



UPROOTING THE PAST

ISRAEL'S NEW HISTORIANS TAKE A HARD LOOK AT THEIR NATION'S PAST

By JONATHAN MAHLER

This past May, an Israeli journalist decided to publish an interview that he had kept buried in a notebook for more than twenty years. It was a 1976 conversation with the late Moshe Dayan, the celebrated general and Israeli minister of defense who ordered his troops to attack Syria and take the Golan Heights in June 1967, midway through the Six-Day War. For thirty years, Dayan's motives for giving the go-ahead to storm the Heights were presumed to be obvious: Syrian gunners were shelling Israel's northernmost settlements down below, and the Golan's strategic high ground was considered invaluable in protecting Israel from its most implacable enemy. In this heretofore unpublished interview, however, Dayan offered a new explanation--Israeli farmers had pressured him to go on the offensive because of the Golan's fertile soil.

To a casual American student of Israeli history, this posthumous confession has all the makings of a bombshell. In Israel, however, such rounds of historical revisionism have become nearly as commonplace as they are controversial. Over the past decade, an increasingly influential group of Israeli historians, sociologists, and journalists have dedicated their careers to shattering the "myths" surrounding the creation of the Jewish state. Like America's revisionist historians--who in the Sixties rewrote the history of the Cold War, recasting Truman and Eisenhower as aggressors who provoked their Soviet counterparts--Israel's New Historians, as they call themselves, are taking a skeptical look at the traditional Zionist narrative. In the process, they are accusing their mentors, the first generation of Israeli scholars, of distorting history to protect the country's image. The New Historians' work is not your typical academic fingerpointing--for Israel is a small, young country whose national narrative resembles a family history. In short, these intergenerational broadsides are of tremendous political importance.

"Until very recently, we did not have real history in this country, we had mythology," says Tom Segev, a journalist and author who believes that the preexisting body of Zionist historical research is so saturated with myths that "New Historians" is the wrong sobriquet for him and his cohorts; they should, he says, be called Israel's first historians.

Not surprisingly, the old guard is fighting back--and with a vengeance. They counter that the New Historians have not discovered anything new, and that, for all of their ambitious claims, their work is based on a facile or misleading use of documents. And just as the New Historians accuse the older generation of exploiting their discipline for the purposes of pro-Israel propaganda, the old historians charge that the New Historians are motivated by political concerns of their own--namely, undermining the Jewish claim to Israel.

"I'm not saying that Zionist history isn't colored by Zionism, but this new history is colored by anti-Zionism," fumes Shabtai Teveth, a historian and author who is in the midst of a [multivolume biography of David Ben-Gurion](#), one of the founding fathers of the Jewish state.

To the first generation of Israeli scholars, Palestine's early Jewish settlers were idealistic pioneers who arrived in pre-state Israel with every intention of living in peace alongside their Arab neighbors and upgrading the quality of life for all of the land's inhabitants. Years later, Zionist leaders worked furiously to help their Jewish brethren escape Nazi-occupied Europe. And when the War of Independence erupted in 1948, the narrative continues, local Palestinian Arabs left their villages not under threats from invading Israeli troops but at the behest of the Arab rulers of surrounding states who assured them they would be able to return to their homes once the Arab armies emerged victorious. As for the war itself, early histories of Zionism characterized the outcome as a major upset: Jewish David defeats Arab Goliath. It was, in short, the stirring portrait of Israel's birth that Leon Uris painted in his best-selling novel [Exodus](#) (1958)--only this tale was codified in textbooks like *The Book of the Haganah*, a history of Israel's pre-state army edited by a former minister of education, and etched into the consciousness of Israeli schoolchildren. Over the years, such collective memories have played an important role in shaping Israeli policy toward the Palestinians. If, for example, the Palestinians fled voluntarily after the Arab states declared war on Israel, why should Israel feel guilty about its reluctance to repatriate them?

Now, with the emergence of the New Historians, nearly every one of Israel's long-accepted truths is under siege. "We are trying to tell people to unlearn the past," offers Gershon Shafir, an Israeli sociologist who accuses the early Zionist settlers of exploiting local Arab workers. Most significantly, Shafir's fellow revisionists have contended that the Zionist response to the Holocaust was, at best, inadequate and that the 1948 Palestinian exodus, the historical event at the root of Israel's continuing problems with its Arab neighbors, would be more accurately described as an expulsion. The revisionist canon is diverse. But the unifying thread connecting all of these works is clear: The view of Zionism as a heroic movement for Jewish independence is better suited to hagiography than history.

THE SEEDS OF the revisionist movement were planted in the early Seventies, when the Jewish nation-building project first started to lose some of its luster. Emboldened by the Israeli victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, religious fundamentalists and other right-wingers began competing with secular Labor Zionists for the legacy of the Zionist movement. At the same time, internal tensions between Jews of North African origin and those of European descent were eroding the utopian vision of Israel as a prejudice-free place of refuge for all

Jewry. Soon, changes were afoot in the academy. At Tel Aviv University, the sociologist Yonathan Shapiro was writing critically of the leading Labor Zionist party, Mapai, questioning the depth of its commitment to socialist ideology. And at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, Baruch Kimmerling was looking at Zionism within the broad context of European colonialism, undermining the prevailing notion that the Jewish settlement of Palestine was a unique historical event. A small cadre of like-minded "critical sociologists" came together at the University of Haifa, and even brought out their own academic journal for a brief stretch.

But it wasn't until the late Eighties that the revisionist movement acquired critical mass. Benny Morris, the author of a seminal work on the Palestinian refugee crisis, [The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem: 1947-1949](#) (Cambridge, 1987) coined the term "New Historians" in a 1988 essay in the American left-wing Jewish magazine *Tikkun*. He attributes the rise of Israeli revisionism to two principal factors. The first is straightforward enough: Under Israel's Archives Law, many key Foreign Ministry documents, as well as a host of other state papers, were not available until the mid-Eighties, after a thirty-year rule had elapsed. But the more compelling explanation is that most of the New Historians were born after the 1948 war and thus grew up in an increasingly self-critical society. The majority of the old historians, by contrast, were firsthand participants in the country's nation-building effort.

"One of the main reasons that they wrote what they did was that for many of them 1948 was the golden moment of their youth," says Morris. "They were all fighting in the hills of Jerusalem, and they weren't going to besmirch that moment." Simply put, the defining experience for the old historians was Israel's triumph in the 1948 War of Independence and the accompanying rebirth of the Jewish nation. The lives of the New Historians were more powerfully shaped by the country's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the 1982 war in Lebanon, Israel's so-called Vietnam.

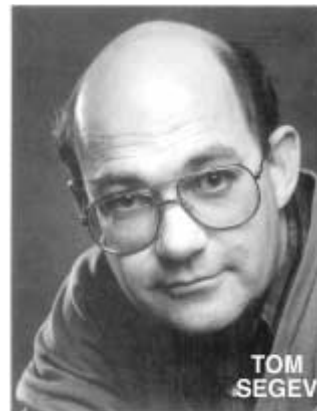
The quarrel between these two generations of historians has spilled out of Israel's scholarly journals and academic seminars and into the country's mainstream media. Morris and Segev frequently write for the Israeli press--and so do their critics. In an opinion piece in the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* in June 1994, the novelist Aharon Megged introduced a new degree of passion and urgency into the debate with his screed, "Israel's Propensity for Self-Destruction." Accusing the New Historians of conspiring to undermine the society's confidence in the justness of the Israeli cause, Megged asked rhetorically: "What is it that moves Israeli scholars to distort and make ugly the Jewish national liberation movement, whose only desire was to realize the 2,000-year-old hope to return to Zion, where both individuals and the people would 'together be resurrected,' as the poet Mane put it?"



But for all the high-flown, ideology-steeped rhetoric, there is a significant irony to the debate. The struggle between the "revisionist" historians and the older generation is often portrayed as a narrow political battle between the left (the New Historians) and the right (the old). Yet Israel's earliest leaders were ardent socialists and aggressive opponents of the right-wing Zionist movement led by Vladimir Jabotinsky. When the New Historians argue that the country's founding fathers acted harshly or treacherously in their dealings

with Arabs, this does little to trouble Jabotinsky's followers (including many members of Binyamin Netanyahu's current government), who argue that no price is too high for the establishment and continuation of a Jewish majority in Israel. It was Ben-Gurion's Labor Zionists, the forebears of today's Labor Party, who were responsible for the settlement of Palestine and who dominated Israel's political scene until the late Seventies. Accordingly, the New Historians have directed most of their critical attention to the Labor legacy. "I think the intention was to have the Labor movement and all the affiliated groups look back at what they have done and what they are doing now vis-a-vis the Palestinians," says Gershon Shafir, who now teaches at UC-San Diego. "It was felt that a new opening was possible."

OF ALL THE salvos fired at the traditional Zionist narrative, the one that has resonated most forcefully in the Israeli consciousness concerns the Holocaust. The Nazi genocide, in effect, vindicated the claims of Zionist leaders who argued that it was not possible to lead a Jewish life in the Diaspora. And yet Israel has always had a complicated relationship with the Holocaust. Many survivors (including Elie Wiesel) who came to Israel after World War II complained that they were not welcomed with open arms.



The psychological explanation for this phenomenon is complex, but there was no doubt a deep divide between the deflated Jews of Europe, the walking wounded who had narrowly escaped this unprecedented instance of persecution, and the empowered Jews of Palestine (and later Israel), who had decided much earlier to live out their lives away from Europe.

Memories of the Holocaust were largely repressed in Israeli society until 1961, when Adolf Eichmann became the first Nazi war criminal to be brought to justice in Israel. While the trial was hailed as a watershed in Jewish history, it wasn't without its critics, including, most famously, a *New Yorker* correspondent by the name of Hannah Arendt. Her dispatches and subsequent 1963 book, [Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil](#), accused Israeli leaders, and Ben-Gurion in particular, of staging an operatic trial that put anti-Semitism throughout history--not just one war criminal--in the dock. Even more controversial was her suggestion that local Jewish councils, as well as Zionist leaders, had abandoned their fellow Jews during the Holocaust. In Arendt's inflammatory words, "This role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story."

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The New Historians have picked up on this theme, blaming the Jewish leadership of pre-state Israel for not doing its part to save European Jewry. The most blistering attack came from Tom Segev, the Israeli journalist who also holds a Ph.D. in history from Boston University. (Many of the New Historians earned their graduate degrees abroad.) In his book, [The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust](#) (Hill and Wang, 1993), an immensely popular--and controversial--best-seller in Israel, Segev provides a broad sketch of the Shoah's impact on Israeli society. But the pages that garnered the most attention--and provoked the most outrage--dealt with the Zionist establishment's alleged indifference toward the Nazi genocide. Segev's argument, in a nutshell, is that the Zionist leaders were much more interested in securing the establishment of the Jewish state than in saving the lives of Europe's Jews.

Segev's main target is none other than the lion of Zionism, Israel's founding father par excellence, David Ben-Gurion. Born in 1886 in Plonsk (then Russian Poland), Ben-Gurion founded his own Zionist youth group at age fourteen. Six years later, he settled in Palestine, where he soon became a pioneer of the Jewish Labor movement and an indefatigable champion of the Jewish struggle for independence. For classical secular Zionists, Ben-Gurion was a modern-day Moses; no single individual embodied the spirit and aspirations of the movement quite as plainly. And to the New Historians, there is no one more representative of Zionists' myopic devotion to their cause. "Ben-Gurion is somebody they like to hate," charges Anita Shapira, a professor of Jewish history at Tel Aviv University and a leading contemporary historian of Labor Zionism. "If they undermine his moral standing, his integrity, his motivation, then they are on their way to undermining the whole idea of Israel."

Much of the blame that Segev allocates to Ben-Gurion is linked to an ill-advised statement that the Zionist leader made in 1938, shortly after the British government announced that it would accept 10,000 Jewish children from Germany and Austria: "Were I to know that all German Jewish children could be rescued by transferring them to England and only half by transfer to Palestine, I would opt for the latter, because our concern is not only the personal interest of these children, but the historic interest of the Jewish people." In addition, Segev recalls an interview he conducted with Ben-Gurion for the Hebrew University student newspaper in 1968. Segev claims that Ben-Gurion, who was then eighty-two, spoke about the failed attempts at rescuing European Jews in an "offhand" tone that was "almost surreal."

Segev also uses the writings of Rabbi Michael Dov-Ber Weissmandel, the founder of a yeshiva in Mount Kisco, New York, to bolster his case. Before emigrating to America in the Fifties, Weissmandel had been involved in clandestine efforts to bribe the Nazis to spare the lives of thousands of Slovakian Jews. One of the principal impediments to these efforts, Weissmandel wrote in a book published by his disciples after his death, was Zionist resistance. He claims to have seen a letter written by a Zionist field-worker in Geneva

rejecting a proposal to ask the Allied nations to help underwrite the plan. The rabbi quotes the letter from memory: "[I]t would be foolish and impertinent on our side to ask the nations whose blood is being spilled for permission to send money into the land of their enemies in order to protect our own blood. Because only through [Jewish] blood will the land [Palestine] be ours."

Needless to say, *The Seventh Million* didn't endear Segev to traditional Zionist historians. The most comprehensive rejoinder to the book came from Shabtai Teveth, who took a break last year from his monumental biography of Ben-Gurion to spin off a 250-page defense of the Zionist leader. [Ben-Gurion and the Holocaust](#), as Teveth's book is called, is to *The Seventh Million* what Jacob Robinson's [And the Crooked Shall Be Straight](#) was to Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*--that is to say, an attempt at a thorough point-by-point rebuttal. Teveth highlights the constraints that Ben-Gurion faced during World War II, including British restrictions on immigration to Palestine, while acknowledging that Ben-Gurion did see everything within the context of the struggle for Jewish independence. "This was the mark of great leadership: that in a time of darkness, total despair, and utter impotence, Ben-Gurion told his people that from their very helplessness they could draw strength," Teveth wrote. As for Weissmandel, Teveth questions the existence of the letter that the rabbi claimed to have seen and offers his own explanation as to why Weissmandel, who lost his wife and children in the Holocaust, might have lashed out at the Zionists. "He could not understand why God took away his wife and his children, but he couldn't bring himself to raise his fist against God, so he had to turn against man," Teveth says.

For his part, Teveth has been accused by the revisionists of having a penchant for hero worship. It's certainly true that he does not approach Zionist history as an indifferent observer. His cramped office in north Tel Aviv has all of the makings of a shrine to Ben-Gurion, complete with an oversized poster of the charismatic Zionist leader grinning beneath his trademark wisps of white hair and gripping the hand of his small grandson. When the War of Independence first broke out, in April 1948, Teveth, then a cub reporter at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, immediately enlisted in the Israeli army and boarded an American ship bound for his native shores of Haifa. The captain, however, decided to stop over in Beirut, where the passengers were promptly arrested and thrown in jail as prisoners of war. The American government finally managed to free Teveth and his fellow passengers, but the ship was ordered to return to New York. Teveth finally made it to Israel several months later and was assigned to the army's weekly newspaper. He now believes that the early Zionists may have been naive in thinking they could integrate peacefully into the country, but he is unbending when it comes to the movement's broader intentions. "Zionism saw itself from the outset as a just movement bearing justice and welfare to all concerned," he insists.

Still, for all of his nostalgic sentiments for the Zionist struggle, Teveth is a dogged researcher, and his work is not easily dismissed, even by revisionists. Avishai Margalit, a sociologist at Hebrew University, draws a distinction between Teveth the historian and Teveth the historiographer. While Teveth rarely fails to give an accurate account of the events in question, Margalit explains, the reader should almost systematically draw a different conclusion.

"When he tells you how marvelous Ben-Gurion and Dayan were, just discard it, it's ridiculous," says Margalit, "but with the stories, you should do something very different."

IF TEVETH FITS the profile of the old-school Zionist historian, his chief adversary among the revisionists, Benny Morris, is the quintessential New Historian. Born in 1948 and raised on a left-wing kibbutz, Morris spent several months in Lebanon during the 1982 war, both on assignment for *The Jerusalem Post* and as a soldier in the Israeli army. "It was an unpleasant and immoral war," remarks Morris, who visited a few refugee camps in southern Lebanon during the war, where he interviewed Palestinians who fled their villages in northern Israel in 1948. He was in a mortar unit during the siege of Beirut, an event that he recalls bitterly as "one of the worst things that happened during the war."

**DAVID BEN-GURION IS THE MAN
THE NEW HISTORIANS "LIKE TO HATE,"
SAYS ANITA SHAPIRA.**

Shortly after returning from Lebanon, Morris decided to write a book about the Palmach, the striking force of the Haganah. Most of the official state documents covering the years leading up to the 1948 war were classified, but he did manage to get approval to sniff around the Palmach archives. Within a few months, however, the officials in charge of the archives had a change of heart: They felt that the history of the military unit ought to be written by a former Palmachnik.

But Morris had already seen enough to inspire him to press on. However, the documents that most intrigued him did not pertain to the heroics of the Palmach; they related to the exodus of some 700,000 Palestinians from Israel over the course of the 1948 war. Like most children educated in Israel, Morris had been taught that the Palestinians had abandoned their villages because Arab leaders told them to. But Morris says the documents buried in the Palmach archives offered a starkly different explanation for the exodus: In many cases, Arabs were expelled from their villages by invading Israeli troops led by commanders like Lt. Col. Yitzhak Rabin.

He detailed his findings in [The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem: 1947-1949](#), a book whose publication coincided with the start of the 1988 Palestinian uprising--or intifada--in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza. Before the intifada (which translates as "an awakening"), Israelis had given little thought to the Palestinian refugee crisis. As skirmishes escalated between Arab youths and Israeli soldiers, however, a growing conviction took hold among Israelis that the time had come to confront the Palestinian question. That meant revisiting the circumstances of the exodus. Bound up in these recondite historical questions is a concrete political issue: Israel's Law of Return, which guarantees every Jew automatic citizenship upon arrival in the country but, to its critics' chagrin, does not apply to Palestinian Arabs who fled Israel over the course of the 1948 war.



ANITA SHAPIRA

For all of Israel's current political turmoil, most of the New Historians and critical sociologists argue that the existence of the Jewish state is now more or less secure, and thus Israeli citizenship should no longer be conferred on the basis of one's religion alone. The Law of Return, they contend, is preventing Israel from becoming a fully pluralistic and democratic society. This view has become known as the post-Zionist perspective, and it holds that whatever its accomplishments and missteps, the state-building process is now over, and the continuation of nationalist measures like the Law of Return is unnecessary, even dangerous. The ideological struggle between the Zionists and post-Zionists lurks in the shadows of Israel's ongoing historical disputes. Zionism's defenders worry that the post-Zionists are out not just to rewrite Israel's past but to alter the course of its future--or, more to the point, strip the country of its Jewish character. "The difference between post-Zionists and Zionists is that the post-Zionists don't attach any importance to Israel being the state of the Jewish people," says Shapira, whose acclaimed 1992 book, [Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881-1948](#) (Oxford), surveyed the evolution of Zionism's complicated attitude toward armed struggle. "On the contrary, they think that this is at the heart of the whole problem of our relations with the Palestinians. They'd like to find a way to eliminate the Jewish predominance in this country."

YET THE RELATIONSHIP between post-Zionism and the new historiography is a tricky one. Traditional Zionists argue that the two are, in effect, inseparable inasmuch as the New Historians approach their work through a post-Zionist lens. But some revisionists insist that one can be critical of Zionism from a historical perspective without believing that the essential project of the movement--the establishment of a Jewish state--was misguided. "To be an apologetic Zionist doesn't make you more Zionist than someone who is a critical Zionist," says Margalit, who calls himself a classical Zionist--namely, one who believes that Israel should be an asylum country for all Jews. While Margalit is persuaded by many of the critiques of the early Zionist leadership, his commitment to the movement remains unshaken. He avers: "I think it's an act of honor never to renounce Zionism. It's an act of loyalty not to renounce it but to fight for the meaning of it."

For his part, Morris chafes at the suggestion that he is motivated, or even influenced, by ideological concerns. "I'm not a post-Zionist, I'm a historian," he says indignantly. "I didn't invent the term post-Zionism and I don't use it." While he stops short of denying that historical writing has political implications, he argues that it is his responsibility as a historian to ignore them. "I was aware that people would distort what I was saying," he says, "but a historian can't be held accountable for what he writes or he won't write the truth." An overweening sense of political mission, Morris adds, is precisely what prevented Israeli historians from telling the whole story during the height of the country's propaganda war with its Arab neighbors in the Fifties and Sixties.

Morris complains that these same unreconstructed Zionists still control the Israeli academy and offers his own career as proof. He

started looking for a teaching job in 1988, shortly after publishing his first book; it wasn't until the beginning of this year that he managed to get a position at Ben-Gurion University, whose reputation is not on par with either Hebrew or Tel Aviv University. "I was ostracized by Israeli universities," says Morris. "People felt that my work would endanger their own academic reputations. I was saying that Israeli historiography was propaganda, and I was branded subversive."

ARE MORRIS'S fears justified? That depends on whom you ask. Baruch Kimmerling, a sociologist at Hebrew University, answers in the affirmative. "In the past four or five years, an almost coordinated campaign on the scale of a McCarthyistic witch-hunt has been waged against academics in Israel who do not accept the basic ideological premises of mobilized research or who are critical of some of the paradigms of the elder generations," he says. And Ilan Pappé, a post-Zionist professor of political science at Haifa University, attributes his failed attempts to get a post at Hebrew University to this same campaign.

The old-school Zionists' impression of the academic establishment couldn't be more different. The prime minister himself, Binyamin Netanyahu, has blasted Israel's universities for their pro-Palestinian tendencies and has pledged to support the creation of alternative institutions. The premier's own father, a renowned historian of medieval Jewry who is a professor emeritus at Cornell, says he left Israel because his right-of-center perspective prevented his getting tenure at any universities there. Some Zionist scholars ascribe the professional difficulties faced by Morris and his colleagues to the shallow nature of their work. "On the whole, the historical knowledge of Benny Morris--not to mention others less scholarly than he--is very limited," says Shapira, who contends that the very term "the New Historians" is a misnomer for a group that has done little more than recycle the arguments presented in anti-Israel communist brochures in the Fifties and Sixties. "They are interested only in diplomatic documents, and from my point of view these are not the most important documents because they reflect one field of historical knowledge."

Perhaps Morris does not always meet his own strict standards of historical objectivity. In his aforementioned essay in *Tikkun*, he speculated that the new historiography "may also in some obscure way serve the purposes of peace and reconciliation between the warring tribes of that land." That said, he is generally seen as a first-rate, even tireless, researcher, and his book on the refugee crisis is, at least on the surface, a straightforward work of positivist history. It was an ambitious undertaking by any measure; Morris sought to use only original Israeli documents (he deemed interviews too unreliable) to explain how and why some 600,000 to 760,000 Palestinian Arabs became refugees between December 1947 and September 1949. Did they flee or were they pushed?

The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem offers no simple answer to this question. The picture that Morris paints varies from town to town, depending on such factors as strategic importance, Israeli commanders, and, of course, timing. He divides the exodus into four waves, with the first, December 1947 to March 1948, representing a largely voluntary, if uncoordinated, flight of upper-class families from cities like Haifa and Jaffa. He concludes that the inhabitants of Nazareth were earmarked for gentle treatment from the start because of the town's importance to the world's Christian community. But in

July 1948, Morris writes, some 50,000 to 60,000 Palestinians were expelled from Lydda and Ramle, neighboring Arab villages that lie along the road that connects Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The orders of expulsion, he reveals, were issued by none other than Lt. Col. Yitzhak Rabin, who recognized the threat that the two towns posed to communication lines and Jewish traffic.

**BENNY MORRIS STRIVES TO ANSWER
A SIMPLE QUESTION ABOUT THE
PALESTINIAN REFUGEES: DID THEY
FLEE OR WERE THEY PUSHED?**

The overall conclusion that Morris reaches is that both parties are to blame for the refugee crisis: "The Palestinian refugee problem was born of war, not by design, Jewish or Arab. It was largely a by-product of Arab and Jewish fears and of the protracted, bitter fighting that characterized the first Israeli-Arab war; in smaller part, it was the deliberate creation of Jewish and Arab military commanders and politicians." It's a nuanced judgment that hardly seems controversial. But the impassioned reactions to the book and to Morris's scholarship in general--from old-school Zionists, other New Historians, and Arab scholars alike--suggest otherwise. Indeed, they underscore just how charged this debate has become.

"Benny Morris is ferociously anti-Zionist," says Teveth, who accepts that Israel is partially to blame for the refugee problem but argues that Morris's evenhanded conclusion is just a disguise for accusing Israel of what we would now call ethnic cleansing. Teveth took on Morris first in a stinging three-part critique in *Ha'aretz*, and later in an essay in *Commentary* magazine, the ideological antithesis of *Tikkun*. In Teveth's view, Morris is unwilling to acknowledge that when Israel expelled Palestinian Arabs, "it did so because they were enemies whose interests lay in abetting the invading Arab armies." Where Morris says he was unable to divine any pattern in the Arab flight, Teveth insists that Morris simply didn't want to admit that the first flight of 75,000 Arabs was ordered by Arab leaders. To buttress his case, Teveth relies on the 1961 testimony of--who else?--Ben-Gurion, who told the Knesset that "we have explicit documents testifying that [the refugees] left Palestine following instructions by the Arab leaders, with the Mufti at their head." Those "explicit documents," Teveth continues, are intelligence reports from the Haganah and its successor, the Israeli Defense Forces. What's more, he notes, Morris himself quotes from them extensively, "though in a highly biased fashion."

But what vexes Teveth most are Morris's attempts to show that "transferring" Arabs from Palestine to neighboring countries was a part of the Zionist plan from the get-go--an argument that, if true, would indeed cast a shadow over the whole Zionist project. Morris pins much of his case on declassified memoranda written by an early Zionist figure, Yosef Weitz, who headed a 1937 committee formed to study the possibility of transfer. "He makes out of Yosef Weitz a kind of Mengele of Zionism," sputters Teveth, who goes on to question Weitz's importance within the Zionist leadership while explaining that the "transfer committee" was disbanded in 1938, after deciding that a population exchange would be impractical.

But "ferociously anti-Zionist" to one Israeli historian is not anti-Zionist enough to another; Morris has endured criticism for

being too soft on Zionism from some of his revisionist cohorts, most notably Ilan Pappé. "Given the evidence that he presents," says Pappé, "it's surprising that he does not conclude that there was a master plan for the expulsion of the Palestinians." Moreover, Pappé argues that it is naive, if not disingenuous, for Morris to claim there is no connection between history and ideology. "At least in the Israeli-Palestinian context, the pretension of professional historians of being objective or neutral is, to my mind, ridiculous," remarks Pappé. According to him, the historical documents speak in different ways to different people; call him a postmodern post-Zionist. He believes that Israeli historians should state clearly their political affiliations before presenting their research and even sets an example in this regard, speaking openly about his membership in the Hadash, Israel's communist party.

**THE NEW HISTORIANS HAVE FACED
STINGING CRITICISM FROM TRADITIONAL
ZIONISTS AND PALESTINIAN SCHOLARS ALIKE.**

Pappé's own view of the Palestinian exodus--that it was part of a premeditated master plan--is closer to that of the bulk of Palestinian scholars, including Nur Masalha, an honorary fellow at the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the University of Durham, in England. Masalha credits Morris with helping to change the terms of the debate on the Palestinian question, but, like Pappé, he sees a discrepancy between the evidence Morris presents and the conclusions he draws. In a 1995 review of Morris's book *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Masalha chides Morris for making distinctions between "outright expulsion" and the use of "various military pressures and psychological means" to prompt people to flee. He goes on to fault Morris's "inadequate command of Arabic" and suggests that he "seems hardly aware of the growing body of Palestinian oral history."

For the most part, Morris and his cohorts have elected not to draw on the emerging canon of Palestinian scholarship, a body of work that in its impassioned style often recalls the early Israeli lesson books that Morris grew up reading. Rashid Khalidi, a well-known Palestinian scholar who directs the Center for International Studies at the University of Chicago, acknowledges that it is difficult for Palestinians to write objective history at a time when their future as a people is not secure. Nonetheless, he argues that Morris's book on the refugee crisis did little more than put an Israeli imprimatur on what Palestinian scholars have been saying for years. And like Masalha, he faults Morris for taking an Israeli-centric approach to the exodus. "The Palestinians are written out as the subject of this," complains Khalidi, the author of [Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern Consciousness](#) (Columbia, 1997). "He doesn't deign to dignify these people with a voice."



Still, such critiques are mild compared with those Morris has faced from the Zionist establishment. To old-school Zionists like Teveth and Shapira, post-Zionism and the adversarial ethos reflected in the

work of the New Historians represent something far more menacing than the evolution of a political and ideological movement. Indeed, they signal a loss of faith in the intrinsic value of the Zionist enterprise and, consequently, nothing short of a crisis for the Jewish state. In their view, the clash between New Historians and old, Zionists and post-Zionists, is symptomatic of a society being torn apart at the seams. It is certainly the case that Israel's recent public debates over how to approach its past have been nothing short of bitter: Witness the flap over Netanyahu's decision not to release a government-commissioned report confirming that Israeli soldiers had killed forty-nine Egyptian prisoners of war back in 1956. Or consider the recent controversy over a Jerusalem high school teacher's refusal to take his students to Masada, the ancient Jewish city whose inhabitants committed suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Romans.

But, paradoxically, there is another way to interpret this internal combustion: One hundred years after the birth of political Zionism and fifty years after the declaration of the Jewish state, Israel is becoming a normal nation, one that can conduct a freewheeling, no-holds-barred debate about its past. "Part of what it means to be a Zionist is to inhabit a free country and to be able to write history without apologetics," observes Margalit. "In my view, we are now a free people and should be free to write history in an open and critical way."

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