press by the authors.



Arab villagers flee from their homes in the Galilee (today northern Israel) during Operation Hiram, October 1948. The photo was taken by David Eldan, born in Austria, who founded the Israeli Government Press Office Photography Department in 1948. (David Eldan [1914–1989]/Israeli Government Press Office)

1. Between Post-Zionist and Critical Zionist Historiography: Responses to the Israeli Historians' Debate

One of the most significant responses to the New Historians emerged 14 years after the original debates, voiced by none other than a prominent member of the same group (and the person who coined the term New Historians), Benny Morris. In an op-ed article he published in the *Guardian* in February 2002 titled ›Peace? No Chance‹, Morris confided to his readers that his ›thinking about the current Middle East crisis [...] has in fact radically changed‹ in the recent years.¹¹ His interpretation of the ›current crisis‹, however, is presented in the essay as a reassessment of the entire history of the

11 Benny Morris, Peace? No Chance, in: *Guardian*, 21 February 2002 (reprinted in: *Me'Deir Yassin ad Camp David. Ma'amarim Ishiim, Politim ve Historim [From Deir Yassin to Camp David. Personal, Political and Historical Essays]*, Tel Aviv 2018, pp. 25-32).

Jewish-Arab conflict. Shifting the focus away from Zionist-Israeli responsibility for the expulsion and killing of civilians in ›1948‹, Morris now declared that the Palestinian leader Haj Muhammad Amin al Husseini was responsible for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. In the ensuing years Morris elaborated on this new approach. Seeking to ›expose‹ the lies of the current Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, for instance, he rejected the latter's claim that the ›Zionists expelled the Arabs of Palestine‹, arguing that ›in fact‹ the Zionist forces had merely reacted to the well-funded Arab aggression.¹² Morris included the abovementioned piece in a recently published collection of essays, alongside disparaging reviews of Avi Shlaim's and Ilan Pappé's new studies in which he criticizes their ›non-academic shortsightedness and selective use of documents that smacks of anti-Zionist bias‹.¹³ Referring to Morris' zeal to ›correct the mistake‹ he made in his previous studies,¹⁴ the Holocaust historian Daniel Blatman compared Morris' denial of Israeli-led ethnic cleansing to the denial of a planned genocide of Jews during WWII.¹⁵ Blatman's essay indicates the importance and relevance of the New Historians to contemporary debates: what Zionist scholars considered to be a self-evident claim prior to the 1988 debate – that there was no planned ethnic cleansing in 1948 – is now compared to the outrageous denial of well-documented historical horrors.

Yet while Morris' new rhetoric resembles that of his critics in the 1980s and 1990s,¹⁶ his ›turn‹ does not bring him back into the fold of the Zionist ›narrative‹. His new publications repeatedly discuss acts of forced expulsion and cases of murder and rape of Arab civilians. Rather than concealing these atrocities, Morris now proposes two interpretive frameworks that, so he argues, alter the implications of Jewish-initiated violence. These frameworks are developed at length in Morris' comprehensive (and rather melancholic) *Righteous Victims. A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–2001* (1999).¹⁷ The broad time frame of the book highlights the first interpretive framework he advocates, namely the place of ›1948‹ in the long, brutal history of the Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine. The decisions that were made during the 1948 war, the book suggests, were the culmination of a decades-long period of violent conflict. Ever since the late 1800s, neither Jews nor Arabs had been ›righteous victims‹; neither side had shied

12 Benny Morris, Exposing Abbas, in: *The National Interest*, 19 May 2011 (reprinted in: *Me'Deir Yassin* [fn. 11], pp. 21–24).

13 Idem, Historia Revisionistit Meuvetet [Revisionist and Twisted History], in: *Me'Deir Yassin* (fn. 11), pp. 161–178, here pp. 166–167.

14 One of Morris' most influential publications was a collection of essays titled ›Tikkun Ta'ut‹ (›Correcting the Mistake‹). This title is often associated with his pro-Zionist shift, even though the essays in this collection are often suspicious of the Jewish intentions in 1948 (Benny Morris, Gerush Mivtza Hiram: Tikkun Ta'ut [The Expulsion during the Hiram Campaign: Correcting the Mistake], in: *Tikkun Ta'ut. Yehudim ve Aravim Be'Eretz Israel, 1936–1956* [Correcting the Mistake. Jews and Arabs in The Land of Israel, 1936–1956], Tel Aviv 2000).

15 Daniel Blatman, Ken, Haya Tihur [Yes, There Was an Ethnic Cleansing], in: *Haaretz*, 13 October 2016.

16 Cf., for instance, Shapira, *Politika ve Zikaron* Collectivy (fn. 8), pp. 373–374.

17 Benny Morris, *Korbanot. Toldot Ha'Sichsuch Ha'Zioni-Ha'Aravi* [Righteous Victims. A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict], Tel Aviv 2004 (first published in English, New York 1999).

away from acts of terror (although, on occasions, both had also shown mercy and empathy). 1948 was no exception. Both sides expelled and murdered civilians during the war; Jewish military victories simply afforded the Zionists more opportunities to take these actions. The second, more implicit, interpretive framework employed in the book maintains that, in comparison with parallel cases of ethno-national civil wars, Jewish violence against Palestinian civilians was an exceptionally marginal occurrence. Post-combat massacres in Deir Yassin, in the Galilee, and (possibly) in the village of Tantura are the exceptions that indicate the comparative restraint exercised by the Jewish militias and army in most other places. The order to ›encourage‹ Palestinians to leave was indeed issued, and in some cases led to the murder of civilians, but its impact on the mass Palestinian migration away from the conflict zones was marginal.¹⁸ I suspect that most of the criticism leveled against Morris' ›turn‹ does not relate to his thorough and generally unbiased portrayal of the ongoing conflict. It is rather Morris' peculiar leap from his reasonable (albeit not indisputable) narration to his moral and political justification of the expulsion of Palestinians and the violence it incurred that irks his critics.¹⁹

Derek Penslar has argued that this approach has come to dominate present-day Israeli public discourse. Guided by an individualist, consumerist ethos, the Israeli public (›with the exception of the radical right‹) is indifferent to new revelations of Jewish-initiated atrocities. Moreover, faced with the collapse of the Oslo Accord many Israelis find it easier to justify such atrocities in retrospect as a necessary means employed in the face of the Palestinians' consistent refusal to come to terms with the existence of Israel.²⁰ Consequently, according to Penslar, critical Israeli historians abandoned their painstaking attempts to unearth incriminating documents about ›1948‹ and began to produce argumentative and often speculative historical surveys offering alternative ›narratives‹ to that of Zionist nationalism. For Penslar, the prime example of this tendency is Shlomo Sand's *The Invention of the Jewish People* (2008), which is built upon facts and hypotheses that were cherry-picked for the sole purpose of ridiculing the Zionist perception of Jewish history as a story of national resurrection.²¹

18 Yoav Galber's account of the same occurrences pushes Morris' point even further: the commands and instructions regarding treatment of Arab civilians were conceived to withstand the invasion of the Arab armies. There was no plan for ethnic cleansing, since, in the thick of an existential war, the fate of Palestinian civilians in the aftermath was deemed secondary. (Yoav Galber, *Komemiyut ve Nakba – Israel, Ha'Falastininim u'Medinot Arav, 1948* [*National Resurrection and the Nakba – Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab States, 1948*], Tel Aviv 2004, p. 153.)

19 ›Under some circumstances expulsion is not a war crime. [...] when the choice is between annihilating others or being annihilated, it is better to annihilate. [...] Without this act [expulsion] they would not have won the war.‹ (Benny Morris, interview with Ari Shavit, Mechake la Barbarim [Waiting for the Barbarians' Invasion], in: *Haaretz*, 5 January 2004.)

20 Derek Penslar, *Matai ve Eich Humtza Ha'Am Ha'Yehudi ve Ketz Ha'Historia Ha'Chadasha* [The Invention of the Jewish People and the End of the New History], in: *Zion* 76 (2011), pp. 522-531, here pp. 522-523. The Israeli right wing tends to adopt a similar view, which prioritizes 1948 over 1967 and thus allegedly indicates that there can be no partition-based solution to the Jewish-Arab conflict.

21 Shlomo Sand, *Matai ve Eich Humtza Ha'Am Ha'Yehudi* [*The Invention of the Jewish People*], Tel Aviv 2008 (also published in English, London 2009).

Sand's bid to undermine fundamental Zionist myths is indeed part of an established trend among Israeli scholars.²² Yet his methodology and interests are not representative of current scholarship on the history of Zionism and Israel. Israeli scholars such as Dmitry Shumsky, Adi Gordon, and Arie Dubnov, among others, have excavated and meticulously examined pre-1948 Zionist approaches that rejected the foundation of a Jewish nation-state or warned of the perils of ethnic nationalism.²³ In line with Penslar's point about the waning interest in 1948, their studies challenge mainstream Zionist historiography without directly addressing wartime atrocities. The intriguing project undertaken by Dan Bar-On and Sami Adwan, *Studying the Historical Narrative of the Other*, appears to demonstrate yet another approach toward grappling with the alleged Israeli indifference to the facts of 1948. This publication presents, side by side, the Israeli and Palestinian perceptions of the conflict's history, proceeding from the assumption that familiarization with the subjective (and often jingoist) narrative of the Other is more effective for conflict resolution than a studious familiarity with the facts.²⁴

There are, however, some indications that Penslar's portrayal of Israelis' indifference to the atrocities of 1948 is inaccurate. It appears that, instead of unconcernedly acknowledging the wrongdoings of the past, many Israelis are still indisposed to disclose and discuss historical war crimes. The legislation of the (warmly received²⁵) 1952 Nakba Law (2011) and 1952 Nation Law (2018), for instance, was presented by the Israeli government as a means of excluding the Palestinian catastrophe from Israeli public discourse. The high-profile law suit filed against Teddy Katz, the author of an MA thesis that purported to expose a massacre conducted by Israeli soldiers in the Arab village of Tantura during the 1948 war, similarly sought to preempt the acknowledgment of a war crime.²⁶ The most influential student organization in Israel, Im Tirzu (If You Want it), launched a campaign against the teaching of Nakba history at local universities under the slogan 1948 is nonsense (1948 = Harta).²⁷ Intriguingly,

22 For instance, Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness. State, Society, and the Military*, Berkeley 2001; Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots. Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*, Chicago 1995.

23 Dmitry Shumsky, *Beyond the Nation-State. The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion*, New Haven 2018; Arie Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin. The Journey of a Jewish Liberal*, New York 2012; Adi Gordon (ed.), *Brit Shalom ve Ha'Zionut Ha'Du-Leumit. Ha'She'ela Ha'Aravit KeShe'ela Yehudit [Beith Shalom and Bi-National Zionism. The Arab Question as a Jewish Question]*, Jerusalem 2008; idem, *Toward Nationalism's End. An Intellectual Biography of Hans Kohn*, Waltham 2017.

24 Dan Bar-On/Sami Adwan, *Lilmod et Ha'Narrativ Ha'Histori shel Ha'Acher [Studying the Historical Narrative of the Other]*, Tel Aviv 2009.

25 Most non-partisan public opinion polls found that the majority of Jewish Israelis supports the 1952 Nation Law (<<https://news.walla.co.il/item/3177175>>; <<https://13news.co.il/10news/news/169230>>). A poll conducted by the liberal Israeli Institute for Democracy shows that many Israelis are nonetheless worried about the law's implications for the state's democratic nature (<<https://www.idi.org.il/articles/24309>>).

26 Dan Yahav, *Tohar Ha'Neshek – Ethos, Mythos, ve Metzivat [The Purity of the Weapon – Ethos, Myth, and Reality]*, Tel Aviv 2002, pp. 181-182.

27 Erez Tadmor/Harel Segal, *Nakba = Harta. Ha'Sifron Shenilcham al Ha'Emet [Nakba = Lies. The Booklet That Fights for the Truth]*, s.l. 2011. The name of the organization is based on a familiar statement by Theodor Herzl, the founding father of the Zionist movement, 'if you will it [the Jewish state], it is not a dream.' By using this quote, Im Tirzu seeks to mark itself as the protector of 'real' Zionism.



Israel's first Independence Day Parade in Tel Aviv, 4 May 1949
(Hans Pinn/Israeli Government Press Office)

even the academic journal *Israel Studies* took a similar position recently, suggesting that the mere use of the terms Nakba and ›Palestinian refugees‹ – as well as the criticism of ›the Jewish settlements‹ (in the occupied West Bank) – is no less than a ›crime‹.²⁸ Dedicated to confronting the ›wild misrepresentation‹ of Israel in current scholarship, parts of the Summer 2019 volume of the journal resemble the rhetoric used in Im Tirzu's campaign to delegitimize academic discussions of the Nakba.²⁹

28 Word Crimes. Reclaiming the Language of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, in: *Israel Studies* 24 (2019) issue 2.

29 The publication of the special issue instigated a heated debate, see Judy Maltz, ›Anti-BDS, Pro-Israeli Hasbara‹: Internal War Breaks Out in Israel Studies Field, in: *Haaretz* (English edition), 18 April 2019.

Israel's Ministry of Education also endeavors to keep the Nakba out of sight. The example of the state-wide matriculation exam in history is revealing. In order to receive their high school diploma, Israeli students are required to write essays on – among other topics – ›The Struggle for a Jewish State‹. In 2018, for instance, students could choose to write either on the political conflicts between different Zionist militias before 1948, or on one of the military campaigns conducted during the latter stages of the war.³⁰ Thus, the graduating student is allowed, even encouraged, to take a critical view of the Zionist ethos (by highlighting conflicts within the Zionist camp or by discussing military failures during the operations).³¹ Yet the exam leaves little room for discussion of the well-documented massacres of Arab civilians and their forced expulsion (e.g., in the aftermath of ›Operation Hiram‹ in the Galilee). The student has no need to learn about these occurrences in order to pass the exam. Simply put, contrary to Benny Morris' ›doctrine‹, which advocates knowledge without empathy, the Israeli mainstream still (or again?) works hard to remain ignorant of the details and lasting influence of the Palestinian tragedy. Tellingly, in 2010 the Israeli Ministry of Education excluded *Studying the Historical Narrative of the Other* from its curriculum.³²

2. The Nakba and the Holocaust: Toward an Empathy-Based Historiography

Three decades after the Israeli Historians' Debate, Israeli scholars of ›1948‹ confront a perplexing mix of unprecedented access to information alongside a general reluctance to break with the Zionist ›narrative‹ (manifested either through the endeavor to suppress public discussion of the Nakba or by the justification of the atrocities as a necessary and comparatively minor evil). The studies of Adel Mana offer an original response to this challenge. Mana's *Nakba and Survival* (2017) strives to enlist the empathy of (Jewish) Hebrew readers by narrating ›1948‹ ›from the perspective of the survivors‹, namely the Palestinians who remained in Israel despite the atrocities.³³ Mana does not seek to establish a ›Palestinian narrative‹. Instead, he aspires to provide

30 Chapter 3 of the final exam in history: Bchinat Bagrut be Historia [National Exam in History], Winter 2019.

31 Mordechai Baron notes that in the aftermath of the historians' debate about ›1948‹, criticism of decision-making on the battlefield – formerly silenced or explained away – has been integrated with the mainstream historiography of ›1948‹, whereas criticism of the Israeli policies towards the Palestinians has been labeled as ›post-Zionist‹ and marginalized (Ha'Historiographia Ha'Israelit [fn. 4], pp. 323-324).

32 Dov Ben Meir, Siluf History Eineno Narrativ [Historical Deception Is Not a Narrative], in: *Ynet*, 7 November 2010.

33 Adel Mana, *Nakba ve Hisardut. Sipuram shel Ha'Falastinim She'Nisharu be Haifa ve Ba'Galil (1948–1956)* [*Nakba and Survival. The Story of the Palestinians Who Remained in Haifa and in the Galilee (1948–1956)*], Jerusalem 2017, p. 50.

a factual historical survey of the events and their impact on Palestinian civilians who experienced the war as its victims. At the core of Mana's study, and the impetus for its writing, is the story of his family members, villagers from the Galilee, who were murdered and expelled in the aftermath of the abovementioned Operation Hiram. Mana refrains from presenting a united Palestinian front against the Zionists, and he acknowledges that the acts of violence perpetrated against Arab civilians were not systematic, were often disorganized, and occasionally elicited resistance on the part of the occupying Jews (both soldiers and civilians). Yet the study paints a disturbing picture of the attempt to conduct ethnic cleansing of the Muslim population in the Galilee.

For various reasons, Mana's book failed to shake historians' conventions or even to open an avenue toward a more empathic mainstream historiography of 1948. Benny Morris' reaction to the book aggressively questioned the validity of the research, the testimonies on which it relies, and its far-fetched conclusions. According to Morris, the stories of rape and murder that Mana collected from his family members – even if true – do not amount to a broader trend. Morris goes further to claim mockingly that Mana uses the expression ›massacre and expulsion‹ more often in the book than the number of the actual Arab victims of these massacres.³⁴ Thus, rather than contributing to a Palestinian historiography, Morris argues, Mana introduces the Israeli reader to conventional Palestinian propaganda.³⁵ More than it exposes some (evident) weaknesses of *Nakba and Survival*, however, this harsh dismissal of Mana's book discloses Morris' scornful refusal to integrate empathy toward the Arab victims, or even some acknowledgement of symmetry between the atrocities initiated by both sides, with the ›legitimate‹ (Israeli) historiography of the conflict.³⁶

Taking issue both with the denials of mass violence (e.g. by Im Tirzu) and with the marginalization of its implications (Morris), the most intriguing endeavor by today's critical Israeli historians takes up precisely these challenges of empathy and symmetry. Significantly championed by cultural historians and scholars of the Holocaust, the current wave of Nakba-related research in Israel aspires to link the catastrophe of European Jewry to the tragedy of the Palestinians. As Yair Oron's sober survey demonstrates, the intertwined nature of the histories of the Holocaust, the Nakba, and the foundation of the State of Israel is unmistakable, and was already noted repeatedly by the Jews in Palestine – on both the left and the right – during the escalation of violence in the latter 1940s.³⁷ Consequently, the history of the Nakba must incorporate the

34 Benny Morris, Lo Haita Medinyut shel Gerush [There Was No Policy of Expulsion], in: *Haaretz*, 18 July 2017.

35 This is a common argument against historians who maintain that Israel worked toward ethnic cleansing (see Yoav Galber, The Despair of the Radical Left, in: *Tchelet* 39 [Spring 2010], pp. 3-20). As Oron shows, in some cases this criticism is more convincing than in others (Yair Oron, *Ha'Shoah, Ha'Tkuma ve Ha'Nakba [The Holocaust, the National Resurrection and the Nakba]*, Tel Aviv 2013, pp. 45-60).

36 Morris pushes this point further in his review of Hillel Cohen's 1929: *Shnat Ha'Efes shel Ha'Sichsuch Ha'Yehudi-Aravi [Year Zero of the Jewish-Arab Conflict]* (2013): Benny Morris, 1929 – Shnat Ha'Efes? [1929 – Year Zero?], in: *Me'Deir Yassin* (fn. 11), pp. 195-204.

37 Oron, *Ha'Shoah, Ha'Tkuma* (fn. 35), pp. 107-128.

Holocaust, its memory, and its place in Israeli identity. As Alon Confino recently noted, in novels, poems, and films – as well as in numerous memoirs and newspaper articles – ›Israeli Jews never ceased to interweave the Holocaust and the Nakba‹. The question, therefore, ›is not whether we should examine the Holocaust and the Nakba side by side, but how to do it reasonably.‹³⁸

Confino does not propose to seek a symmetry between the mass murder of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe and the unsystematic violent expulsion of Palestinians. Rather, he underscores experiences of victims that were similar despite the differences, such as the loss of Jewish property in Europe and of Arab property in Palestine that resulted from widespread government-backed appropriation. Confino argues that one can draw parallels between Europe and Palestine with regard to the helplessness of the victims as well as the justifications offered by the expropriators. Studying these phenomena within a comparative framework would most likely reveal new aspects of the Nakba and of the Holocaust (and of their lasting memory). Moreover, this approach would highlight the rare cases of empathy with the victims – such as the documented refusal of Holocaust survivors to take possession of the house of their absent Arab neighbors in Jaffa after the 1948 war. Such cases of empathy, according to Confino, facilitate a new perception of the past by undermining the justifications for the Zionists' actions (e.g., the claim that the looting was a ›natural‹ reaction to an existential threat, or that Jews' loss of property in Europe and North Africa justifies the confiscation of Palestinian property).

Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg's edited volume *The Holocaust and the Nakba* (2015) makes an even more ambitious call for ›a discourse of mutual empathy‹ in the historiography of ›1948‹. Instead of focusing on the ›common ground‹ cases, such as the looting of property, they seek to consider the Nakba and the Holocaust together as two ›foundational traumas‹ of the pair of interconnected nations: ›for even if the events are very different from each other, as a memory they function in a similar manner for both peoples.‹³⁹ The contributors to this collection – Jews and Arabs – consider various possibilities of attaining a new understanding of both the Holocaust and the Nakba by examining them in tandem. Some contributors suggest that a joint discussion of the national catastrophes, regardless of the lack of symmetry between them, might lead to a new Jewish-Arab historiography.⁴⁰ Others, however, strenuously oppose the

38 Alon Confino, Kshe'Genia ve Henrik Kar'u Tigar al Ha'Historia: Ben Shoah ve Nakba [When Genia and Henrik Challenged History: Between the Holocaust and the Nakba], in: *Sicha Mekomit [Local Discussion]*, 17 March 2019.

39 Bashir Bashir/Amos Goldberg (eds), *Ha'Shoah ve Ha'Nakba. Zikaron, Zehut Le'umit ve Shutafut Yehudit-Aravit [The Holocaust and the Nakba. Memory, National Identity and Jewish-Arab Shared Existence]*, Jerusalem 2015, p. 13. English edition (with a partially different selection of contributions): Bashir Bashir/Amos Goldberg (eds), *The Holocaust and the Nakba. A New Grammar of Trauma and History*, New York 2019.

40 Amal Jamal, Nidui Atzmi Ke'Merchav Epistemology [Self-Expulsion as an Epistemological Space], in: Bashir/Goldberg, *Ha'Shoah ve Ha'Nakba* (fn. 39), pp. 147-171; Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, Walter Benjamin, Ha'Shoah ve She'elat Falastin [Walter Benjamin, the Holocaust and the Question of Palestine], in: *ibid.*, pp. 172-181.

drawing of an analogy between the two tragedies lest this lead to misinterpretation of both the Holocaust and the Nakba.⁴¹ These critics of the co-consideration of the Holocaust and the Nakba – both Arabs and Jews – warn of the constitution of a vacuous empathy that would replace history, thereby enabling both sides to escape the inconvenient picking at the wounds of the past.

3. Conclusion: The Return of History in the Age of Denial

In a slightly different context, the Israeli-Arab playwright Said Kashua offered a glimpse of what such mutual empathy-without-history may look like. His television sitcom *Avoda Aravit* (*Arab Labor*, since 2007) narrates the conflicted life of an educated Palestinian who resides with his family in (predominantly Jewish) West Jerusalem. The final episode of the second season plays out on Israel's Fallen Soldiers Memorial Day – the day that precedes the celebrations of ›Independence Day‹ – and culminates in the happy ending of a love affair between a Palestinian woman and a Jewish man (both friends of the protagonist). The main thrust of the episode, however, is the portrayal of the Jewish mourning of fallen soldiers parallel to, and as comparable with, the Palestinian mourning of the loss of homes and family members in the Nakba. Depicting Arab and Jewish suffering and loss as mirroring each other, according to Kashua's comedy, is a precondition for the peaceful co-existence of the two communities. (Symbolically, the daughter of the Arab protagonist sees images from the Nakba as she sings in a Jewish school choir about the fallen Jewish soldiers of 1948: ›But we will remember them all [...] camaraderie such as this will never let us forget.‹) The popularity of *Arab Labor* among Jewish viewers suggests that the combination of bliss and empathy could find a responsive audience in contemporary Israel. Confino believes that such willingness to accept the suffering of others could constitute a starting point for a new Israeli historiography and, perhaps, identity; yet scholars such as Elhanan Yakira and Ismail Nashef – and, arguably, both Mana and Morris – would likely dismiss this idea as a dangerous flight from history into the realm of perilous fantasy.

At first glance, Israeli historiography in the latter 2010s appears to have warded off the threat of the New Historians. The gatekeepers of Zionist historiography – from Anita Shapira to Benny Morris (and, arguably, other erstwhile ›new‹ historians)⁴² –

41 Elhanan Yakira, Ha'Shoah ben Particularism ve Universalism [The Holocaust between Particularism and Universalism], in: *ibid.*, pp. 189-205; Ismail Nashef, Al Ha'Kefiyatit ve al Ha'Odefet [On the Compulsive and on the Redundant], in: *ibid.*, pp. 298-327.

42 After publishing Ben Gurion's biography in 2018, Tom Segev took aim at a new study that associated the massacre of 51 Arab civilians in 1956 with Ben Gurion's plan to instigate the expulsion of Palestinians after 1949. Adam Raz, the author of the study, accused Segev of blindly protecting Zionist conventions (Tom Segev, Review of Adam Raz, *Tevach Kafr-Qasim. Biographia Politit [The Massacre of Kafr-Qasim. A Political Biography]*, in: *Haaretz*, 13 February 2019; Adam Raz, Response to Tom Segev's Review, in: *Haaretz*, 27 March 2019).

have produced various arguments in response to the 1980s revisionists' attempts to focus on Palestinian victimhood in ›1948‹. Morris, especially, puts forward a powerful and evidently attractive argument in favor of acknowledging wrongdoings while marginalizing (and politically justifying) their implications. The critical historians of past decades, such as Pappé and Shlaim, currently write very little in Hebrew and therefore make a negligible impact on Israeli public discourse. In the guise of a struggle against the ›threat‹ of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement,⁴³ the Israeli government and organizations such as Im Tirzu work hard to smother open discussion of the Nakba. Intriguingly, harsh criticism of the decisions and practices of the early Israeli leadership is still frequently voiced in Israeli historiography and public discourse. This critical energy, however, is now directed away from the conflict of ›1948‹ toward the ›racist‹ policies that discriminated against Mizrahi (Asian and North African) Jews in the early years of the state.⁴⁴ As some of the historians I invited to the roundtable discussion maintained, the ›Historians' Debate‹ of the 1980s and 1990s seems to be irrelevant today.

And yet, as the above survey demonstrates, the findings, arguments, and critical impulse of the New Historians gave rise to and legitimized various new approaches to, and new perspectives on, the study of Israeli history. Despite Mana's scoffing at Morris' belated ›revelation‹ of the violent expulsion from the Galilee,⁴⁵ it is hard to imagine the former's Hebrew publication of his 2017 study without Morris' 1980s onslaught against Zionist mainstream historiography. The wave of publications on alternative Zionist thought can likewise be attributed to the 1980s explorations of the systematic policies initiated by the Zionist leaders in ›1948‹. And finally, the recent endeavors to conceive a new Israeli historiography based on empathy and on comparative frameworks that interweave Jewish and Arab suffering would have been impossible without the fundamental challenge laid down by the New Historians.

43 Initiated in 2005, the BDS movement defines itself as a ›Palestinian-led movement for freedom, justice and equality‹ that seeks to ›challenge international support for Israeli apartheid and settler-colonialism‹ (<<https://bdsmovement.net>>). Rather than a coherent ›movement‹, however, the BDS comprises various groups of activists with various objectives, from protesting the Israeli violent occupation in the West Bank to eliminating the state of Israel altogether. Due to this diversity, the current Israeli government effectively denounces all BDS-related activism – including human rights initiatives and anti-occupation demonstrations – as dangerous acts that threaten the very existence of Israel. This position has also been accepted by the German Bundestag in its recent, preposterous proclamation that all BDS-related campaigns, including criticism of Israeli violations of human rights, are in fact ›anti-Semitic‹ (<<https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2019/kw20-de-bds-642892>>).

44 The most illuminating example of this trend is the current impassioned debate about the alleged abduction of Yemenite Jewish children from their families in the 1950s. (The abduction, it is argued, was coordinated by the racist state authorities, led by European Jews.) For instance: Nathan Shifris, *Yaldi Halach Le'an. Parashat Yaldei Teiman: Ha'Chatifa ve Ha'Hakchasha* [Where Did My Son Go? The Yemenite Children Case: Abduction and Denial], Tel Aviv 2019; Tova Garniel/Nathan Shifris, *Yeladim Shel Ha'Lev. Hebetim Chadashim Be'Cheker Parashat Yaldei Teiman* [Children of the Heart. New Perspectives on the Case of the Yemenite Children], Jerusalem 2018.

45 Mana, *Nakba ve Hisardut* (fn. 33), p. 21.

The Nakba and its lasting impact have always been simultaneously absent from and painfully present in Israeli identity discourse. In the aftermath of Israel's ›Historians' Debate‹, this strange duality has become more entrenched: while the events of 1948 are more carefully concealed from view, they are more visible and inescapable than ever before.

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