



O Jerusalem! by **Larry Collins and Dominique Lapiere**

Reviewed by John Dixon

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Written by a pair of journalists with a flair for popular history, *O Jerusalem!* was an international bestseller when it first appeared in 1972, and it can still be found in every Steimatzky bookstore in Jerusalem.¹ It is both history and

¹ The back cover of the original edition describes Larry Collins as "for more than ten years a foreign correspondent in North Africa, the Middle East and Europe, first for UPI and then for *Newsweek*, for which he was Paris Bureau chief." Of Dominique Lapiere it says he "was for many years a senior reporter and editor for *Paris-Match*." They collaborated on two other popular historical works, *Is Paris Burning?* (1965) and *Or I'll Dress You in Mourning* (1968), each of which were also international best sellers.

mythology. It is a panoramic account of the battle for Jerusalem during the 1948 war that draws on vast research and extensive interviews with a range of participants on both sides and that in many ways debunks stock Zionist accounts and anticipates the historical conclusions of the so-called "new" Israeli historians. At the same time it is a dramatization of the birth of Israel that powerfully rehearses certain central Zionist myths.

Its narrative technique is to tell the larger story of the war in Jerusalem by interweaving the stories of many individual participants, both Arabs and Jews, leaders and ordinary people. The narrative proceeds through an artful montage of these individual story lines, eliciting a strong sense of sympathy for characters as they become unwittingly entangled in events and suffer tragic twists of fate. The stories are told from an omniscient perspective from which we see not only into secret meetings and private gatherings, but also into the thoughts of the characters themselves. This novelistic technique brings history alive for the general reader. At the same time, unfortunately, it effectively puts the critical faculties asleep and convinces the reader that the story as it unfolds is nothing less than the unvarnished truth of an eyewitness account.

In reality, like all histories, this one is a selective construction of events shaped by historically situated interests and motives. *O Jerusalem!* was first published in 1972, in the wake of the 1967 war. In the war Israel had conquered extensive territory and demonstrated overwhelming military superiority, calling into question the myth

of Israel as a Masada—weak, beleaguered, and fighting for its survival against its hostile Arab neighbors.² I argue below that a central aim of the book is to reinforce the Israeli myth of self-defense. In its original context of publication this aim represents a reaction against the growing perception of Israel as an aggressive military power. By vividly re-telling the story of Israel's origin, the book seeks to restore Israel's image as a besieged fortress. At the same time, it cannot return to this myth in its pristine purity. To simply ignore unpleasant truths would discredit the old myths. This book has all the marks of an early effort to preserve fundamental Zionist narratives in a changed historical context, one which required assimilating unpleasant truths so as to reduce the high level of sheer cognitive dissonance that was beginning to build up at this stage of Western discourse about Israel.

The book is in fact remarkable for its disclosure of facts that stereotypical Zionist accounts previously suppressed. The opening chapter offers an example. There the authors mention the relative proportions of land ownership and population between Jews and Arabs in 1947 when the UN voted in favor of the partition plan, and explain why in view of these proportions the Arabs saw the hand-over of over half of Palestine to the Zionists, who constituted only a third of the population, as "a

² Significantly, the importance of the Masada story in Israeli national consciousness greatly diminished after the 1967 war (See Nachman Ben-Yahuda, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 254-56.

monstrous injustice thrust upon them by white Western imperialism in expiation of a crime they had not committed" (pp. 10-11).

As the narrative proceeds, they also make it clear that the Arab leadership were distressed at the exodus of Palestinians from Jerusalem and from towns and villages throughout the country during the early months of 1948 and, far from calling for people to leave, were doing everything in their power to force them to stay (pp. 203-04). Moreover, in the authors' treatment of the causes of the refugee problem, they offer a sophisticated analysis with striking parallels to Benny Morris's later revisionist treatment of the subject.³ For instance, they admit that in many cases the flight was the result of "a calculated Haganah policy" (p. 337), as in that of Operation Dani, which cleared out Lydda and Ramle (p. 554). It is important, however, to note what they are not saying. They are not arguing that during this phase the central Zionist leadership began implementing long-standing "transfer" plans to ethnically cleanse the country under the cover of war, as many Palestinian and other historians have argued.⁴ Indeed they do not even raise this as a possibility. Instead, like Morris the authors explain these expulsions as simply the outcome of ad hoc military considerations that developed during the course of the war. In their view, the early success of the Arab guerrilla attacks on the road to Jerusalem

prompted the Haganah to shift in April 1948 to a new policy (initiated in Operation Nahshon) of eradicating the towns and villages on which the Guerrilla forces relied for support (pp. 236-37).

Nevertheless, their account breaks with the traditional Zionist view that the Palestinian population simply left voluntarily or at the behest of Arab leaders. Like Morris, the authors also stress as contributing factors both the general breakdown of Palestinian Arab society with the departure of much of the traditional leadership during the civil war phase (pp. 334-38) and the effectiveness of Zionist psychological warfare, in particular the propaganda following the Deir Yassin massacre.

As for the massacre, far from downplaying it, they devote most of chapter 22 to a graphic account of it based on a painstaking examination of the evidence, even accepting the figure of approximately 250 killed, which Palestinian researchers themselves have recently questioned.⁵ The very fact they give so much attention to the massacre indicates what a critical ideological challenge it represents. Remarkably, the authors reach almost the same conclusion as Morris does some fifteen years later: that while the expulsion of villagers was pre-planned, the massacre itself was not.⁶ Unlike Morris, however, they mention nothing about the tacit Haganah approval of and military support for the initial

³ See Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

⁴ See Nur Masalha, "A Critique on Benny Morris," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no. 1 (Autumn 1991), pp. 90-97.

⁵ Sharif Kanani and Nihad Zitawi, *Deir Yasin*, Monograph No. 4, Palestinian Destroyed Villages series, second edition (Bir Zeit: Center of Documentation and Research, Bir Zeit University, 1987), p. 6 [Arabic].

⁶ Morris, *The Birth*, pp. 113-14.

attack.⁷ In fact they stress the moral outrage of the Haganah and the rest of the *Yishuv* at the news of the massacre, suggesting it was an exceptional incident carried out by unrepresentative, rogue elements. The rest of their account strongly resembles that of Morris. In their view, encountering unexpected resistance and inflamed by the losses they suffered, the Irgun forces went on a murderous rampage. Only afterwards did the Zionists see the propaganda value of what had happened, which they readily exploited. At the same time, the Palestine Arab leadership made a fatal miscalculation, deciding to spread the news of the massacre as a way to bring popular pressure on Arab regimes to enter the war. Instead of its desired effect, their propaganda just intensified the local climate of fear and became a major factor in causing Palestinians to flee (pp. 267-78).

The book also challenges the myth that the Zionist victory was a miracle that came out of the blue against a superior and unified Arab force bent on annihilating the *Yishuv*. In its analysis of the role of Jordan, it anticipates the work of Avi Shlaim, showing the secret collusion between Jordan and the Zionists and describing the way the forces of the Arab legion were held back at certain critical moments, particularly in May 1948 when the Jewish forces in West Jerusalem were at their weakest and might have been driven from their positions if Glubb Pasha had allowed them to go on the offensive.⁸ Moreover, it

⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

⁸ See pp. 342-43, 346-48 and 506-07. The seminal revisionist work on this subject is Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

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reveals through its vignettes of secret meetings and portraits of leading personalities how the other Arab leaders undertook military efforts only with great reluctance under immense popular pressure and how the forces they did send were inadequately trained and undersupplied.⁹ At the same time, it details the military resources the Zionists were secretly amassing and the speed with which they deployed them after the British departure.

Media critics who have studied the responses of newspaper readers have found that the photographs and headlines that accompany news stories leave a more lasting impression than the facts presented within the articles. Similarly, *O Jerusalem!* does not so much suppress facts as it downplays or minimizes them, submerging them within a larger drama that overwhelmingly supports the original myths. Indeed, in presenting unwelcome facts it creates the strong impression of a balanced and fair account, which lends the old myths a new resilience.

In setting the context of the struggle in chapter one, the authors introduce the themes that will predominate throughout the book. Far from critically examining Zionist claims about Jewish history and the *Yishuv*, they uncritically accept them as their own explanatory framework. They embrace Zionism's own self-representation according to which the Zionist project is the culmination of a 2,000 year old Jewish

⁹ In this regard it anticipates revisionist assessments of the military balance in 1947-48. For an example of the revisionist argument, see Ilan Pappé, "The Arab World Goes to War, or Does it? The General Arab Preparation," chapter 4 of *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-1951* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992).

desire to return to the Jewish homeland and re-establish the "ancient state" (xx). In Zionist fashion they also reduce, without any historical discrimination, all of Jewish history to a 2,000 year record of undifferentiated persecution culminating with the holocaust (pp. 5-10). And they make little mention of Zionist colonizing activities in Palestine prior to World War II so that the chief aim of the Zionist project comes across as that of providing a refuge for the victims of the Holocaust (p. 10).

Even before they introduce these themes, however, they have precluded certain perspectives on the 1948 war through their very choice of subject matter and time period. By bracketing some events and foregrounding others, their seemingly innocent choice to tell the story of Israel's birth through a depiction of the struggle over Jerusalem from late 1947 to mid-1948 works powerfully to preserve the central Zionist myth of "self-defense." Clearly, of all the aspects of the 1948 war, the events in Jerusalem from the General Assembly's vote in favor of the UN partition plan in November 1947 to the first truce in June of 1948 come closest to confirming the myth of the *Yishuv* as a David facing the Arab Goliath.¹⁰ And this is in fact precisely the period on which the book focuses, its coverage ending with the dramatic shift in the tide in Israel's favor during the so-

called "Ten Days," from 9-18 July 1948. The impression is that of an heroic and above all *defensive* struggle against overwhelming odds. For instance, the book gives extensive and disproportionate coverage to the Arab attack on the Jewish convoy sent to rescue the settlement of Kfar Etzion at the end of March 1948 (chapter 18) and the subsequent fall of the whole Etzion Bloc at the hands of the Arab legion in May (chapters 28 and 29). The book also dwells on the defeat of the Haganah forces at Latrun on 25 May (chapter 39); on the attack on the Jewish medical convoy in Sheikh Jarrah on 13 April (chapter 23); on the efforts of the Haganah in the spring of 1948 to re-supply the city; on the long struggle of the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem to eke out their supplies and survive Arab shelling (most of part four); and finally on the siege of the Jewish Quarter and its fall (chapter 40). Indeed, while the book mentions the Arab refugees from West Jerusalem, it does so in passing without any comparable individuation of the victims or lengthy dramatization of their stories.¹¹ One reads chapter after chapter about the water and food shortage facing the city's Jews during the winter and spring of 1948 and the efforts of convoys from Tel Aviv to break the siege, but the exodus of 30,000 Palestinians from their homes in West

¹⁰ Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal note that "From the Zionists' perspective the situation in March, 1948, looked grim, with Jerusalem cut off, the Etzion Bloc and other settlements under siege, and the Arab states poised for invasion upon the departure of the British. But such Palestinian successes were camouflage for deep political and military weakness" (*Palestinians: the Making of a People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 142).

¹¹ It covers the Arab exodus from West Jerusalem on pp. 307-08, 334, and 506 in passages which serve merely to tie up the narrative and make a transition to a new episode or scene. By contrast, the attempts to rescue the Jewish Quarter, its eventual fall, and the departure of its Jewish inhabitants to West Jerusalem occupy the better part of four chapters.

Jerusalem during the same period is mentioned only in two short passages which are placed later in the book as an afterthought when our attention is already focused on the imminent invasion of the Arab armies (pp. 307-08 and 334-35).

The impression of balance given by the focus on both Arab and Jewish participants diverts attention from this deeper imbalance and allows it to operate more insidiously. In fact, while the book features scattered profiles, story lines, and episodes in which Arabs are individualized, on the less conspicuous but more pervasive level of language and metaphor there is a disturbing strain of dehumanization and demonization. In the treatment of the Arab demonstrations of early December following the announcement of the Partition Plan, we have images of "howling women," of the crowd heading to the Jewish Quarter like "a rush of water bursting from a dyke," of a "rhythmic Arabic singsong" rising up from "the mob," which was "waving a forest of clubs and iron bars." We might first note that no mention is made in the depiction of these protests of the fact that they were followed by systematic, armed Haganah reprisals, which, at least according to the British, did much to escalate hostilities during this early phase.¹² An image of the Arabs as the violent instigators of the early clashes is etched in the reader's mind. Further, the "mob" itself is depicted as just a blind force

¹² On this point, see Nathan Krystall, "The Fall of the New City 1947-1950," in *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighbourhoods and their Fate in the War*, ed. Salim Tamari (Institute of Jerusalem Studies & Badil Resource Center, 1999), p. 96.

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of nature being controlled by the real mastermind, the Mufti, al-Hajj Amin al-Husseini, who is the book's leading villain. Just prior to this depiction we have learned how the Mufti had "orchestrated" and "provoked" (p. 42) the 1920 Nebi Musa demonstrations, the 1928-29 Wailing Wall disturbances, and the Arab revolt of 1936-39. He took the "ill-defined emotions" of the ordinary Arabs and "patiently coaxed the expository anger of the coffeehouse into the fury of the mob" (p. 40). This whole representation is informed by orientalist metaphors and bears little relation to the facts. As Philip Mattar has shown, during these episodes the Mufti was operating within the existing constraints of urban notable politics under British rule, pursuing Palestinian nationalist and anti-Zionist goals while trying not to alienate the British on whom his own power depended. He thus sought to moderate popular demonstrations and, far from being some sinister instigator, was largely responding in a cautious way to circumstances beyond his control.¹³

The book's portrayal of Arabs is symptomatic of projection, a self-defense mechanism that preserves an idealized self-image by imputing to the Other the ugly aspects of one's own behavior. How else can one explain the book's strange obsession with incidents of Arabs looting Jewish property and attempting to eradicate signs of the Jewish presence on the land? To give a feel for the dehumanizing

¹³ See Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 16-18, 33-49, and 68-70.

metaphors, here are just a few examples: "the villagers, scenting the loot ahead, swooped down like a swarm of locusts on the convoy" (p. 127). In another scene, "Shrieking their jubilant cries of victory, the [villagers] flung themselves on the abandoned trucks, ripping them to pieces" (p. 210). After detailing the frenzy of looting, the authors end with: "Soon, like the industrious files of their ancestors carrying stones to erect some prehistoric citadel, long columns of villagers began twisting up the hillside, bent by the weight of the booty they carried away" (p. 210). Later, Arab Legion soldiers are described as being "infected" by the "passion for looting" of the Arab irregulars (p. 366). Indeed such scenes are a prominent motif of the book. Now, according to a leading Israeli historian, more than 60 percent of the total land area of the fledgling state of Israel had been Arab property before the war. Moreover, "nearly a quarter of all the buildings in Israel, some 100,000 dwellings and 10,000 shops, businesses and stores" had been Arab-owned.¹⁴ Another Israeli historian notes that of the citrus holdings in Israel after the war, half had been Arab-owned, that in 1951 exports of Arab fruit provided nearly 10 percent of the country's foreign currency earnings, and that in 1949 the olive produce from abandoned Arab groves was Israel's third largest export.¹⁵ In view of these facts, it is curious that the chief images of plundering in the book involve Arabs plundering Jews. While

there are one or two mentions of Jews looting Arab properties in West Jerusalem, these are depicted either as random individual acts disapproved of by the authorities (pp. 404-05) or as supply raids necessary to defend the city (p. 384). Indeed, the official Zionist policy of systematically moving Jews into Arab homes in West Jerusalem to prevent their return goes unmentioned.¹⁶ While the book portrays a desire for loot as an almost innate aspect of the Arab character and the chief motivation of Arab soldiers, it always depicts the Jewish soldiers as motivated by selfless nationalist ideals.

The book is marred by other salient examples of this bias. Although the book describes both Arab and Jewish acts of terror during the Civil War phase, in its photograph section it shows only pictures of the three major Arab attacks. Further, the Jewish "terrorists" are individualized, and shown as idealistic nationalists, morally conflicted and self-doubting. What motivates the chief Arab "terrorist," Fawzi al-Kutub, however, is not nationalism, but pure blood-thirsty anti-Semitism, an inexplicable, inborn desire to destroy Jews.¹⁷ The cumulative effect of this kind of depiction of Arabs is to implicitly deny them the same level of nationalist consciousness as Jews, a stock Zionist trope.¹⁸ Finally, the authors represent the whole geography and landscape of the scenes in the book through

¹⁴ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to our Time* (New York: Knopf, 1998), p. 437.

¹⁵ Uri Davis, *Israel: An Apartheid State* (London: Zed Books, 1987), p. 20.

¹⁶ On this policy, see Krystall, "Fall of the New City," pp. 102-03.

¹⁷ Consider the passages on pp. 160-61 and on p. 328.

a Western, biblical, and Zionist lens so that the Zionist claim to the land is implicitly validated in every description of a town, a hill, or a valley.¹⁹

This book is worth reading for its wealth of stories about individual participants. One has a real sense of living through the events in Jerusalem during late 1947 and the first half of 1948. It is also valuable for its historical treatment of the behind-the-scenes decision-making of key leaders and for its anticipation of revisionist Israeli historians. At the same time it is replete with many unquestioned Zionist themes, metaphors, and stereotypes. Taken as a whole, its way of framing the war and the birth of Israel is typical of a new phase of pro-Israeli discourse in the West, one that revises the original myths to account for unpleasant truths in a way that leaves the basic structure in tact.

Consider the remarkable similarities between this 1972 book and a 1999 documentary, *The 50 Years War: Israel and the Arabs*, that was widely hailed in the United States as groundbreaking in its objectivity and fairness.²⁰ They both tell their stories through interviews with Arab and Jewish participants, thus making a show of "balance." In treating the rise of Israel, they both begin with the UN

partition plan and emphasize Arab intransigence in refusing to accept it. They both ignore the pre-1948 period of colonization and suggest that Israel was founded chiefly as a refuge for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In covering the war itself they both focus almost exclusively on the war in Jerusalem and in particular the Jewish efforts to break the Arab siege. They both only show images of Arab terror. They both dwell on Deir Yassin, admit the horror, but suggest the exceptional nature of the crime. They both point out the anguish with which Jewish sensibilities reacted to the massacre. In both accounts, the focus on Deir Yassin becomes a kind of badge by which fairness is proclaimed, while in fact each account obscures the dimensions and causes of the larger refugee problem. These similarities are not accidental, but point to a shared and socially maintained structure of interpretation. *O Jerusalem!* represents an important early manifestation of a new stage in the dialectical development of Western defenses of Israel, a stage that we are still in the midst of.

¹⁸ The trope is exemplified in Golda Meir's infamous remark: "It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country from them. They did not exist" (cited in *The Sunday Times*, 15 June 1969).

¹⁹ See in particular the description of the region along the Tel-Aviv-Jerusalem road on pp. 52-53.

²⁰ Produced by Brian Lapping Associates and co-produced by WGBH, Boston, and the BBC.