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A War to Start All Wars

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For 60 years, both the Israelis and the Palestinians have used the past to illuminate the present and confer legitimacy on their nations' respective founding myths. Of course, Zionists and Palestinian nationalists were not the first to embellish the stories of their nations' births or make excuses for their tragedies. Throughout history, nations have been born in blood and frequently in sin. This is why, as the French philosopher Ernest Renan wrote, they tend to lie about their pasts.

The birth of the state of Israel in 1948 has long been the subject of self-congratulatory historiography by the victorious side and grievance-filled accounts by disinherited Palestinians. To the Israelis, the 1948 war was a desperate fight for survival that was settled by an almost miraculous victory. In the Arab world, accounts of the war tend to advance conspiracy theories and attempt to shift the blame for the Arabs' defeat. In both cases, the writing of history has been part of an uncritical nationalist quest for legitimacy.

Refusing to admit that the noble Jewish dream of statehood was stained by the sins of Israel's birth and eager to deny the centrality of the Palestinian problem to the wider conflict in the Middle East, the Israelis have preferred to dwell on their struggle for independence against the supposedly superior invading Arab armies. But the war between the indigenous Palestinian population and the Yishuv, the organized Jewish community of Palestine, was arguably the fiercest phase of the conflict. It was during this period " between November 30, 1947, and May 15, 1948 " that the fate of the nascent Jewish state really seemed to hang by a thread. Nevertheless, the popular notion cultivated since then has repressed the memory of this fighting and focused instead on the heroic stand of the tiny Yishuv against the invading Arab armies during the second phase of the war, from May 15, 1948, to the spring of 1949. When the war was over, the Palestinian problem practically disappeared from Israeli public debate, or it was conveniently defined as one of "refugees" or "infiltrators." It was as if there were no Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Palestinian people. As Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir famously put it in 1969, "They did not exist."

LONG REVISION

During the 1980s, a group known as the new historians began to challenge the Zionist mythology surrounding Israel's birth. These Israeli revisionist scholars " Simha Flapan, Ilan Pappé, and Avi Shlaim, among others " unearthed documents that challenged the conventional view of the war as a clash between a Jewish David and an Arab Goliath. They also argued that the war was really the story of Arab states betraying the Palestinian cause and showed that there was collusion between some Arabs and the Jews " as when Trans-jordan and the Yishuv conspired to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state. In other cases, the new historians argued, Arab states rushed to grab land at the expense of the Palestinians or their own rivals in the Arab coalition.

But it was Benny Morris who addressed the most sensitive issue of all: the refugee crisis. His book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, published in 1987, remains the single most important work on the thorniest moral and political issue underlying the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum. It recounts the often violent expulsion of 700,000 Arabs as Jewish soldiers conquered villages and towns throughout Palestine. For bravely and masterfully advancing a new narrative of Israel's birth, he paid a heavy personal price. Denounced as an "anti-Zionist" after the publication of his 1987 book, Morris was denied tenure by practically every department of history in the country. It was not until 1996, when then President Ezer Weizman summoned Morris to his office and asked him to affirm his belief in Israel's right to exist that Morris was given a job at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

More than any other revisionist, Morris has singled himself out by drawing a line between his views as a historian and

his views as a citizen, between his pathbreaking interpretation of the past and his controversial and politically incorrect views about the present. Once a peacenik with impeccable credentials – he went to jail for refusing to serve as an Israeli army reservist in the occupied territories during the first intifada, in 1987 – Morris has gradually drifted, together with most Israelis, toward a position vehemently critical of the Palestinians. He has blamed Palestinian leaders for the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the al Aqsa intifada, which began in September 2000.

In January 2004, Morris famously lamented that the architects of Israel's 1948 war strategy had not more thoroughly purged the Jewish state of its Arab population. Morris told the Haaretz journalist Ari Shavit, "If [David] Ben-Gurion [Israel's first prime minister] had carried out a large expulsion and cleansed the whole country – the whole Land of Israel, as far as the Jordan River . . . he would have stabilized the State of Israel for generations. . . . If the end of the story turns out to be a gloomy one for the Jews, it will be because Ben-Gurion did not complete the transfer in 1948." His statement shocked many of his old admirers and fellow revisionist scholars. But even if his left-wing critics consider him a controversial citizen of the present, Morris remains an honest and superbly professional student of the past.

The ability to engage in a sober inquiry into the past is an essential test of free societies and truly democratic academic institutions, and the challenges that the new historians have posed to traditional myths surrounding the birth of Israel represent a major contribution to both historiography and the country's identity. The revisionists' work has had political consequences as well: the Israeli-Palestinian peace process of the 1990s was nurtured by their reshaping of the national *Zeitgeist* in Israel. The introduction of powerful new arguments about 1948 has influenced the views of politicians and peace negotiators, too, whether they admit it or not. (The speech I gave as head of the Israeli delegation during the 1992 multilateral talks on Palestinian refugees in Ottawa, Canada, was profoundly influenced by Morris' work.)

No such new history has yet emerged in the Arab world, nor have any Arab archives been opened to allow for such a fresh perspective. Most Arab historians continue to absolve their countries' militaries of all responsibility for the defeat. By exonerating the Arab armies and attributing their failure to the treachery and incompetence of conservative civilian elites, such scholars provided legitimacy for the revolutionary military regimes that took power across the Arab world after 1948.

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