Forgetfulness for Memory: The Limits of the New Israeli History

Joel Beinin

Many believe that the "new historians" represent a revolution in Israeli intellectual life. However, the exclusion of Arab voices and sources of evidence, especially in the work of Benny Morris, limited the extent of that revolution and situates some of the new history close to traditional Zionist categories of knowledge. This historical exclusion partly explains Morris's retreat to the Israeli political center since the outbreak of the second intifada. Meron Benvenisti's outlook and "relational" approaches to the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are intellectual methods with a more promising political perspective.

According to Benny Morris, "in the last two decades [1980–2000] a historiographical revolution has been occurring in Israel."[1] There certainly has been a high volume of self-critical Israeli historical writing since the late 1980s relating to the 1948 war and other aspects of the conflict. But to what extent can this literature be considered a revolution? And what are its fruits?

This essay evaluates the work of the Israeli "new historians"—the name Morris gives the historical school he deems the agent of the revolution he perceives—in light of the virtual demise of the Israeli peace camp following the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada in September 2000. For despite his insistence that historical research has nothing to do with politics, Morris did initially hope that the work of the Israeli "new historians" might facilitate a more conciliatory Israeli attitude toward the Palestinians.[2] But this did not occur beyond rather limited intellectual circles, and after the failure of the July 2000 Camp David summit, Morris vociferously realigned himself with Israel's political center.[3] This raises the question of whether there might be something immanent in Morris's historical method that would explain what appears to be such a dramatic political shift. I suggest that the collapse of a viable Israeli peace camp, to which Morris previously belonged, and the limited impact of the new history on Israeli public culture are related phenomena rooted in an inability to hear Palestinian voices or give credibility to Palestinian historical evidence.

I focus primarily on Morris for several reasons. He is the one who theorized the existence of a historical school and cautiously expressed hope that

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Journal of Palestine Studies Vol. XXXIV, No. 2 (Winter 2005), pp. 6–23 ISSN: 0377-919X; electronic ISSN: 1533-8614.
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reassessment of the history of the conflict might facilitate its resolution. His signature work, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949,* is arguably the single most significant revision of the hitherto prevailing Israeli historical consensus.[4] The book is also one of the most contentious, addressing one of the central questions in any future Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations. Morris, an indefatigable archival researcher, is the most prolific of the new historians, with more than half a dozen books in English and Hebrew. By publishing in both English and Hebrew, he has had the greatest potential to reach the Israeli Jewish audience. The only other new historian who has published as much in Hebrew is Tom Segev, a working journalist with a Ph.D. in history. Most of the works of Avi Shlaim and Ilan Pappé, the other leading new historians, are available only in English.[5]

The point of departure for *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* is that two contending explanations traditionally sought to account for the flight of the Palestinian refugees from their homeland in 1948. The Palestinian and Arab version argues that the "transfer" (or expulsion) of the native population was always an element of Zionist thought and that the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 provided the opportunity to implement the transfer plan. Hence, the Zionists expelled the Palestinian Arabs by conscious design. In contrast, the traditional Zionist version argues that the Palestinian Arabs fled on orders from Arab military commanders and governments and intended to return behind the guns of the victorious Arab armies, which would "drive the Jews into the sea." Consequently, the Zionist authorities had little or no responsibility for the fate of the Palestinian refugees.

This is a fair characterization of the prevailing views among the Arab and Israeli publics. But Morris cites no historical literature that adopts either of these positions. This is because he believes that there was no "proper" history prior to the work of the new historians. Morris's characterization of the existing historical literature allows him to position his own conclusion—that neither the traditional Arab or Zionist versions can be empirically substantiated and that "the Palestinian refugee problem was born of war, not by design, Jewish or Arab"—as a golden mean, with all the moral and philosophical legitimacy that accrues to such a position in the western cultural tradition.[6] Morris's appeal to this apparently reasonable, if fallacious, notion has contributed to making *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* the standard work on the topic in Europe and North America despite the disapproval of establishment Israeli scholarly circles. To be fair, the book's status is also due to Morris's impressive compilation of empirical evidence, in both the book and in subsequent essays elaborating and refining its arguments.

1948: HISTORY AND CATEGORIES OF KNOWLEDGE

Most narratives of the *nakba* by Palestinians and those sympathetic to them are built around two central elements. The most fundamental is the insistence that the Palestinian Arabs are the victims of the 1948 war, and by extension of

the entire Zionist project. The central fact of this narrative is the loss of home and homeland.

Many early accounts of the refugee question are based on the work of relief agencies such as the American Friends Service Committee, American Near East Refugee Aid, and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. The resolutions of the United Nations and other texts of international law, beginning with General Assembly Resolution 194 of December 1948, added a legal dimension to the understanding of the Palestinians as victims and stipulated mechanisms for rectification and restitution, most notably what the Palestinians regard as "the right to return." Eventually, the humanitarian and legal approaches were politicized and theorized by Palestinian nationalists. The most cogent expression of this development directed to a Western audience was Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine*.[7] Its most forceful chapter, "Zionism from the Point of View of Its Victims," challenges the prevailing lachrymose conception of Jewish history—the representation of Jews as always and everywhere victims—by asserting that in the Arab-Zionist conflict the Palestinian Arabs were the victims of the Jews.

The second constitutive element of Palestinian narratives of the *nakba* is heavy reliance on Palestinian sources of evidence, most prominently the oral testimony of those who fled or were expelled in 1948.[8] Another form of Palestinian evidence is the physical remnants of the Arab society destroyed in the process of the establishment of the State of Israel: some 400 destroyed villages, Arab homes and neighborhoods in cities now inhabited by Jews, and so on.[9]

There did emerge from the 1950s a limited Arab and Palestinian historical literature on the 1948 war that deploys the available documentary evidence and historical methods similar to those Morris uses. Its salient figures include Constantine Zurayk, 'Arif al-'Arif, and Walid Khalidi.[10] Especially after the establishment of the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut in 1963, Palestinian intellectuals began to document the pre-1948 existence of their communities and their destruction in the war.[11] In 1965 the PLO Research Center was established, and it too published some serious historical work based on documentary evidence.[12] Morris ignores this early work in the first edition of *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* and makes only cursory reference to it in the introduction to the second edition. He also gives short shrift to the serious historical work that appeared after the publication of *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* in part as a response to it.[13] Thus, despite his critique of the traditional Israeli-Zionist narrative, he shares at least one of its features: the nearly complete disregard for Palestinian voices.

The Israeli "old history," as Morris terms it, took the form of memoirs or histories written by Jews who participated in one form or another in the 1948 war. Such narratives were informed by Zionist categories of knowledge and practice that rendered Palestinian Arabs invisible for political purposes. As Zachary Lockman has argued, this invisibility has "less to do with ignorance

than with a particular way of knowing and a particular kind of knowledge, one that served certain needs and furthered certain goals."[14] Moreover, it is not true that Israelis did not know what happened in 1948 until Morris and others wrote about it. Substantial evidence from contemporary Zionist sources indicates that members of the military and political elite, secondary leaders, and intellectuals close to them—to say nothing of soldiers and kibbutz members who actively expelled Palestinians, expropriated their lands, and destroyed their homes—knew very well what happened to the Palestinian Arabs in 1948. Elements of the socialist-Zionist Mapam and, most insistently and consistently, the Jewish-Arab Communist Party of Israel perceived the events of the 1948 much as Benny Morris portrayed them some forty years later.[15] A minority in the dominant labor Zionist party, Mapai, opposed the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, but only cautiously expressed its views publicly, if at all.

Morris and other new historians are aware of this. Tom Segev cites a debate in the Knesset during August 1949 in which a member of Herut, the party led by Menachem Begin that had grown out of the pre-state Etzel militia he commanded, claimed that "thanks to Dayr Yassin [the most infamous massacre of Palestinian Arabs on 9–10 April 1948 committed by the Etzel and Lehi] we won the war, sir." When challenged by Knesset members from Mapai, he responded, "If you don't know [about the Dayr Yassin-type massacres that you yourselves performed] you can ask the Minister of Defense [i.e., David Ben-Gurion, who was simultaneously the Prime Minister]."[16] The diaries of Yosef Nahmani, a regional leader of the Zionist institutions in the eastern Galilee whose activities involved building up the Haganah and purchasing lands for the Jewish National Fund, also offer a clear description of the expulsion of Arabs and the confiscation of their lands and express concern about these issues. Analyzing the 1948 entries of the unpublished diary in a chapter of *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians*, Morris concludes that this is one of the first instances of the distinctive Israeli syndrome known as "shooting and crying."[17] Morris also knows that Mapam publicly opposed "the tendency to expel the Arabs from the Jewish state . . . and the illegal expropriation and intentional destruction of the means of livelihood of those . . . who remained or were entitled to return at the end of hostilities."[18]

In the literary sphere, the short stories of S. Yizhar, "Hirbet Hiz'ah" and "The Prisoner," depict the wanton destruction of a Palestinian village and the mistreatment of a captured civilian. Yizhar fought in the 1948 war as a member of the Palmah and subsequently served as a Knesset member representing Mapai. These stories, as well as his monumental novel, *Yemei Tziklag* (Days of Ziklag), graphically portray the repeated suppression of the individual impulse to ethical behavior in favor of the morally questionable collective will.

The information contained in these texts, while known in Israel, was marginalized, in part through the "construction of Zionist memory" discussed below. This process was facilitated by the fact that the new immigrants and veteran Jewish settlers who were housed in abandoned Arab buildings or settled on Arab agricultural lands had no interest in inquiring too deeply into how these

buildings and lands came to be abandoned. Perhaps above all, the romantic-heroic narrative of a people condemned to death in Europe renewing itself in its ancient homeland overpowered the reservations of most Jews and delegitimized Arab resistance.

LEARNING TO FORGET

Given the early availability of textual and oral evidence contradicting the official Zionist version of events, the main conceptual problem in explaining the rise of the new historians is not the availability or unavailability of new evidence on which to base an alternative narrative. The central problem is how the discursive mechanisms of Zionism and the State of Israel enabled most Israeli Jews to "forget" what they once "knew": that during the 1948 war, the majority of the Palestinian Arabs were ethnically cleansed from the territories that became the State of Israel. Much, even if not all the details, of the information Morris presents in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* and other works was always available in one form or another. It was actively rendered illegible in the Israeli historical narrative.

The construction of Zionist memory about the events of 1948 was encouraged by the Israeli state through its political, educational, and cultural apparatus. Shabtai Teveth, one of Benny Morris's harshest critics, unwittingly cites a typical moment in this process—Prime Minister Ben-Gurion's speech to the Knesset in October 1961 proclaiming that "The Arabs' exit from Palestine . . . began immediately after the UN [partition] Resolution from the areas earmarked for the Jewish state. And we have explicit documents testifying that they left Palestine following the instructions of the Arab leaders, with the Mufti [al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni] at their head, under the assumption that the invasion of the Arab armies at the expiration of the Mandate will destroy the Jewish state and push all the Jews into the sea, dead or alive."[19]

This is an example of the political rather than the historical nature of the claims about the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem. Ben-Gurion did not place the documents he claimed to have in the public record, nor has Teveth produced them. Morris maintains, on the basis of his assiduous research, that such documents do not exist.[20] In an interview with Ari Shavit in *ha-Aretz*, Morris claimed that in preparing the second edition of his book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Crisis Revisited,* he discovered "a series of orders issued by the Arab Higher Committee and by the Palestinian intermediate levels to remove children, women, and the elderly from the villages."[21] However, the book itself contains no formulation suggesting such a systematic attitude on the part of the Palestinian leadership. In the text, Morris's strongest statement is that "[al-Hajj al-Amin al-] Husseini at times explicitly permitted and even encouraged the evacuation of women, children, and old people from combat zones . . . He may also have believed, mistakenly, that the departure of dependents would heighten the males' motivation to fight."[22] But this

is rather different from what Ben-Gurion claimed, and reasonable behavior for a population at war. Moreover, Ben-Gurion's contention is manifestly false in one important respect. Teveth, Morris, and Palestinian sources agree that among the first to flee were wealthy Arabs from Jerusalem, including the western neighborhoods incorporated into the State of Israel after 1948. This territory was not allotted to the Jewish state by the UN partition plan, but designated as an international *corpus separatum*. Ben-Gurion and most of the Zionist movement never accepted that Jerusalem would not be part of the State of Israel. The efforts of the Zionist armed forces to retain Jerusalem, including the massacre at Dayr Yassin, were an important factor prompting the Arab population of western Jerusalem and its surrounding villages (Malha, Lifta, 'Ayn Karim, etc.) to leave.

A key mechanism in the project of forgetting was that self-critical accounts of the Zionist project were usually rendered only in Hebrew. This ensured that only an intimate social circle—a *gemeinschaft* of committed Zionist settlers who could be trusted not to use this information to challenge the moral and political legitimacy of the enterprise—would be privy to it. The Jewish members of the Communist Party of Israel and other Israeli radicals were a small source of leakage, but they had only a limited audience in Israel and were discounted in the west during the cold war.[23]

Another mechanism that enabled forgetting what was once known is the exclusion of Arab testimony about the events of 1948 and after. Because of the destruction of the fabric of Arab society and the flight of most of the population, few intellectuals remained who could offer a coherent counter-narrative capable of contesting the Zionist narrative. The delegitimization of Palestinian-Israeli voices was institutionally enforced by the military government imposed on most Arab citizens from 1949 to 1966. Mapam did criticize, even if for the most part ineffectually, instances of extreme injustice to Palestinian-Israelis, but the activity of Arab members was usually supervised by Jews. Only the Communist Party offered Palestinian-Israelis a relatively free framework for cultural expression and political action.[24]

A complex of official and unofficial Israeli institutions was mobilized to dig a memory hole in which things once known were deposited and rendered unknowable for the vast majority of Israeli Jews. Essays in the Hebrew journal *Theory and Criticism* address this issue. But Morris is uninterested in excavating this hole. He never asks how and why unsupported and demonstrably false assertions, like Ben-Gurion's 1961 Knesset speech, could become so widely accepted among Israeli Jews, among world Jewry, and by western public opinion, although he acknowledges that this did occur. By limiting the problem to one of archival evidence, Morris and most other new historians avoid addressing the ways in which the material and cultural structures of Israeli society actively made Palestinians "present absentees" in

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their homeland, not only legally, but in Israeli public culture, a process that began in 1948 and continues to this day.

POST-1967 HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL REASSESSMENTS

How and why was the discursive erasure of what at least some Israelis once knew about 1948 and other aspects of the conflict partially reversed? The euphoria and triumphalism generated by Israel's spectacular military victory of 1967 spurred some elements of its military-political elite to greater frankness about what happened in 1948. Those seeking to justify Israeli settlement in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip reminded Israeli Jews (though still only in Hebrew) that the original Zionist settlement project was not exactly "a land without a people for a people without a land"—as a popular early Zionist slogan proclaimed. Moshe Dayan declared, "We came to this country that was populated by Arabs. . . . Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. There is not a single place in this country that did not have a former Arab population."[25] Such statements raised questions about the extent of the difference between the "beautiful Israel" of labor Zionism, which claimed to adhere to universal ethical values, and the belligerent Judeocentrism of the Likud, which achieved power for the first time in 1977.

Simha Flapan directed Mapam's Arab Affairs Department from 1959 to the mid-1970s and edited *New Outlook*—a non-party monthly that promoted Arab-Jewish rapprochement in terms that were just on the edge of, but not beyond, the limits of Zionist discourse. Flapan's point of departure was Menachem Begin's proclamation in the Knesset during the 1982 Lebanon war that the only difference between his policies and those of Ben-Gurion was that Ben-Gurion resorted to subterfuge.[26] Although Flapan's *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* is less scholarly, more overtly polemical, and more defensive of Mapam than is Morris's work, it anticipates several of the latter's arguments. Flapan and Morris both demonstrate that Begin's statement contained a large measure of truth. Nonetheless, Flapan affirms, "I have never believed that Zionism inherently obviates the rights of the Palestinians, and I do not believe so today."[27] There is no evidence in *The Birth of Israel* and only occasional indications in the pages of *New Outlook* that Flapan took seriously the opinions of Palestinians on the matter of Zionism and Palestinian rights.

A critical account of the 1982 Lebanon war by two prominent journalists, Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, constituted another significant breach in the national consensus.[28] Schiff is an influential military reporter for *ha-Aretz* and known for his good connections with the senior echelons of the military. Ya'ari is Israel's leading journalistic Arab affairs analyst. In the foreword to the English version of their book, the authors note that the Israeli military censor did not clear all of the original manuscript for publication. They suggested that the censor's appraisal "of what does and does not prejudice the true interests of national security" was mistaken.[29] Such an open challenge to the military

censor from pillars of the Israeli ideological apparatus like Schiff and Ya'ari would have been unthinkable before the 1973 war.

Yehoshafat Harkabi's *Israel's Fateful Hour* was perhaps the most authoritative reassessment that preceded the work of the new historians.[30] After serving as chief of military intelligence, Harkabi built an academic career arguing that Arab and Palestinian opposition to the State of Israel was existential, intractable, and permeated with anti-Semitism.[31] In his book, however, he wrote that Israel should open negotiations with the PLO to establish an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Harkabi wrote the original Hebrew version of the book after resigning his post as intelligence advisor to the prime minister upon the accession of Begin and the Likud to power in 1977. He emphasized that he advocated ending the occupation from a "pro-Israeli" standpoint. Harkabi had no interest in whether Palestinian Arabs had any inalienable rights in their homeland. The book's argument is internal to the Israeli-Zionist discourse about the best policies to secure the future of the State of Israel, although the effect of the text was to extend the outer limits of that discourse.

Why did these members of the Israeli military-political and journalistic elite engage in such self-critical reflections? Harkabi believed that Likud rule endangered the future of Israel. Schiff and Ya'ari, like many liberal Zionists, thought that the Lebanon war was a catastrophe for Israel and sought to expose the machinations of the Likud government, and especially of Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, that brought it about. Flapan was motivated to write his book by Begin's defiant claim that his policies continued those of Ben-Gurion. These books were part of a debate among Jews who identified with labor Zionism and who were concerned about the Likud's accession to power.

THE CONDITIONS OF THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

While the texts discussed above indicate that the work of the new historians was not quite as revolutionary as Morris claims, something new did happen in the late 1980s. Lockman identifies a conjuncture constituted by the declassification of many state and private papers relating to the events of 1948 and "a shift in the outlook of a small but significant segment of the Israeli left and liberal intelligentsia in the wake of the [1982] Lebanon war."[32] Morris substantially agrees with this view. He attributes the "historiographical revolution" to the opening of archives, greater resources dedicated to historical research, and the maturation of Israeli civil society. He also acknowledges that political events—the 1973 war, the Lebanon war, and the first Palestinian intifada—contributed to the intellectual reorientation of the liberal Israeli intelligentsia.[33]

Both Lockman and Morris concur that it was not the conflict with the Palestinians and the continuing occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem that breached the walls of the Israeli national consensus. Rather, it was the shock over the "lapse" that allowed Egypt and Syria to seize

the initiative in the first stages of the 1973 war, the invasion of Lebanon, and the senseless deaths of Israeli soldiers who maintained a strategically counterproductive occupation there. Moreover, many liberals were driven to the margins of the national consensus because of concerns about religious coercion and other "quality of life" issues that had little apparent connection to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The principal difference between Lockman's and Morris's assessments is that Lockman is pessimistic about the ability of the work of the new historians to alter the terms of political debate in Israel. He argues that despite noticeable political shifts in the late 1980s and early 1990s, most of the Israeli peace movement and the liberal Zionist intelligentsia remained unwilling to consider full Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, the dismantlement of the settlements, and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with its capital in east Jerusalem. Most of the liberal Zionist intelligentsia, even those who came to endorse negotiations with the PLO as a consequence of the first intifada (represented most prominently by Meretz and Peace Now), were not prepared to consider that Palestinians had "rights" in Israel/Palestine. They adopted security-based arguments similar to those of Harkabi that they thought would make their views acceptable to the broad Israeli-Jewish public. Hence, their approach to the Palestinians was largely framed in terms of "concessions" compatible with Israeli security needs or the racist notion of "separation" between Israel and the Palestinians. The fate of Jerusalem and the future of the Palestinian refugees were not subjects for discussion in these circles.

In contrast to Lockman's pessimism, Morris's reference to the "maturation of Israeli civil society" suggests a belief in progress. But integral to the political and cultural orientation of the liberal (mainly Ashkenazi) Zionist intelligentsia to which he then belonged was forgetting what was once known about the events of 1948. The essence of this perspective was: "We won't open the file on 1948. But let's give the Palestinians what *we* think (not what *they* think) they need to in order to get on with our lives in peace." Problematic as this attitude was, it sometimes resulted in serious resistance to Israeli policies. Thus, although Morris was motivated at least as much by concern about the occupation's impact on Israeli society as he was about its violation of Palestinian rights, he did go to prison in the summer of 1988 rather than perform his military reserve service in the occupied territories.

The liberal Zionist exclusion of issues that were on the Palestinian and Arab political agenda—Jerusalem and refugees—is structurally parallel to Morris's exclusion of Arab sources of historical evidence. In this respect, his approach is deeply embedded in the categories of knowledge of the Zionist project and not as incompatible with the methods of the old history as he would like to think. Both his political position and his historical method continue the well-established labor Zionist tradition of self-critical reassessment from within, or, in the less generous colloquial Israeli terminology previously introduced, shooting and crying.

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE LIBERAL ZIONIST REASSESSMENT

The trajectory of Morris's work expresses a certain radicalization in both its historical conclusions and their political implications that corresponds roughly to the period of first Palestinian intifada (1987–91) and the ensuing willingness of liberal Zionists (in party terms, Labor and Meretz) to negotiate with Palestinians (the 1991 Madrid conference, the Washington negotiations from 1991 to 1993, and the Oslo process from 1993 to 2000). Thus, even though his conceptual categories do not exceed the limits of liberal Zionist discourse, they contributed to expanding the boundaries of that discourse at a time when liberal, middle-class Israeli Jews eagerly looked forward to the end of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The conclusion of the Hebrew version of *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, which appeared in 1991, contains a harsher assessment of Israeli responsibility for the flight of the refugees than the English version of 1988. There, Morris added that the refugee problem was also "in part . . . the result of deliberate, not to say malevolent, actions of Jewish commanders and politicians; in smaller part Arab commanders and politicians were responsible for its creation through acts of commission and omission."[34] In articles that appeared after the publication of *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Morris maintained that even if there was no national political decision to expel Palestinians in 1948, the number of regional expulsions and their extent was greater than either the English or the Hebrew version of the book recognized. He also acknowledged that there were systematic massacres of Palestinians during Operation Hiram in the Galilee, which he had previously denied, relying on the oral testimony of the operation's commander.[35] By 1997, Morris acknowledged that although he still could find no document ordering a blanket expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs, the concept of transfer had developed from a haphazard idea to a near Jewish consensus between 1937 and 1948. Hence, the Zionist political and military leaders "arrived at 1948 with a mindset which was open to the idea and implementation of transfer and expulsion" and almost all of them understood "that transfer was what the Jewish state's survival and well-being demanded."[36] In *Israel's Border Wars*, Morris comes close to saying outright that Israel's activist political and military leaders wanted a "second round" and intentionally provoked the Suez War of 1956—a far higher level of responsibility than he attributes to Israel for the flight of the Palestinian refugees in 1948.[37]

Morris's examination of Israeli press accounts of what might be considered Ariel Sharon's first war crime—the retaliatory raid/massacre of nearly 60 Palestinian civilians at Qibya on the night of 14–15 October 1953 in response to the murder of a Jewish mother and her two children by Arab infiltrators two days earlier—draws extremely sharp conclusions about the propagandistic nature of the Israeli press. He shows that Azriel Carlebach—the editor of *Ma'ariv*, Israel's leading daily at that time—tended to accept Prime Minister Ben-Gurion's totally spurious claim that the Israeli army was not involved in the incident. It is now well-established that Sharon commanded the unit that carried out

the massacre. Commenting on the *Ma'ariv* article, Morris concludes, "There is hardly a sentence of Carlebach's words that does not disregard, distort, or debase the truth, either explicitly or implicitly, whereas the words of Radio Ramallah, as quoted in the Hebrew press, [which Carlebach dismissed as 'Oriental fantasies and exaggerations'] were almost all the simple truth."[38] While his language and conclusions became more radical in relation to the Zionist consensus, this is the closest Morris comes to granting legitimacy to Arab voices in understanding the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In Morris's narratives, just as in those of the old historians, Jews are the subjects of history, while Arabs are the objects of Jewish action. The focus on Jewish actions is partly, but not entirely, due to the availability of copious Israeli literary and archival materials and the unavailability of comparable Arab sources. Despite his favorable evaluation of Radio Ramallah's reporting compared to that of *Ma'ariv*, Morris dismisses the Arab documentation that does exist as mostly "slight, unreliable, tendentious, imaginative, and occasionally fantastical."[39] His empiricist and positivist historical method excludes Palestinian Arab voices to nearly the same extent as the old historians. Morris also tends to give precedence to what Jews *thought* over what they *did*. Thus the critical question for him is the existence of a document that would constitute a "smoking gun"—a blanket order to expel Arabs in 1948. The nonexistence of such a document (or at least his inability to find it) looms far larger in his understanding of the Palestinian refugee question than the fact, which he readily acknowledges, that the great majority of the Palestinian Arabs who lived in the territory that became Israel fled or were expelled as a result of actions of the Israeli armed forces. The preoccupation with what Jews thought or intended to do rather than the consequences of what they actually did—a continuation of the dominant idealist approach of Israeli historical writing on Zionism and the Arab-Zionist conflict[40]—is related to the rejection, shared by most traditional Israeli historians, of the notion that proper scholarly methods have political implications. Because Morris found no Palestinian documents (and in any case could not read them if he did) comparable to Israeli documents, the experiences and understandings of Palestinians and other Arabs a re rendered obscure, if not incomprehensible. Thus in the political arena, the vast majority of liberal Zionists, among them early advocates of negotiations with the PLO, were utterly unable to understand the causes of the failure of the July 2000 Camp David summit and the outbreak of the second intifada because they had largely disregarded Palestinian criticisms of the Oslo accords or accounts of life in the occupied territories since 1993.

BACK TO THE CENTER

Morris was among those unable to understand the outbreak of the second intifada. He was bitterly disappointed that Palestinians did not behave as he thought they should—an understandable consequence of not having listened to what Palestinians had been saying about the problems of the Oslo process all

along. Consequently, the second intifada marked the beginning of Morris's road back to the center of the Israeli consensus. In an interview in the Friday supplement of Israel's largest circulation daily, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, he announced what he claimed was his political, but not historiographical, about-face. Evaluation and moral judgment, he forcefully argued, were not proper professional concerns for a historian: "I do not look [at history] from a moral perspective. I look for truth, not justice."[41] But the interview is replete with moral and political judgments:

> What happened in 1948 was inevitable (*bilti nimna'*). If the Jews wanted to establish a state in Eretz Yisrael that would be located on an area a little larger than Tel Aviv, it was necessary to move people. . . . I do not see this as inadmissible (*pasul*) from a moral standpoint. Without a population expulsion a Jewish state would not have been established here, and I am morally in favor of the establishment of a Jewish state. Without the expulsion a state with a large Arab minority would have been established here, with a large fifth column, as Sharett and other leaders justifiably called it. . . . I revealed to Israelis [and not to the rest of the world?] what happened in 1948, the historical facts. But the Arabs are the ones who began the fighting. They began shooting. So why should I take responsibility? The Arabs began the war, they are responsible.

Moreover, Morris does not say that the Palestinian Arabs were "expelled," but that they "were driven out," in the passive voice. The initiative, according to Morris, came primarily from commanders in the field who understood that it is better to clear out (*lefanot*) the Arabs.

Morris draws a sharp, but ultimately untenable, distinction between political and military policy. How did these commanders come to this understanding? Did anyone in a position of political leadership rebuke them for their actions? Morris is even less interested in these questions now than he was in the 1990s. The positivist assertion that whoever began to shoot is the aggressor and bears moral responsibility for all the consequences of the war resembles the question of the existence or nonexistence of a blanket order to expel the Palestinian Arabs during the 1948 war. Absent such an order Morris will not conclude that there was an intention to expel Arabs, even though the Zionist political and military leaders "arrived at 1948 with a mindset which was open to the idea and implementation of transfer and expulsion."[42]

Morris's willingness to entertain only certain moral judgments stems from his perception that the Palestinians rejected a "generous offer" by Israel and the United States at the July 2000 Camp David summit and afterwards. He admits, "I have accumulated a lot of anger toward the Palestinians in the last two years. Because they rejected Clinton's proposal."[43] Although he agrees that Barak also made mistakes, Morris considers them insignificant compared to those of

Yasir Arafat. "For their [i.e. Palestinian] mistakes we pay in human lives, ours and theirs." Israeli mistakes apparently do not cost human lives.

The bottom line of Morris's reassessment represents the Israeli national consensus: "What happened in 1948 is irreversible."[44] That is to say, there can be no consideration of a Palestinian right to return in any form. The entire historical project of demonstrating Israel's ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians in 1948 is emptied of its political implications and reduced to an antiquarian curiosity. For Morris and the broad center of the Israeli consensus, even if they were to acknowledge that ethnic cleaning occurred to whatever degree, this is irrelevant to the political questions that can legitimately be addressed.

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Morris expanded on these views in an interview in *ha-Aretz* a month before publication of a greatly expanded second edition of his principal work, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Revisited*.[45] Relentlessly pursuing his empirical research, Morris documents some two dozen more Israeli massacres of Palestinians than were chronicled in the original text as well as about a dozen cases of rape by Israeli soldiers. "There is no justification for acts of rape. There is no justification for acts of massacre. Those are war crimes," he concludes. "But . . . I do not think that the expulsions of 1948 were war crimes. You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs. You have to dirty your hands." Morris now explicitly approves of the ethnic cleansing of 1948 because, "A Jewish state would not have come into being without the uprooting of 700,000 Palestinians. Therefore it was necessary to uproot them. There was no choice but to expel that population."[46]

Morris's moral justification of ethnic cleansing is a post-second intifada innovation. It is not coincidental that one of his arguments is that "Even the great American democracy could not have been created without the annihilation of the Indians."[47] Native Americans and those with a sounder knowledge of North American history may demur. But in Israel, appeal to the authority of the United States is the clincher in any argument, especially as George W. Bush and many of his supporters have ingratiated themselves more than any previous administration by giving quasi-religious endorsement to very nearly any outrage Israel commits against the Palestinians. Yearning for the success of the American example, Morris now criticizes Ben-Gurion for failing to do "a complete job" because "this place would be quieter and know less suffering if the matter had been resolved once and for all. If Ben-Gurion had carried out a large expulsion and cleansed the whole country. . . . It may yet turn out that this was his fatal mistake."[48] Palestine/Israel might also be quieter today if Hitler had completed his planned genocide of world Jewry. Morris is willing to speculate on the first proposition; but he would certainly and quite properly consider the second beyond the pale of civilized discourse.

Benny Morris and the liberal Zionist intelligentsia of which he is part limited a priori the conclusions that might be drawn from the historical reassessment of

1948 and related matters. Because Morris, even in his most politically radical phase, avoided the conclusions toward which his research gestured, Israelis accustomed to the practice of shooting and crying could pass over it lightly. Others who knew very well what happened in 1948 nodded and continued their silence. Intellectual guardians of the flame of Ben-Gurion and the heritage of labor Zionism responded with summary rejection of nearly everything Morris and the other new historians said without offering any contrary evidence.[49] A decade later, more extensive, even if largely unconvincing, efforts to refute the new historians appeared.[50] By that time, the second intifada had broken out; in that bloody atmosphere nothing said about the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was likely to change the terms of political debate in Israel.

ALTERNATIVES TO MORRIS

Meron Benvenisti belongs to a Sephardi family resident in Jerusalem for many generations. As a former deputy-mayor of Jerusalem, Benvenisti was part of the Labor Zionist elite and a prime candidate for writing what Morris calls "old history." His early work on the West Bank Data Project has some of the same characteristics as the books by Schiff and Ya'ari and Harkabi, although Benvenisti eventually reached a more fundamental critique of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and other aspects of Zionist practice.[51]

Morris and Benvenisti do not differ significantly about what happened in 1948. In formal terms, Morris, though he rejects Israeli moral culpability, enumerates even more Israeli actions related to the flight and expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs than Benvenisti's *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948*.[52] But unlike Morris, Benvenisti, despite some hesitation and qualification, uses the term "ethnic cleansing" for part of what occurred in 1948. This implies Israeli culpability, with all the moral opprobrium associated with this term since it was introduced during the Bosnian civil war. (Morris uses "to clean" [*lenakot*]—a term used in 1948 and beyond by Zionists—which crucially omits that the Palestinian Arabs were an ethnonational community.) The very different sensibilities of Morris and Benvenisti have significant intellectual and political implications. In an interview in *ha-Aretz*, Benvenisti explains his disagreements with his "friends in the left" (i.e., the Zionist peace movement):

> I am a native son. But this is a country in which there were always Arabs. This is a country in which Arabs are the landscape, the natives. So I am not afraid of them. I don't see myself living here without them. In my eyes, without Arabs this is a barren land.
>
> I am . . . drawn to the Arab culture and the Arabic language because it is here. It is the land. And I really am a neo-Canaanite. I love everything that springs from this soil. . . . [T]he right, certainly, but the left too, hates Arabs.[53]

What emerges from this is that Benvenisti, unlike Morris and the broader liberal Ashkenazi circles from which he emerged, is not a racist. Benvenisti has no better access to Arab documents than Morris. But his descriptions of "cleansing campaigns" are buttressed by a visual and verbal catalogue of destroyed Arab villages and buildings now populated by Jews, following the method of Walid Khalidi's *All That Remains*. Thus, Benvenisti finds a way to incorporate Arab evidence into his text and considers it important to do so. Further, he insists that the legacy of 1948 persists inside the borders of pre-1967 Israel. *Sacred Landscape* demonstrates that there are alternatives to the narrow empiricism and positivism that tend to marginalize Arab voices in the historical narrative of both the old and new historians.

This advance beyond Morris's historical method is associated with a different political orientation and moral sensibility. The term "ethnic cleansing" suggests that even the mass-murder of European Jewry does not exempt Israel from universal legal and moral standards and challenges Ehud Barak's repeated insistence—before, during, and after the failed July 2000 Camp David summit—that Israel would accept no legal or moral responsibility for the Palestinian refugees. In the same *ha-Aretz* interview in which he expressed the heretical (from a Zionist perspective) view that, "This is a country in which Arabs are the . . . natives," Benvenisti rejected the two-state solution to the conflict in favor of a vaguely defined living together rather than living apart. This is the antithesis of the Labor Party's position of "us here, them there." One can also imagine versions of a two-state solution that are based on coexistence rather than separation.

Benvenisti's acknowledgement that Palestinian Arabs are an indigenous and natural part of the landscape of Palestine/Israel is akin to Lockman's "relational approach" to the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.[54] This method conceptualizes the conflict as a dynamic process involving the two (and often more) parties. It is therefore more likely to include Arab voices and Arab understandings of their experience of the conflict in the historical record. A relational approach does not imply parity on either the historical or political level. But any discussion of the history, sociology, or politics of Palestine/Israel from the late nineteenth century to the present must acknowledge that two peoples claim the land in question and account for the real social power informing their competing claims.

NOTES

1. Benny Morris, *Tikun ta'ut: yehudim ve-'aravim be-eretz yisra'el, 1936–1956* [Correction of an Error: Jews and Arabs in the Land of Israel, 1936–1956] (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 2000), p. 11.

2. Benny Morris, "The New Historigraphy: Israel Meets its Past," *Tikkun* (Nov.–Dec. 1988), pp. 19–23, 99–102. The revised Hebrew version was published as "Historiografiah hadasha: yisra'el pogeshet et 'avarah," in *Tikun ta'ut*, pp. 23–41.

3. A very prominent expression of this realignment was Morris's collaboration with Ehud Barak in an extended debate with Robert Malley and Hussein Agha over who was responsible for the failure of the July 2000 summit. See Benny Morris, "An Interview with Ehud Barak" and Robert

Malley and Hussein Agha, "A Reply to Ehud Barak," *New York Review of Books*, 13 June 2002; Benny Morris and Ehud Barak, reply by Robert Malley and Hussein Agha "Camp David and After—Continued," *New York Review of Books*, 27 June 2002.

4. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; second edition, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, 2004). Citations are to the first edition unless otherwise noted. Avi Shlaim's *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000) presents a more comprehensive reconsideration of Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors from 1948 to the 1990s and may ultimately be more significant. Published close to the outbreak of the second intifada when there was little Jewish receptiveness to critical assessments of Israel's history, the book has not received the attention it deserves.

5. Ilan Pappé has written one major book in Hebrew, *Atzulat ha-aretz: mishpahat al-Husayni, biografiah politit* [Aristocracy of the Land: The Husayni Family, a Political Biography] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2002), while a Hebrew translation of Avi Shlaim's *The Iron Wall* is underway.

6. Morris, *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, p. 206.

7. Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

8. For example, Elias Shoufani, "The Fall of a Village," *JPS* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1972), pp. 109–21; Nafez Nazzal, *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee, 1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1978). Much later and directed to a very different audience is 'Adil Manna', "Majd al-Krum 1948: 'amaliyyat tamshit 'adiyya" [Majd al-Krum 1948: An Ordinary Combing Operation], *al-Karmil* no. 55–56 (Spring–Summer 1998), pp. 184–200.

9. Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israeli in 1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992); Salim Tamari, ed., *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighborhoods and Their Fate in the War* (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 1999).

10. Constantine Zurayk coined the term *nakba* in *Ma'na al-nakba* (Beirut, 1948) translated as *The Meaning of the Disaster* (Beirut: Khayat's College Book Cooperative, 1956); 'Arif al-'Arif, *al-Nakba: Nakbat bayt al-maqdis wa'l-firdaws al-mafqud, 1947–1952* [The Catastrophe: The Catastrophe of Jerusalem and the Lost Paradise, 1947–1952], 6 vols. (Sidon and Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'asriya lil-tiba'a wal-nashr, 1956–61); Walid Khalidi, "Why did the Palestinians Leave?" *Middle East Forum* 35, no. 7 (July 1959), pp. 21–24, 35; "The Fall of Haifa," *Middle East Forum* 35, no. 10 (December 1959), pp. 22–32; and "Plan Dalet: The Zionist Blueprint for the Conquest of Palestine," *Middle East Forum* 37, no. 12 (November 1961), pp. 22–28.

11. Among its early publications was the Arabic edition of Sabri Jiryis's *The Arabs in Israel*, first published in Hebrew in 1966. It was published in English by IPS in 1968.

12. For example, Sami Hadawi, *Village Statistics, 1945: A Classification of Land and Area Ownership in Palestine, with Explanatory Notes* (Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organization Research Center, 1970).

13. For example, Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of Transfer in Zionist Thought, 1882–1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992) and *A Land Without a People: Israel, Transfer and the Palestinians, 1949–1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).

14. Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 36.

15. For more details see Joel Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There? Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel, 1948–1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

16. Tom Segev, *1949: The First Israelis* (New York: Free Press, 1986), p. 89.

17. Benny Morris, *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 159–211. Quote is from the Hebrew version, *Tikun ta'ut*, p. 17.

18. Aharon Cohen, "Mediniutenu ha-'aravit be-tokh ha-milhamah: ptihah le-berur be-va'adah ha-politit" [Our Arab Policy during the War: Introduction to a Discussion of the Political Committee], Aharon Cohen Papers, Merkaz te'ud ve-heker shel Ha-shomer Ha-Tza'ir, Giv'at

Haviva, 90.10.10(4); "Mediniutenu klapei ha-'aravim: hakhlatot ha-va'adah ha-politit me 15.6.48" [Our Policy toward the Arabs: Decisions of the Political Committee of 15 June 1948], *Miyoman ha-mazkirut* [From the Diary of the Secretariat] (23 June 1948), *Ibid*., 90.31 (2 gimel).

19. Shabtai Teveth, "The Palestinian Refugee Problem and Its Origins," *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 2 (April 1990), p. 221.

20. Khalidi, "Why did the Palestinians Leave?" demonstrated in 1959 that there were no such orders on the basis of a review of the contemporary Arab press, news agency reports, and Arab radio broadcasts (recorded and archived by the BBC). This Arab orders issue was exhaustively debated in the British *Spectator* by Jon Kimche, Erskine Childers, and Khalidi from May to August 1961, which may explain why Ben-Gurion raised it in the Knesset that October.

21. Ari Shavit, "Survival of the Fittest," *ha-Aretz* Friday supplement 9 January 2004, p. 15. Reprinted in Document C2, *JPS* 33, no. 3 (Spring 2004), pp. 166–73. Citations are from the Hebrew original (my translations when quoted).

22. Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, p. 136. Thanks to Eric Hooglund for assistance on this point.

23. One important expression of the counter-narrative of Israeli radicals, originally members of the Communist Party and subsequently founders of Matzpen, is A. Yisraeli [i.e., Akiva Orr and Moshe Machover], *Shalom, shalom, ve-ayn shalom: yisra'el-'arav, 1948–1961* [Peace, Peace, and There Is No Peace: Israel and the Arabs, 1948–1961] (Jerusalem: Weinfeld, 1961).

24. For details see Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There?*

25. *Ha-Aretz*, 4 April 1969.

26. Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), p. 5.

27. Ibid., p. 11.

28. Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Milhemet sholal* (Jerusalem: Domino Press, 1984). Translated into English as *Israel's Lebanon War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

29. Ibid., p. 10.

30. Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Hakhra'ot goraliot* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 1986). Translated into English as *Israel's Fateful Hour* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

31. For a critique of Harkabi's argument in his *Arab Attitudes toward Israel* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), see Joel Beinin, "Anti-Zionism, Anti-Semitism, and the Jewish Community in Egypt, 1939 to the Present," *Hagar: International Social Science Review* 3, no. 1 (2002), pp. 62–63.

32. Zachary Lockman, "Original Sin," in Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin, eds., *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), pp. 185–203.

33. Morris, *Tikun ta'ut*, p. 11.

34. Morris himself makes much of this change in his "Response to Finkelstein and Masalha," *JPS* 21, no. 1 (Autumn 1991), p. 114.

35. "On the Expulsion of the Remaining Arabs of Majdal to Gaza, 1950" and "Yosef Nahmani and the Arab Question in 1948," in *1948 and After*. Reassessments of Operation Hiram appear in "Gerush mivtza' hiram: tikun ta'ut" [The Expulsion of Operation Hiram: Correction of an Error], in *Tikun ta'ut* and in "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948" in Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 48–56.

36. Morris, "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948," p. 48.

37. Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

38. Benny Morris, "Ha-'itonut ha-yisra'elit be-parashat kibya, October–November 1953" [The Israeli Press in the Kibya Affair, October– November 1953], in *Tikun ta'ut*, pp. 184–85.

39. Morris, *1948 and After*, pp. 42–43.

40. Prominent examples of this idealist approach are Yosef Gorny, *Zionism and the Arabs, 1882–1948: A Study of Ideology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

41. *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, 23 November 2001, pp. 15, 16.

42. Morris, "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948," p. 48.

43. *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, 23 November 2001, p. 15.

44. "The Right of Return (I): An Interview with Benny Morris," *Tikkun*, March–April 2001, online at www.tikkun.org.

45. Shavit, "Survival of the Fittest."

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. See, for example, Teveth, "The Palestinian Refugee Problem and Its Origins"; and Anita Shapira, "Politics and Collective Memory: The Debate over the 'New Historians' in Israel," *History & Memory* 7, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 1995), pp. 9–40.

50. For example, Yoav Gelber, *Palestine 1948: War, Escape, and the Emergence of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2001) and the *Journal of Israeli History* 20, no. 2/3 (2001) whose entire issue is devoted to the new historians. Efraim Karsh, *Fabricating Israeli History: The New Historians* (London: Frank Cass, 1997) is a tendentious polemic (see my review in *Middle East Journal* 52, no. 3 [Summer 1998], pp. 448–50). Itamar Rabinovich, *The Road Not Taken: Early Arab-Israeli Negotiations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) is primarily an attempt to refute the early work of Avi Shlaim on post-1948 Arab-Israeli relations and says relatively little about the Palestinians.

51. Meron Benvenisti, *The West Bank Data Project: A Survey of Israel's Policies* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy, 1984).

52. Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

53. Interview with Ari Shavit, *ha-Aretz* Friday supplement, 8 August 2003.

54. Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*; see also Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There?* and Susan Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). The term "relational history" was coined by Perry Anderson in a different context in "Agendas for Radical History," *Radical History Review,* no. 36 (September 1986), pp. 32–37.