

“1948 AND AFTER” REVISITED

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1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians, by Benny Morris. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. vii + 347 pages. Bibliography to p. 353. Index to p. 366. \$23.00 paper.

Benny Morris, the most influential and commercially successful of the Israeli “new historians,” first came to prominence in 1986 after the publication of a series of now-famous articles on the 1948 Palestinian exodus in *Middle Eastern Studies* and the *Middle East Journal*. Since then, Morris’s work has attracted phenomenal publicity in the West and has generated keen interest in Israel. The revised and expanded paperback collection of essays under review is, to some extent, a reflection of Morris’s remarkable success in both academic and commercial terms. At the heart of this success there is a dogged researcher and talented historian. The reissuing of these essays, some for the third time, is also a testimony to the fact that the terms of the debate in the West on Palestine/Israel are changing.

For all the reports of Morris’s ostracism in his own country because of his views, Morris is in fact a research fellow at the Truman Institute of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, one of the most prestigious and mainstream academic institutions in Israel. And despite the controversy

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his views elicit in his country, he himself announced in this journal in "Debate on the 1948 Exodus" that "The principal conclusions of the 'new historians' [i.e., Morris, Shlaim, etc.] . . . are by now more or less the coin of the realm in Israeli historiography" [*JPS* 21, no. 1 (Aut. 1991), p. 110]. Moreover, the Hebrew edition of the *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (hereafter *Birth*) was published in 1991 by 'Am 'Oved, a Labor party publishing house founded by the Mapai leadership in the early 1940s. Plus, Morris's research is widely reported in *Hadashot*, *Kol Ha'ir*, and *Ha'Aretz*.

This collection was first published in a hardcover edition in 1990. Since then, the number of essays has been expanded from nine to ten and some have undergone revisions to take into account new documentation that has come to light since the first edition. Most of the essays, however, had already been published singly by the late 1980s and the most important ones ("The Causes and Character of the Arab Exodus from Palestine: The Israel Defence Forces and Intelligence Service Analysis of June 1948" and "Yosef Weitz and the Transfer Committees, 1948-1949") had first been published in 1986.

1948 and After was intended to complement Morris's major work, *Birth*, which first appeared in 1987. Thus, although this collection and *Birth* are two different books, they ought to be treated as one major study. In contrast to *Birth*, however, this collection, especially the paperback edition, brings into sharper focus the whole issue of transfer (a euphemism for expulsion) and its relevance to the continuing debate on what went on in 1948 and after.

The author has chosen to begin the new collection with the infamous expulsion of Lydda and Ramla in July 1948. This largest single "outright expulsion" accounts for nearly 10 percent of the total exodus. Moreover, the titles of two out of the ten essays of *1948 and After* contain the word "transfer": "Yosef Weitz and the Transfer Committees, 1948-1949" and "The Transfer of Al Majdal's Remaining Arabs to Gaza, 1950." The new essay that has been added to the paperback edition, "Yosef Nahmani and the Arab Question in 1948," discusses, inter alia, the "transfer" activities of Weitz's Jewish National Fund (JNF) colleague Nahmani and of the Israeli army in eastern Galilee in 1948 and up to the 1956 Suez War, and shows Nahmani advocating transfer as of the late 1930s; in this new essay, a section is entitled "The Transfer Abroad of the [Palestinian] Maghrebi Communities and Other Israeli Arab Villagers." The chapter on the "Transfer" of the inhabitants of al-Majdal has been doubled in length in the paperback edition to accommodate new archival material, which (in Morris's words) "sheds fresh and important light" on this "transfer, in which systematic coercion was employed to obtain the Arabs' exodus to Gaza" (p. vii). Even the abstract promises that Morris will explain "how Yosef Weitz, a senior Jewish

National Fund official, and his two 'Transfer Committees' helped promote the exodus."

One of the most important essays in the collection discusses the activities of Weitz and his two "Transfer Committees"—the first "self-appointed" and semiofficial, which was active in late May and June 1948, and the second official and active from late August to November. According to Morris, "the exodus was a tale both of 'voluntary' flights and expulsion, and many fine gradations between" (p. 155). Weitz, the powerful head of the JNF Lands Department, played a major role in the 1948 exodus. Thus, for example: "Weitz quickly saw the need for decision-making and policy implementation on a national level in order to accomplish the 'transfer' which alone could solve the new Jewish state's 'Arab problem'" (p. 156);

Weitz was to be frustrated in his efforts to become the chief executive of what he called the 'Transfer policy'. Ben-Gurion preferred that what happened should happen away from the full glare of public appointment and endorsement, and was best carried out on the local level by Jewish settlements and IDF units, especially under the cloak of an enveloping fog of battle (p. 156);

and "Weitz was well placed [in 1948] to shape and influence decision-making regarding the Arab population on the national level and to oversee the implementation of policy on the local level" (p. 105). In this chapter Morris elaborates on the de facto (if not semiofficial) "Transfer policy," which was evidently espoused by Ben-Gurion and generally understood at every level of military and political decision making.

Although the "Transfer" issue is given far greater emphasis in the present collection than in the earlier work and is repeatedly raised in various chapters and contexts, there is still an inadequate historical background against which this issue can be understood. For instance, in the essay on "Yosef Weitz and the Transfer Committees, 1948-1949," Morris is silent about the important fact that in December 1937 Weitz already had worked out a semiofficial "Transfer" plan and that from 1937 onwards he had headed the Jewish Agency's "Transfer Committees" operations. Thus, Weitz's "obsession" with Arab transfer predated 1948 by more than a decade; his "preparations" and exploration activities were sanctioned by David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett and continued into late 1944. In September 1941, for example, he went on an exploratory tour of the al-Jazirah district in Syria. It was such activities and sustained concern that brought him naturally and almost inevitably to chair the "Transfer Committees" in 1948 and to his efforts to mastermind what he called a Yishuv "Transfer policy" in the same year. The same thing applies to Nahmani and his 1948 transfer activities: again, Morris fails to mention Nahmani's membership and involvement in that same Jewish Agency "Transfer Committee" of 1937-38. One could speculate that the lack of adequate discussion of the transfer is-

sue in Zionist decision-making circles prior to 1948 is rooted in Morris's concern that to do so would undermine his own thesis that the exodus involved no antecedents or premeditation, no anticipation or initiation on the part of the Zionist leadership—in effect, that the whole thing came out of the blue. The official Jewish Agency's "Transfer Committees" and "Transfer" schemes from 1937 onwards and the extensive official discussions on transfer into the mid-1940s could make this thesis difficult to sustain. Ben-Gurion, as Morris knows, had "obsessively" advocated "compulsory transfer" in the late 1930s.

It is interesting to note that Morris's conclusions have undergone noticeable (though not fundamental) revision, toward assigning greater responsibility in the Arab exodus to the actions of Zionist commanders and politicians, since the publication of *Birth*. As his conclusions stand now: "The Arab refugee problem was born of war, not by design, Jewish or Arab"; "in part, it was the result of deliberate, not to say malevolent, actions of Jewish commanders and politicians" [*JPS* 21, no. 1 (Aut. 1991), p. 114]; and "in great measure, that [refugee] problem was a product of Jewish military and political actions" (*1948 and After*, p. 49). Throughout this collection, Morris makes a problematic distinction, which is central to his conclusions, between outright expulsion on the one hand and the (vague or euphemistic) "causing," "promoting," "precipitating," "encouraging," "nudging," and "prompting" people into flight through various military pressures and psychological means. The problem with this distinction is that it leaves glaring discrepancies between the evidence he produces and the conclusions he deduces. Morris's empiricist approach produces a meticulous account, for he is a dogged researcher and a talented historian. But the same approach is also responsible for a major weakness in his account: his evidence can be interpreted in ways not to his liking, as indeed it has been by many scholars, including his fellow revisionists Ilan Pappé and Avi Shlaim.

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As a positivist historian, Morris has always been strong on evidence and documentation, particularly Israeli, and this fact has generally been recognized as his greatest asset. Yet he seems only marginally aware of the growing body of Palestinian oral history that has emerged in recent years, which should form a significant part of any authoritative account of 1948. One also has the impression that Morris has an inadequate command of Arabic, which would explain the extreme rarity of Arabic sources in his account: I could find only one Arab (not Arabic) source among the more than 640 footnotes in this collection. (Morris also mentions (p. 43) that he used more than a dozen Arab sources in *Birth*, but these sources were either in the English language

or had appeared in Hebrew translations.) This raises the question of whether it is possible to write a definitive account of central events and processes of Palestinian history with overwhelmingly or largely Israeli official documents (and in several cases intelligence reports) and few Arab and Arabic sources. But there is also an explicit anti-Arab prejudice: Morris writes, "Arab political memoirs of the 1940s and the 1950s tend to be unreliable, being self-serving, and inaccurate" (p. 43). This reservation apparently does not apply to the political memoirs and official documents written by Israeli-Zionist politicians and army officers, which Morris uses extensively and in many cases uncritically. Just because an official document was written for internal purposes, it does not mean that political motives did not influence its author. All political memoirs are self-serving, but they can still be used carefully and critically.

In addition to the collection's aforementioned weaknesses—the fact that his conclusions are not necessarily born out by his evidence and that the collection lacks an adequate historical background against which the 1948 exodus could be situated—one gets the impression that there is more than one Morris at play, that he is torn between conflicting truths. Thus, in his arguments with his Israeli detractors (for instance, Shabtai Teveth), he tends to stress the fact that the Zionist leadership had "obsessively" espoused Arab transfer in the 1930s and early 1940s; that Ben-Gurion had already advocated "compulsory transfer" in the same period; and that this fact must have influenced Ben-Gurion's thinking and orders in 1948. Yet in his argument with Palestinian historians (including this reviewer), Morris seems to deny that the fact "that the Zionist leadership during the 1930s and early 1940s considered, and generally supported, a 'transfer' solution to the future state's 'Arab problem'" had anything to do with what took place in 1948 (p. 37). The available evidence shows that a de facto, semiofficial "Transfer policy" indeed was adopted in 1948 and was practically carried out, even if not always systematically or uniformly, throughout the period. I personally have no problem accepting the complexity of the 1948 exodus, which took place largely against the background of war and military campaign. But this does not contradict the existence of the intent to transfer or of a de facto transfer.

Morris's introductory essay, "The New Historiography: Israel and Its Past," stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the volume in purpose, style, and content. Largely polemical (both defensive and offensive), it takes on both his Israeli and Palestinian detractors. Unfortunately, he seems little interested in constructive dialogue with Palestinian scholars and seems unable to acknowledge either that they have contributed to the growth of the historiography of 1948 or that they are not a monolithic group. The essay reflects the still inflamed emotions generated

and sustained by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as much as the debate on conflicting historical truths on 1948.

After having seemingly styled himself as the final arbiter of the "historical truth," he turns to what he calls the "psychological truth" (p. 39), namely the psychological mechanism of guilt and blame: the Palestinians should stop blaming the Israelis (or anybody else) for their 1948 tragedy, and, moreover, current Palestinian historians should stop absolving their fathers and forefathers "of all responsibility ('guilt') for what happened—for loss of land, self-respect, honour, charges of incompetence and cowardice." There is an implied "blaming the victim" here that Morris had generally tried to avoid in the other essays. It seems that it is not sufficient for Palestinian historians to adopt a critical approach in scrutinizing what their forefathers did in 1948; Morris seems to want them to buy his entire package, not only his empirical evidence but also his problematic conclusions and, worse still, his Israeli-Zionist perspective and psychological theories.

History and historiography ought not necessarily be written, exclusively or mainly, by the victors. They should be used as tools for initiating dialogue or even cooperation across the national divide. Like any other scholarly effort, interpreting history is a common endeavor toward which many Palestinians, Israelis, and outsiders have contributed. It is in the interest of Israeli revisionist authors not to get carried away by their sense of triumph but rather to concentrate on the task of expanding our common knowledge.