

Making History

Israel's "new historians" have come of age. It was scarcely a decade ago that books such as Benny Morris' *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (1987) and Tom Segev's *The Seventh Million* (1991) appeared, heralding the arrival of a cadre of young Israeli historians radically at odds with the way that previous scholars had recounted the story of Zionism. In particular, the new historians painted a highly unflattering picture of Israel's founding, centered around the Zionist leadership's mistreatment of the Arabs during and after the War of Independence (Morris) and its errors of omission and commission towards the victims and survivors of the Holocaust (Segev). At the time, the new perspective on Israel's past was generally dismissed as a fringe phenomenon, and only a handful of names were associated with it. Since then, however, scholars openly identified with the new history—and with the similar treatment of Zionism in disciplines such as political science, sociology and philosophy—have grown appreciably in numbers and influence. Many of them have earned coveted tenure-track positions at Israeli universities, while their views have been widely disseminated by the Israeli media, especially in the daily *Ha'aretz* (Israel's equivalent of *The New York Times*), and most spectacularly in *Tekuma*, Israel Television's 1998 documentary miniseries on the Jewish state's first fifty years.

In the past year, however, the new historians have taken a quantum leap towards acceptance by the cultural mainstream. In July 1999, the Israel Defense Forces, through its History Division, cosponsored the publication of

The Struggle for Israel's Security, a book which the daily *Yedi'ot Aharonot* described as “shattering a number of the most splendid myths on which we were raised” (August 4, 1999), and which was particularly harsh in assessing Israel's security policy during the formative period of the 1950s. Two months later, the Ministry of Education introduced into ninth-grade classrooms across the country the first three textbooks about Israel that are part of a new curriculum aimed at teaching history from an expressly “universal” (as opposed to “nationalist”) perspective. The most radical of these texts is *A World of Changes: History for Ninth Grade*, edited by Danny Ya'akobi and published by the Ministry's own Curriculum Division, which attributes the victory of Jewish forces over five Arab armies in the War of Independence to the Jews' organizational and logistical edge rather than to determined leadership, brilliant military tactics or individual heroism, and suggests that Israel precipitated the Six Day War by acting aggressively against Syria in the months prior to the outbreak of fighting. The new history has captured the interest of a growing segment of the Israeli public as well: Tom Segev's *Days of the Anemones* (1999), an account of the Mandate period that credits the Arabs rather than the Jews with driving the British out of Palestine, has been on the *Ha'aretz* national bestseller list for thirty-one weeks, and counting—a feat unparalleled by any historical work published in Israel in the last decade and a half. (See Yehoshua Porath's article on Segev, p. 23.)

At least as impressive has been the new historians' penetration of the American intellectual mainstream—which sets the trend for the way that Israel is viewed throughout the democratic world, and which until now has remained largely immune to the trends in Israeli academia. In September 1999, New York's prestigious Knopf publishing house released Benny Morris' *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999*, a 750-page reinterpretation of Zionist history which suggests that Zionism was “tainted by a measure of moral dubiousness” from the outset, and argues that the Israeli leadership bears substantial responsibility for all the wars fought since 1948. The following month, W.W. Norton published *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World Since 1948*, a 670-page tour of the last half-century

authored by Avi Shlaim, an Israeli-born “new historian” who teaches at Oxford. Shlaim’s conclusions, though presented in a less scholarly manner than those of Morris, are similar in substance. Many of America’s leading opinionmaking publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Republic*, *Commentary*, *Foreign Affairs* and *The Weekly Standard*, devoted lengthy reviews to these iconoclastic works, making them the most widely discussed books on Israel to appear in the English-speaking world in the past decade.

Clearly, the new historians can no longer be dismissed as a fringe group. Moreover, many of the facts they present concerning errors made by the Zionist movement cannot be denied by fair-minded readers. At the same time, however, their conclusions often seem tailor-made to undermine the very legitimacy of those Israeli leaders most centrally associated with the establishment of the Jewish state—especially Labor stalwarts like David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Dayan, Yigal Allon and Golda Meir. And while the main targets of the new historians’ animus are no longer alive, the assault on the legacy of Zionism poses a grave threat to Israel’s future. No nation can retain its basic vitality if its entire historical narrative comes to be seen in the public mind as a long series of moral failings compounded by errors of judgment. And to this point, it is far from clear that Israeli intellectuals have succeeded in mounting an effective response to this challenge. How, then, should those who on balance have a favorable view of Zionism’s first century respond to the new historians?

The first step is to recognize that the new historians’ main contribution to the debate over Zionist history is not one of facts, but of *perspective*. Of course, this is not the way they have sought to portray themselves. Since Benny Morris first coined the term “new historians” in an article that appeared in the November 1988 issue of *Tikkun*, he and his colleagues have claimed that what distinguishes them from their predecessors is the willingness and ability to unearth the inconvenient facts of Israeli history. They have

argued that their authority to rewrite Zionist and Israeli history was based in large part on the opening of Israel's state archives (like other democracies, Israel follows a thirty-year rule for the declassification of documents, which means that most primary sources on the 1948 War of Independence first began to be made available to the public in the late 1970s). And indeed, many of their more impressive works have appeared in the wake of the declassification of the relevant documents: The initial spate of publications about the War of Independence was followed in turn by books and articles excoriating what the new historians perceived as Israel's high-handed immigration policies of the early 1950s, its aggressive cross-border raids of the early and mid-1950s, its imperialist war with Egypt in 1956, and its discriminatory social policies of the early 1960s.

But while some of the sources presented by the new historians had previously been untapped, the factual core on which they based their findings was far from original. Avi Shlaim's *Collusion Across the Jordan* (1988) covered material much of which had been familiar to Israeli historians for over a decade, and whose major components Dan Schueftan had already explored in *A Jordanian Option* (1986). The depiction of the Zionist leadership's response to the Holocaust in Segev's *The Seventh Million* (1991) likewise added little to the research on which Dina Porat had based her *Entangled Leadership* (1986). What made the new works highly controversial was therefore not the facts they presented, but the perspective from which they were written, which was characterized by a markedly more negative evaluation of Zionist leaders than that reached by previous Israeli historians. Shlaim, for example, took the well-known story of contacts between Ben-Gurion and King Abdullah of Jordan before and during Israel's War of Independence, embellished it with additional material from the archives, and wrote a sensationalized account premised on the notion that this strategic partnership was illicit "collusion."

In considering the impact of the new historians' perspective on their scholarship, it is appropriate to begin with Benny Morris, if only because his research and writing are often cited, with some justification, as being of a higher quality than that of other partisans of the new history. In *1948 and*

After: Israel and the Palestinians (1994), Morris acknowledged that his research agenda was shaped by political opinions that were at variance with those held by earlier historians (“the political views of the new historians and current political concerns were among the factors that led these historians to research particular subjects”). His often extreme use of language is likewise a reflection of perspective: In his November 1988 *Tikkun* article, Morris raised the possibility that Israel “was besmirched by original sin” due to the manner in which the Jewish state had come into being. Last year, he went even further, describing the Zionist leadership’s treatment of the Palestinian Arabs during the War of Independence as “a variety of ethnic cleansing.” (Roy Gutman and David Rieff, eds., *Crimes of War: What the Public Should Know*, 1999, pp. 28-37.)

These are not “facts” that one discovers in recently opened archives. They are indicative of profound moral evaluations, which may or may not have been shaped by some formative archival experience. It is such evaluations which have allowed Morris and others to write a sweeping new narrative of Zionist history that goes far beyond anything suggested by the revelations of recently declassified documents. Thus Morris’ latest book, *Righteous Victims*, argues that Zionism was from the outset “a colonizing and expansionist ideology and movement,” which was infected by “the European colonist’s mental obliteration of the ‘natives.’” It is this damning characterization that permits him to conclude that the Zionists reduced the Arabs to “objects to be utilized when necessary,” rather than human beings with legitimate aspirations.

Needless to say, someone else examining the facts Morris presents might easily describe these matters differently. But once seen from such a perspective, the factual landscape of Israel’s history—both the “new” facts and those that have been known for decades—immediately takes on an ugly slant that no amount of arguing over the facts can set aright.

Unfortunately, the response of Israel's mainstream cultural leadership has been less than inspiring. Efforts to take on the new historians have frequently missed their target, precisely because they have mistaken the broad assault on the Jewish nationalist perspective on history for an argument about facts. Typical of this problem is Efraim Karsh's *Fabricating Israeli History*, which was published in English in 1997 and first translated into Hebrew last year. While Karsh does succeed in showing that some of the claims put forward by new historians such as Morris and Shlaim are based on sloppy archival work, if not deliberate falsification of the sources, the points on which he goes to the mat with them are peripheral to their central theses. He takes Morris to task, for example, for distorting the evidence in trying to show that from the mid-1930s on, Ben-Gurion and the mainstream Labor Zionist leadership favored the wholesale transfer of Arabs from the areas of Palestine slated for a Jewish state. Yet even if Karsh is right on this point—which he almost certainly is—Morris' main claims about Israeli actions during the War of Independence remain unaffected. Moreover, when Karsh presents his own interpretation, which seeks to vindicate the Zionist leaders, his elaboration of their motives is so implausible as to all but ruin his case. For example, Karsh insists on taking at face value speeches in which Ben-Gurion waxed poetic over his desire for idyllic relations with the Arabs—a desire which may have been sincere in the abstract, but which were frequently at odds with the hard-nosed character of his policies.

To compete effectively, scholars who do not share the new historians' ideological predilections must set as their primary task the formulation of an appropriate perspective from which Israeli history can be understood. And this means, first and foremost, a clarification of the moral standards by which the actions undertaken by the Zionist leadership are to be judged. Underlying much of the work of the new historians is the unspoken premise that the wielding of power necessary to found and defend a state is morally problematic in general, and especially so in the case of Israel. This premise leads them to take a magnifying glass to those cases in which the Zionists' use of power

led (or may have led) to the suffering of others—both Arab and Jew—while downplaying the circumstances that rendered those actions necessary. In responding, it is necessary to articulate and defend a competing set of premises, which more faithfully reflect the proper application of morality to politics: That the behavior of historical actors must be assessed in light of their obligation to wield power on behalf of the people whose interests they were bound to protect; that the establishment and preservation of a state for the Jewish people was not only legitimate but a moral imperative; and that Zionist leaders have generally been faced by international and local exigencies that have compelled them to make difficult choices. This, of course, does not mean accepting the idea that everything the Zionists did was right, or even reasonable. But it does make it possible to take historical facts that come to light and put them in their proper place within a narrative whose conclusions remain fundamentally sympathetic to Zionism.

We can take as an instructive example the research done by Benny Morris in *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*. Despite occasional inaccuracies, Morris' account of the subject is more detailed and accurate than anything that preceded it. If we consider the facts Morris presents, it is reasonably clear that the flight of much of the Arab population from the territory that became Israel stemmed from battles between Arab and Jewish forces, and from the fears of Arab civilians of getting caught in the fighting. The Zionist leadership, Morris' research shows, correctly understood the danger that the Palestinian Arabs posed to the nascent Jewish state, and therefore did little to prevent their departure, at times encouraging or even precipitating it through political or military actions. In fact, Morris' own research does much to disprove the claims of his recent writings that what happened during the War of Independence was "ethnic cleansing."

This is not to say that one cannot document cases of unjustified Jewish brutality. Recording and condemning such atrocities is the duty of a balanced history. But these do not necessarily warrant Morris' conclusion that from the outset, the Zionist enterprise was "tainted by a measure of moral dubiousness." The fact that Israeli troops at times used excessive force in retaliating

against terror attacks in the 1950s does not, for example, prove that Israel's counterterrorism efforts of this period were unnecessary or immoral. On the contrary, when viewed in the context of the challenges that Israel faced, and in light of how other nations responded to comparable dangers, the Zionist record remains admirable. Likewise, the fact that Holocaust survivors and immigrants from Arab countries were not always received in Israel with appropriate dignity does not fundamentally alter the picture of a Zionist leadership deeply committed to the safety and well-being of these Jews.

Rather, what these and other errors demonstrate is that practice sometimes fell short of national ideals—a fact that should serve as a reminder of the responsibility that comes with statecraft, and of the vigilance that is needed in order to prevent the exigencies of power from leading to moral corruption. Only people who believe that the Jewish state should be held to standards of purity that are incompatible with the exercise of sovereign power, or who think that such errors are representative of Israel's entire past, need fear an honest stocktaking with regard to the nation's history.

At the same time, however, it is a mistake to respond to the challenge posed by the new historians in a purely reactive manner. Because of the perspective that guides their research, the new historians invariably focus on those topics that best lend themselves to uncovering evidence of Zionism's sins, both real and imagined. If they are allowed to dictate the agenda for scholarly debate, public discourse about Israel's legacy will be reduced to a series of arguments concerning the precise degree of blame to be assigned the Jewish state in the most problematic chapters of its history. To mount a successful opposition, scholars of Zionist and Israeli history need to concentrate on producing original works that reflect the full range of significant events, and that employ a comparative perspective appropriate for describing the establishment and development of a state born under difficult circumstances. In doing so, they will necessarily give the most noble aspects of Zionism their due, without whitewashing the failures that are part of every major historic enterprise.

In describing the individuals who shaped this enterprise, there is no reason to try to cast great men and women as angels. Rather, they should be depicted as they were: As great men and women, faced with terrible choices, who took responsibility for the fate of their people, with all of the good—and ill—that this entails. One need only think of Anita Shapira's two-volume masterpiece *Berl* (1980), or Shabtai Tevet's three-volume *The Burning Ground* (1976, 1980, 1987)—monumental biographies of leading Zionist figures Berl Katznelson and David Ben-Gurion, respectively—to see how painstaking works of scholarship can also become a source of national pride. Though markedly different in their approach to the craft of writing history, these authors carried out exhaustive research, recorded the most problematic elements in the lives of their subjects, and still painted a picture that elevates the reader's respect for these leaders. It is in the hard labor of producing such works that scholars refine a perspective which is capable not only of destroying myths that lack a real basis, but of contributing to the creation of legends solidly grounded in truth. Though there doubtless are further skeletons waiting to be exhumed from the Zionist closet, there are also many stories marked by heroism and justice which await the appropriate chronicler. To be a Zionist historian is not to deny the existence of the former. It is to believe that—taken on the whole—it is the latter that dominate a fair and truthful retelling of the history of the Jewish state.

If the new historians spur scholars more sympathetic to the legacy of the Jewish state to retell the story of Zionism in a manner that is theoretically compelling, and which takes full advantage of newly available sources, they will have performed an invaluable service. Such an outcome, however, depends not on the new historians, but on those intellectuals whose assessment of the Zionist heritage is more positive. It is they who will have to display the creativity and diligence necessary to vindicate their nation's past in the eyes of scholars and the broad public alike. The future of the Jewish state may well depend on their success.

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