



**GET 4 WEEKS FREE**  
THE NEW REPUBLIC DIGITAL  
SUBSCRIBE NOW

SEARCH

 

ADVANCED SEARCH

SUBSCRIBE TO TNR

THIS WEEK IN PRINT

CAMPAIGN '04

ECONOMY

FOREIGN DISPATCHES

IRAQ

DIGITAL ARCHIVE

LETTERS

NEWSLETTERS

ABOUT



DOWNLOAD THIS ISSUE

GIVE THE GIFT OF TNR

MEDIA KIT

**TNR/ON**  
The New Republic's  
Symposium  
on Public Policy

**Politics by Other Means**  
by Benny Morris

1 | 2 | 3

Post date 03.17.04 | Issue date 03.22.04

- Printer friendly
- E-mail this article

**T**his has been Pappé's political evolution. *A History of Modern Palestine* is a milestone in his evolution as an historian. He sets out to tell the story of Palestine, which he far less frequently also refers to as the Land of Israel, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, starting with Napoleon's invasion in 1799. It is mainly the story of two peoples--Arabs and Jews--and the interaction between them. Needless to say, a great many pages are devoted to the development of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; but Pappé is at pains, as he tells us in his foreword, not to confine himself to the usual tale of high politics and military history--to the thoughts, the words, and the actions of leaders and generals. In keeping with the politically correct norms of the profession in the contemporary West, he focuses, rather, on "the victims" of "the invasions, occupations, expulsions, discrimination and racism" to which Palestine has been subject. His "heroes," he says, are the "women, children, peasants, workers, ordinary city dwellers, peaceniks, human rights activists"--and his "'villains' ... the arrogant generals, the greedy politicians, the cynical statesmen and the misogynist men."

It goes almost without saying that Pappé's "victims" are primarily Palestine's Arabs; and all, or almost all, of the "greedy" and the "cynical" are Israelis. In fairness I should add that he does dish up some "misogynist" Palestinians, which is not surprising, given the fact that in Arab and Islamic societies women are by tradition, and often by law, third-class members, who often lack basic rights (in some countries they have no vote, in others they cannot drive cars, and so on). In this respect, Palestinian society is similar to Syrian or Jordanian or Egyptian society, but Pappé papers this over by repeatedly pointing to the continuously "improving" nature of Palestinian women's status at certain points in time--for example, during the two Palestinian intifadas or rebellions against Israel.

Unfortunately, much of what Pappé tries to sell his readers is complete fabrication. In trying to demonstrate women's growing political involvement (and, incidentally, Israeli beastliness), he tells us at one point that "one third of the overall [Palestinian] casualties [in the intifada of 1987-1991] were women," and that "rural women" took "a central role,

Get **4**  
**FREE**  
ISSUES  
OF  
THE NEW  
REPUBLIC  
DIGITAL



ELSEWHERE IN POLITICS

Sign up for  
TNR Online's  
Politics  
newsletter

Marc Racicot:  
Not quite ready  
for prime time.

Bush's tax cuts  
versus the war  
on terrorism.

John Kerry's

boldly confronting the army." Among urban women, the proportion of participants in the intifada was even higher, he says. All of this is pure invention. In fact, women constituted about 5 percent of the Palestinian casualties in the first intifada. According to B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights group, eleven hundred Palestinians died at the hands of Israeli army and security personnel during that uprising, and of these, fifty-six were women. Even a cursory glance at film footage of the intifada's riots shows that there were generally no female participants. Women did make an appearance, in small numbers, when pleading with soldiers not to take away arrested men for questioning or when mourning male casualties lying bloodied in the streets; but the women remained remarkably absent from the front lines of the intifada--as they remained, and still remain, absent from the front lines of the current intifada and from the coffee shops of the West Bank and Gaza and other venues where serious matters in the Arab Middle East are discussed, and sometimes decided. Indeed, the recent surge in Islamic fundamentalism in Palestinian society has restricted women even more firmly to hearth and home than was the case before the 1970s. Arafat, with his good sense for public relations, inducted two women--Hanan Ashrawi and Umm Jihad--into the political elite, and Arafat's Fatah has dispatched a handful of female suicide bombers into Israel's cities, but these are token representations of a gender that is essentially disempowered in Palestinian society.

Pappe's periodic insertion of women into the unfolding history is artificial, often absurd, and occasionally without foundation in the sources. He tells us--without offering any source or concrete example--that, following the Young Turks' reformist revolution in Istanbul in 1908, "women [in Palestine] too--but the elite only--began attempting to change their lives.... They organized on a gender basis for the first time." Organized what? He doesn't tell us. And then he adds: "True, only among the Zionist immigrants did women actually work--but even here rhetoric was more abundant than fundamental change in gender relations." In other words, after completely inventing a small feminist revolution among Palestinian women, Pappe, implicitly admitting that nothing of the sort occurred, goes on to assail the Zionists for being no better. The comparison is ridiculous. While women were certainly discriminated against in the workplace and in wages, they have always been full citizens in the Zionist community: they worked in the fields and factories, and they voted for candidates in the Zionist institutions, and they were elected to office. There was nothing comparable in pre-1948 Palestinian Arab society.

Since contemporary historiography apparently requires it, Pappe also injects children into Palestinian social history. Children were always there, of course, but very few sources discuss them, and their impact on the development of Palestine, at least until the intifadas, was probably insubstantial. Yet a politically correct historian worth his spurs cannot exclude them, and so Pappe writes: "It is also possible to say that 1908 marked a new beginning for

strategy for the military vote.

BOOKS & THE ARTS

Sign up for TNR Online's Books & Arts newsletter

American historians v. American founders

*Spartan* is Mamet's take on the political thriller; *Good Bye, Lenin!* dithers between tragedy and satire.

An argument for gray suits, mass consumption, and book clubs.

children in Palestine." What he means by this assertion, or on what he bases it, is never elucidated. Did children suddenly get the vote? Did they get more candy? Did they cry less? Pappé does not say. What he does say is that in the Palestinian Arab school system corporal punishment continued to be the norm through the first half of the twentieth century. He also assumes that, since the Young Turks revolution of 1908 led to an increase in education throughout the Ottoman Empire, there must have been more or better schooling in Palestine too, hence the improvement in the lot of Palestinian children. (But if children were being routinely flogged in the schools, perhaps an increase in schooling--if this in fact occurred--would not necessarily have been a good thing.)

Keeping up with historiographical fashion leads to confusion. Nations and nation-states are retrograde and nasty, almost by definition. At the outset of his book Pappé informs his readers that he intends to "de-nationalize" the history of modern Palestine: a worthy postcolonial or at least postmodern goal. But how does one "de-nationalize" what is essentially a history of a conflict between two nations or peoples? One strategy, seemingly--it is the one Pappé adopts--would be to focus on the economic and social developments in Palestine rather than on the country's politics. But alas, here, too, the historian immediately comes up against the "national" problem, inasmuch as Palestine's two national or ethnic communities essentially developed and grew separately, on national lines. Indeed, by the 1920s they had even spawned two separate "national" economies.

Pappé recognizes the trap almost as soon as the word "de-nationalize" escapes his lips, and in mid-paragraph he dexterously switches gears, telling his readers that, at the least, he intends to "bi-nationalize" his history: unlike many of his predecessors from the Zionist and Arab camps, he will tell Palestine's history from both the Palestinian Arab and Israeli Jewish perspectives. And as the book unfolds, Pappé describes the separate socio-economic and political development of each people at each stage of the country's history before reviewing their interactions.

**I**t all sounds very reasonable and very tolerant, but in fact *Modern Palestine* is really the story of one people, the Palestinians, who, according to Pappé, unequivocally "turn towards ... nationalism" in 1912 (most historians would place this "turn" a bit later, in the 1920s and 1930s). They are put upon and invaded and subjugated and in part exiled by another people, an invading people, the Zionist Jews. Pappé barely mentions the Jewish habitation of, and rule over, Israel during the thousand years between Joshua's invasion and the crushing of the Bar-Kochba Revolt against Rome in 135 C.E. And while he mentions the causes that during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries propelled a fraction of the Jewish people to head for the land in the Levant--anti-Semitic discrimination and violence in the

Christian, and later the Muslim, world--Pappe's heart is clearly not in it. He sees the "invasion" and the inevitable clash solely from the Arabs' perspective.

In Pappe's account, there is no faulting the Palestinians for regularly assaulting the Zionist enterprise--in 1920, 1921, 1929, 1936-39, 1947-48, the late 1960s and early 1970s, 1987, and 2000--as there can be no criticizing them for rejecting the various compromises offered by the British, the Americans, the Jews, and the world community in 1937, 1947, 1977- 1978, and 2000. The Palestinians are forever victims, the Zionists are forever "brutal colonizers." To his credit, Pappe wears his heart on his sleeve. There is no dissembling here. He even tells us in his acknowledgments--as if he cannot wait to inform his readers of his loyalties-- that while his "native tongue is Hebrew," "today [he] converses more and more in Arabic," and his "love of the country [Palestine]" is matched only by his "dislike of the state [Israel]."

**T**ony Judt once described in these pages an encounter with students in a graduate seminar in modern European history in an American university:

After some probing ... [the] students would start to confess that they were actually in a state of panic. To be sure, they could expatiate at length on theories of nationalism. They had mastered the disputes surrounding the nature of fascism or the gendered impact of industrialization. They knew how to "explain" history.... But they had not the foggiest notion what happened, when it happened, who did it, or why.

They simply did not know history. Judt could almost have been describing Ilan Pappe, his colleague in the "one-state solution." Pappe, too, is mortally ignorant of the basic facts of the Israeli-Arab conflict. This book is awash with errors of a quantity and a quality that are not found in serious historiography. And, in Pappe's case, it is not just a matter of sloppiness or indolence in checking facts; the problem goes deeper. It can almost be called a deliberate system of error.

The multiplicity of mistakes on each page is a product of both Pappe's historical methodology and his political proclivities. He seems to admit as much when he writes early on that

my [pro-Palestinian] bias is apparent despite the desire of my peers that I stick to facts and the 'truth' when reconstructing past realities. I view any such construction as vain and presumptuous. This book is written by one who admits compassion for the colonized not the colonizer; who sympathizes with the occupied not the occupiers; and sides with the workers not the bosses. He feels for women in distress, and has little admiration for men in command.... Mine is a

subjective approach....

For those enamored with subjectivity and in thrall to historical relativism, a fact is not a fact and accuracy is unattainable. Why grope for the truth? Narrativity is all. So no reader should be surprised to discover that, according to Pappe, the Stern Gang and the Palmach existed "before the revolt" of 1936 (they were established in 1940-1941); that the Palmach "between 1946 and 1948" fought against the British (in 1947-1948 it did not); that Ben-Gurion in 1929 was chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive (he was chairman from 1935 to 1948); that the Arab Higher Committee was established "by 1934" (it was set up in 1936); that the Arab Legion did not withdraw from Palestine, along with the British, in May, 1948 (most of its units did); that the United Nations' partition proposal of November 29, 1947 had "an equal number of supporters and detractors" (the vote was thirty-three for, thirteen against, and ten abstentions); that the "Jewish forces [were] better equipped" than the invading Arab armies in May, 1948 (they were not, by any stretch of the imagination); that the first truce was "signed" on June 10, 1948 (it was never "signed," and it began on June 11); that in August, 1948 "the successful Israeli campaigns continued, leading to their complete control of Palestine, apart from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip" (the Second Truce prevailed during August and September, and warfare was resumed only in mid-October); that the Grand Mufti fled Palestine in 1938 (he left in October, 1937); that the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was "built ... in 1920" (it was founded in 1925 and constructed during the following decades); that Tel Aviv was "founded ... on a Saturday morning in July 1907" (it was in 1909); that the late nineteenth-century Zionist pioneers known as the Biluim established "the first Zionist settlements in Palestine" (they did not), and that they "were led" by Moshe Lilienblum and Leon Pinsker (they were not); that "the Israeli Foreign Office ... translated [U.N. Security Council Resolution 242] into Hebrew in a way that implied that it did not have to withdraw from all the territories it had occupied [in the Six Day War]" (the resolution, in the authoritative English original, speaks of withdrawal "from [occupied] territories," not "the territories" or "all the territories"); that in 1979 there were "1.8 million [Palestinian] refugees" in Lebanon, and in 1982 "well beyond two million" (on both dates the number was around two hundred thousand); that Black September, the Jordanian crackdown against the PLO, took place in 1969 (it was in 1970); that the first settlements in the West Bank were established in 1968 (they were established in 1967); that there was an anti-Hashemite "uprising" in Jordan in 1956 (there were anti-Hashemite or anti-Baghdad Pact riots in Jordan in 1955, but not an uprising); that "the negotiations on Palestine's future produced [during World War I] three documents: the Husayn-McMahon correspondence, the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration" (only the last focused on Palestine's future); that "in September 1918 the north of Palestine was taken quietly [by the British army]" (it was taken in battle, the Battle of Armageddon or Meggido); that "300 Jews" and a similar number of Arabs were killed in

the Arab rioting of 1929 (just over one hundred Jews and a similar number of Arabs died); and so on and on and on.

**Next:** The book is also awash with errors resulting from the writer's ideological preferences...

1 | 2 | 3

 [Printer friendly](#)

[E-mail this article](#)

**Get FOUR FREE WEEKS  
of The New Republic.**

[Home](#) | [Politics](#) | [Books & the Arts](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact TNR](#) | [Subscriber Services](#)  
Copyright 2004, The New Republic