



معهد مواطن للديمقراطية وحقوق الإنسان
Muwatin Institute for Democracy and Human Rights



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Palestinian Emancipatory Alphabets

The New Historians

Ellan Pappé

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In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the Israeli academia has been shaken and excited by a scholarly debate on Zionism. This debate has been brought into the public arena through a number of articles in the leading press; on several occasions, it was even the subject of heated discussion in the electronic mass media. For a while it even influenced slightly the curriculum in schools and the educational system, the film industry, and other cultural media. In 2000, after the second Intifada, a reverse process began. The impact of the new history disappeared, and the academia and cultural media became even more Zionist, some would call in neo-Zionist, in their interpretation of the history and present realities in historical Palestine.

The debate in the 1990s reflected on 1948s a challenge to the official historical version of Zionism by a group of young scholars. The roots of these university challengers were twofold: political and academic.

Ever since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the official Zionist historiography has had to face competing historiographical versions. From without, there was always the counter Palestinian version: a historiographical version of the events in Palestine since 1882 until today, expressed in academic writings, literature, poetry and in the official political stances. There was also a challenge to the Zionist version from within, one which emerged in the radical Israeli left (with the Communist Party at its centre). In these leftist circles the competing version considerably resembled the Palestinian side of the story. From within, too, the right wing (Herut and Likud) had their own reservations about the official historiography written by the Labour Zionist movement. It had its own historians who glorified the role of the Revisionist underground movements, the Irgun and Stern Gan, in the struggle against the British and the Palestinians.

After 1967, different challenges were voiced by political groups. From an ethnic and socioeconomic background, a protest movement came out with criticism against the Ashkenazi establishment and Israel's social policy. This group

developed its own historical version and what happened in the early years of statehood, mainly one of exclusion and deprivation.

The Palestinians who had been left under Israeli rule in the wake of the 1948 war - the 48 Arabs - had similar grievances. They also became more insistent in their version after the 1967 war.

What is common to the claims of all these political challengers is that they were excluded from the Zionist historical narrative and that their chronicles were distorted in schools and university curricula. Their share in the national ethos - the one which is conveyed through official ceremonies or through literature and poetry - was blurred. Until the 1970s, these claims of exclusion and deprivation were expressed through poetry and literature or within the platforms of political parties; however, they were not presented as scientific claims or as based on scholarly works. Since the 1970s, quite a considerable part of these claims was examined by a small group of researchers in the Israeli academia and the result was the espousal of many of them by these young scholars. However, as will be pointed later, it was not easy in this century to sustain such positions and many of these more critical scholars left the academia or emigrated.

The particular challenge of the late 1980s and 1990s, which many call the post-Zionist challenge, was triggered by additional factors. The unsuccessful Israeli assault on Lebanon in 1982, the brutal Israeli reaction to the first Intifada in 1987 and the beginning of negotiations with the PLO shattered, at least for some, the confidence in the official version of the state.

These events produced the phenomenon known as the “new historians” which refers to a group of professional Israeli historians who worked on the Nakba.

In the late 1970s, Israel, Britain, the UN and France opened to the public documentation from 1948. A number of scholars in Israel and abroad flocked around the doors of the archives in Jerusalem, London and Washington when the first bunch of declassified material concerning the 1948 war became accessible to the public. A few years later, it transpired that from these documents emerged a new historiographical picture of the war which stood in stark contrast to the one portrayed by the educational, communicational and political systems in Israel. The new picture contradicted the collective national memory of Israel of the year 1948: a mythological and a formative year for most of the Jews in the State of Israel.

The new portrayal of the war challenged the mainstream historiographical claim that the Jewish community in Palestine was under the danger of annihilation on the eve of the 1948 war. The documents revealed a divided Arab world and a

very week, militarily Palestinian community unable to seriously threaten the existence of the Jewish community. The leadership of the neighbouring Arab countries were mainly engaged in rhetoric of protecting the Palestinians but less in proper military preparations. This exposure and analysis could be found in the work of Avi Shlaim and myself in our early books on 1948.

When the Arab League had eventually decided to send forces to the battlefield, they did not transcend the number of Jewish troops, and certainly were of a lower operational ability compared to the Jewish army facing them (although in the end of the day the catastrophe would have been worse had they not entered Palestine all together). This was a common myth in Israel that 1948 was a war between a David and Goliath, and the historian and journalist, Simha Flapan did an excellent job in refuting it and showing the balance of power for what it was.

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The myth of annihilation is also challenged by the prominent role attributed by the new historians to the tacit understanding between the Hashemites and the Jews on the eve of the war. The two sides had agreed to divide between them post-Mandatory Palestine and only failed to reach an agreement on the future of Jerusalem. The Arab Legion was the strongest and ablest of the Arab armies, and its neutralization on the Jerusalem front had tipped the balance in the Jews' favour even more. This particular aspect of the new history was covered in detail by Avi Shlaim in his book, *Collusion Across the Jordan*.ⁱⁱ

Moreover, although the Cold War had already broken out, the two superpowers of the day the USA and USSR adopted a similar policy towards post-Mandatory Palestine. They both supported the idea of a Jewish state, while opposing the Palestinian demand to establish an Arab state in all of Palestine. Even Britain was neutral in this conflict, and not hostile, as repeatedly claimed by Israeli historians. Britain supported the Zionist alliance with the Hashemites in Transjordan as the best means of safeguarding its own interests in the area and saw the alliance as the best solution to the conflict. My first book on 1948 analysed British policy and late on Avi Shlaim published a long article on the topic.

It is beyond the scope of this entry to examine why such an international atmosphere existed at the time. Beyond the obvious reason, a Western guilt about the Holocaust that “dwarfed” the just Palestinian claim, it was the accumulation of centuries of Christian antisemitic wish to get rid of the Jews in the West and create a Christian kingdom in the east.

Thus, the new historians found logical and not mystical reasons for the Zionist military success on the ground. There was advantage even against the regular Arab armies that entered Palestine on 15 May 1948 in terms of manpower and military equipment. The balance of power tipped in the Zionist favour also because of the understanding with the Jordanians and they could sustain their

military achievement due to the international support. There are all the main "new" explanations to the success of the Jewish community in the war: explanations which challenge the mainstream Zionist historiographical treatment of the Jewish success as a miraculous event.

The new history also challenges two other myths connected to the war. One is the myth of the Palestinian flight. The new historians write about mass expulsion, and report on massacres and atrocities committed by the Israelis, apart from the infamous Deir Yassin massacre. They also refute the allegation that Arab and Palestinian leaders encouraged the population to leave and wait until victory came. The first seminal work on this was written by Benny Morris.ⁱⁱⁱ It is clear from his and Palestinian historians their work that Israel perpetrated ethnic cleansing in 1948, premediated and systematic and that half of the Palestinian refugees had already been uprooted before 15 May 1948 and that regardless of the Palestinian decision to reject the partition plan, the Zionist leadership was adamant and determined to perpetrate that ethnic cleansing, whether the Palestinians accepted the partition plan or not.

Probably most important in this respect, was the paradigm shift some of them offered. It was not the war that created the refugee problem. The war was the means used in order to turn the Palestinians into refugees. I developed that concept in my book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*.^{iv}

The second myth challenged is the intransigence of the Arab world after the war, while Israel was offering peace to its enemies. According to the works of the new historians, Israel was not seeking peace while quite a substantial number of Arab leaders were willing to negotiate peace with it. This can be seen both in the work of Simha Falapn and one of my earlier books, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*.^v

The new historians point to the zeal with which Israel erased the abandoned Arab villages and turned them either into Jewish settlements or agricultural land, thus pre-empting any chance for peace with the Palestinian people. They also stress Israel's refusal to recognize the right of return granted to the Palestinians by the U.N. in Resolution 194, and Israel's rejection of that resolution's recommendation to internationalize Jerusalem and partition Palestine.

While the works of the new historians were received very well in the world and in their turn influenced the way 1948 was taught in school curricula, university courses and in films. Palestinian historians at first were justifiably annoyed that the truth about what happened in 1948 was easier for the world to accept when it was conveyed by Israeli historians, but all in all it was appreciated as positive mood.

The political elite in the West did not internalize the significance of this contribution to the struggle against the Nakba denial and it remain a topic not discussed in the “peace process” or referred to by mainstream media and politics.

In 2000, Israel shifted as apolitical system to the right, and the liberal Zionist left nearly disappeared. The peace process petered out as well and Israel became a neo-Zionist state, namely adopting even a harsher version of Zionism. Hence, the findings of the new historian were rejected, expunged from school textbooks and the vast majority of Jews in Israel did not even show basic compassion to the suffering of the Palestinian in 1948 let alone acknowledged Israel’s accountability.

But the residues are still there. An NGO called Zochrot, remembering, works in tandem with ADRID, the committee for the Internally Displaced Palestinians inside Israel, the internal refugees. They take part in the annual march of return to one of the destroyed Palestine villages and try to ensure that the Jewish society in Israel does not forget or deny. Time will tell whether the “new history” was an exceptional chapter, forgotten and insignificant or a precursor of a meaningful change within the Jewish society in Israel.

Further Readings

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ⁱ Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*, New York: Pantheon books, 1988.

- ii Avi Shlaim, **Collusion Across the Jordan** King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine, Clarendon Press, 1988.
- iii Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- iv Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oxford and New York: Oneworld Publications, 2006.
- v Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948-1951* London and New York, I.B Tauris, 1998.