



Lessons of the Holocaust and their Application in Israel and Palestine

Abstract

This essay examines the connections between the Holocaust and the ongoing conflict in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This essay discusses their historical connection, as well as the application of humanist lessons from the Holocaust. This includes the consideration of Raphael Lemkin's efforts through pursuing international laws to prevent crimes against humanity such as genocide. This will be done through an examination of the work from Israeli New Historians and scholars who are descendants of Holocaust survivors.

History is connected with memory, justice, and identity. The current injustices of today, specifically in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) are of historical origin. To better understand the complexity of the conflict, it is necessary to have a solid grasp on what actually happened. That becomes problematic when neither side can agree on what occurred from the events that preceded the founding of Israel to today. The predominating Israeli historical narrative and worldview are informed by the collective trauma of the Holocaust. This is possible even when the majority of the Israeli population did not experience the Holocaust firsthand. Any challenge or criticism directed toward Israel, whether it be the historical narrative or an individual policy, is understandably viewed as a threat to the security of a Jewish state.

“Never again” is the phrase most often associated with the Holocaust. It is a mantle that the world took upon itself following one of the worst genocides in human history. Never again would a crime against humanity of that scale be allowed to take place. Never again would a second Holocaust against the Jewish people occur. The creation of the state of Israel in the wake of the Holocaust was seen as a potential safe haven for the survivors who had experienced the worst crimes against humanity. A strong Israeli state continues to be viewed as the best defense against a second Holocaust, along with a robust set of international laws to prevent crimes against humanity. The efforts of Raphael Lemkin to prevent crimes of genocide is an integral component of codified international law and the prevention of such crimes against humanity. However, the magnitude of the Holocaust and its implications ultimately overshadow the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians which occurred in conjunction with the establishment of the state of Israel. The failure to reconcile the Holocaust, the founding of the Israeli state, and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians continues to have a resounding impact on how the conflict is approached and studied.

The state of Israel is the product of Zionist efforts to provide a Jewish homeland that would protect them from the virulent antisemitism of Europe and America. The father of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, promoted Jewish immigration to Palestine with the goal of founding a Jewish state in their historic and Biblical homeland.¹ Early in the twentieth century, proponents of Zionism would continue to encourage immigration while negotiating with the British on the formal establishment of a Jewish State. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 was the first official support of the British government for such a state.² Implementation of such a state would stagnate during the British Mandate of Palestine following the First World War, however the Zionist movement gained momentum and support once Western powers recognized the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis that was being created by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust.

Prior to the current political stalemate and occupation, the conflict between Palestinians and Israel was exponentially exacerbated with the creation of the Israeli state in 1948. Palestinians and early Jewish settlers previously had amicable working relations with each other until it became clear that the goal of Zionism was to establish a Jewish homeland that did not include Arabs.³ Following the 1948 War between Israel and Palestinians, 78% of Mandatory Palestine was ceded to Israel.⁴ During this time, 700,000 Palestinians were forced from their homes and became refugees.⁵ This is referred to as النكبة (al-Nakba) in Arabic, or the catastrophe. This term is still used to describe the continued displacement and oppression of the Palestinian people

¹ Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 4.

² Balfour, A., 1917. *The Balfour Declaration*. [Letter to Lord Rothschild] WWI D.A, Official Papers.

³ Ilan Pappé, *Ten Myths about Israel* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2017), 43.

⁴ Great Britain was granted a mandate over the Palestinian region after it was ceded by the Ottoman Empire between 1920 and 1948.

⁵ Amnesty International, "Israel Must Respect Rights of Return for Palestinians," August 17, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/05/israels-refusal-to-grant-palestinian-refugees-right-to-return-has-fuelled-seven-decades-of-suffering/>.

today. Since 1967, the remaining 22 per cent of land – referred to as the OPT – has either been occupied or is controlled by the Israeli army. Israeli actions within these territories slowly and methodically strip the indigenous Palestinian people of land and water resources necessary to sustain a population.⁶ Tensions between Israel and Arab nations over Palestine and other regional conflicts led to multiple armed conflicts, including the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Considering that the dispute between the Israelis and Palestinians over the land of Palestine only began in the early twentieth century, the contested history and relationship between the two has generated prolific academic scholarship. This vast historiography cannot be succinctly addressed in an essay of this length. Therefore, this essay will focus on two components of academic research within the historiography of the conflict. The first is a wave of scholarship that occurred in the 1980's by Israeli historians. The second will focus on scholarship conducted by two children of Holocaust survivors, and how they relate their personal history with that of their research.

The New Israeli Historians were a group of Israeli scholars that began challenging the traditional Israeli historical narrative in the 1980's. Among the original four New Historians are Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, and Simha Flapan; they were eventually joined by other historians and sociologists including Tom Segev. This wave of scholarship was spurred by the declassification of Israeli government papers from the establishment of Israel. The New Historians used these primary source documents to confront what they saw as a one-sided narrative. While they were initially criticized for challenging what was then the conventional Zionist account, their work spurred debate in both academic and public spheres. The New

⁶ Sandra Guimarães and Anne Paq, "Sowing Seeds of Resistance: The Fight for Food Sovereignty in Palestine," *Equal Times*, July 19, 2019, <https://grain.org/en/article/6299>.

Historians vary in their focus and do not necessarily agree on every detail. They largely disputed five aspects of the Israeli narrative. For example, they asserted that the Palestinians did not leave on their own accord, but that they were forcibly expelled.⁷ The official history had claimed that the Arabs were united with a coordinated plan to destroy Israel; the New Historians claim that they were in fact divided. Along the same lines, it had been said that the balance of power in the Middle East had weighed in the Arabs favor, yet this was dispelled by the New Historians who found Israel had the advantage in terms of manpower and arms over the Arabs.⁸

One of the most prominent New Historians is Benny Morris. His first book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, was among the first to address the Palestinian refugee crisis that was a result of the war in 1948. Morris relies heavily on documents from 1947-1949, making the decision to largely exclude personal interviews, as he considered them to be more fallible than contemporary documents.⁹ In this book, Morris concluded that of the 700,000 Palestinians who fled their homes, most left due to Israeli military actions, fear of impending attacks, as well as expulsions. Morris asserts that there was no centralized plan to expel the Palestinians, but that it occurred within the context of a war when necessary. He also outlines atrocities perpetrated by Israelis, to include cases of rape and torture.¹⁰ Morris is commended for his scholarship and dedication, even by his critics.¹¹

Ilan Pappé is possibly the most prolific writer among the New Historians and has authored almost twenty books on topics related to Israel, Palestine, and 1948. *The Ethnic*

⁷ Benny Morris and Ilan Pappé disagree in regard to the planning and timing of the Palestinian displacement. Morris believes that the displacement happened in the heat of the war; Pappé suggests that it was planned by Zionist leaders so that they would have a demographically homogenous Jewish state.

⁸ *History Is Relevant: The Israeli New History and Its Legacy*. Case Western Reserve University, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SuvUo3Ub1aY>.

⁹ Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem: 1947-1949* (Cambridge, MA: Univ. Pr, 1994), 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 230.

¹¹ Norman Finkelstein, "Myths, Old and New," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no. 1 (1991): pp. 66-89, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.1991.21.1.00p0066y>, 85.

Cleansing of Palestine is one of his most notable works. Pappé diverges from Morris and asserts that the Zionist movement did not wage a war that led to the inevitable expulsion of parts of the indigenous population, but that the goal was to ethnically cleanse all of Palestine in order to create a demographically homogenous state because that was the only method to ensure Israel's security.¹² He acknowledges that while this is an accusation, he is Israeli, and therefore part of the society that he condemns.¹³ Pappé begins by defining the term "ethnic cleansing" and then demonstrates how the events in 1948-49 meet the definition standard of the forced expulsion of an "undesirable" population group from a particular territory due to religious or ethnic discrimination throughout *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*.¹⁴

A later addition to the class of New Historians, Tom Segev considers the role of the Holocaust in Israeli history, society, identity, and policy in *The Seventh Million*. Prior to the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961, Segev notes that the Holocaust was a taboo subject because it did not align with the heroic narrative Israel had established since its war of independence.¹⁵ Later, the Holocaust was adopted as a means to justify Israeli policies, foreign and domestic. In this work, Segev largely focuses on Israeli perspective of the Holocaust and its change over the years, without often mentioning the Israeli military occupation. However, he concludes his work by suggesting the humanist lessons of the Holocaust learned by Israeli society should translate to the treatment of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers.¹⁶

There are two notable American academics that must also be considered due to their unique perspective having been raised by survivors of the holocaust outside of Israel. Sara Roy

¹² *History Is Relevant: The Israeli New History and Its Legacy*. Case Western Reserve University, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SuvUo3UblAY>.

¹³ Ibid. a

¹⁴ Pappé, Ilan. *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. London, England: Oneworld, 2015. 5.

¹⁵ Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: the Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 8.

¹⁶ Ibid, 517.

and Norman Finkelstein are openly critical of Israeli policies towards Palestinians. They have both authored works addressing the use of the Holocaust to defend Israeli actions in the OPT. This has exposed both to criticism for their views.

Roy has published multiple books on the Gaza Strip and is outspoken regarding the influence of the impact that being a child of Holocaust survivors has had on her academic work. Her father was one of the few survivors of Chelmno and her mother was sent to the labor camp at Auschwitz by Joseph Mengele.¹⁷ In an essay titled “Living with the Holocaust: The Journey of a Child of Holocaust Survivors”, Roy discusses the lessons that her parents imparted upon her. She also notes the denigration of the Holocaust by her Israeli friends and how they viewed it as shameful that Jews were “willingly slaughtered”.¹⁸ That is then juxtaposed by the state usage of the Holocaust as a justification for political and military acts. Roy draws parallels between Nazis and Israeli soldiers based on her own fieldwork in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. She writes that their acts “were absolutely equivalent in principle, intent, and impact: to humiliate and dehumanize”.¹⁹

Roy has experienced backlash in light of her views. In 2007, Roy was commissioned to write a book review on *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, written by Matthew Levitt. In this review, Roy criticized Levitt’s analysis of Hamas as simply a terrorist organization striving to destroy Israel.²⁰ She noted that Levitt largely neglects the Israeli military occupation, which she found problematic since Hamas derives much of its popularity as a resistance organization to the occupation. Roy argued that Levitt’s portrayal of Hamas is detached from the context from which it originated, the Israeli military occupation. Roy claimed

¹⁷ Sara Roy, “Living with the Holocaust: The Journey of a Child of Holocaust Survivors,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 2002): pp. 5-12, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2002.32.1.5>, 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

²⁰ Sara Roy, “Book Reviews,” *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2 (2007): pp. 162-166, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2007.00306.x>, 165.

that her book review which had previously been approved by the editor-in-chief of *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, the foreign policy journal of Tufts University, was subsequently censored upon further review by other editors. In the email notifying Roy that the journal would not be moving forward with her piece, the editor-in-chief stated that her review was one-sided, which dissuaded readers from fully reading the piece.²¹

Finkelstein is a controversial, but impassioned scholar of the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Like Roy, Finkelstein is compelled by the experience of his parents to speak out against the treatment of Palestinians. His father was a survivor of Auschwitz and his mother survived Majdenek concentration camp. This upbringing led him to become not only a scholar, but also a pro-Palestinian activist. After giving a lecture at the University of Waterloo in Canada, a tearful German student said that his lecture, which referenced Nazis, was offensive to Germans and those who actually had suffered the Holocaust. Finkelstein responded:

“It is precisely and exactly because of the lessons my parents taught me and my two siblings that I will not be silent when Israel commits its crimes against the Palestinians. And I consider nothing more despicable than to use their suffering and their martyrdom to try to justify the torture, the brutalization, the demolition of homes that Israel daily commits against the Palestinians. So, I refuse any longer to be intimidated or browbeaten by the tears. If you have any heart in you, you would be crying for the Palestinians”.²²

Finkelstein has authored works titled *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History* and *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*. In both books, Finkelstein has the tendency to exercise hyperbolic language in the process of proving his arguments, which often lambast previous scholarship. This opens Finkelstein’s work to widespread criticism and dismissal by other academics. His work also receives praise for asking tough questions that may not have correct answers.

²¹ Ibid, 163.

²² *American Radical: The Trials of Norman Finkelstein*, 2009.

Recent academic work, particularly that of Pappé, Finkelstein, and Roy, has highlighted the hypocrisy in the use of the Holocaust as an ideological weapon and the justification for Israeli actions against the Palestinians. Their work does much to inextricably link the Holocaust with creation of a Jewish Israeli state in 1948, the expulsion of Palestinians during the Nakba, and the current military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. However, this is not well received by many and has not necessarily been adopted as the predominant narrative.

Factors that perpetuate the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians are reminiscent or a direct result of the Holocaust. These factors include a predominant “us versus them” mentality. This mentality stems from the Israeli objective to prevent a second Holocaust by the Arabs. Israelis prioritize safety and defense of the state. The ends justify the means, even if it means treating the Palestinians in a manner similar to that of the Nazis. The Israeli historical narrative continues to disconnect the creation of the Israeli state with the displacement and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. Palestinians, however, have not forgotten and continue to resist Israeli settler-colonialism, sometimes through violence.

The same “us versus them” mentality that designates the outsider population as an existential threat to the insider population that is associated with the antisemitism of Nazi Germany, also pervades Israeli ideology. However, this ideology is not insidious like that of antisemitism. It is informed by collective trauma as a result of antisemitism. For centuries “the Jew” was built up as a threatening figure to Christian and Western ideals.²³ This enabled Hitler to capitalize on developed tropes that were then used to justify the debasement and mass murder of Jews.²⁴ David Ben Gurion, the Zionist leader during the establishment of Israel,

²³ Beth Griech-Polelle, *Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust: Language, Rhetoric, and the Traditions of Hatred* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

antagonistically viewed the Palestinians as an existential threat to the Jews. Ben Gurion concerned himself with the concept of security, *bitachon* in Hebrew.²⁵ *Bitachon* has since been adopted as an overarching policy that justifies core Israeli policies, to include the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and the current military occupation.²⁶

The dehumanization and inhumane treatment of Jews under Nazi occupation is similar to the Palestinians experience since 1948 under Israeli occupation. If that comparison is made however, that would mean that the aggressors are similar as well which leads to an uncomfortable conclusion for those who make it. In her essay *Living with the Holocaust*, Roy gently draws such a comparison via rhetorical questions:

“What does it mean when Israeli soldiers paint identification numbers on Palestinian arms; when young Palestinian men and boys of a certain age are told through Israeli loudspeakers to gather in the town square; when Israeli soldiers openly admit to shooting Palestinian children for sport; when some of the Palestinian dead must be buried in mass graves while the bodies of others are left in city streets and camp alleyways because the army will not allow proper burial; when certain Israeli officials and Jewish intellectuals publicly call for the destruction of Palestinian villages in retaliation for suicide bombings or for the transfer of the Palestinian population out of the West Bank and Gaza; when 46 percent of the Israeli public favors such transfers and when transfer or expulsion becomes a legitimate part of popular discourse; when government officials speak of the “cleansing of the refugee camps”; and when a leading Israeli intellectual calls for hermetic separation between Israelis and Palestinians in the form of a Berlin Wall, caring not whether the Palestinians on the other side of the wall may starve to death as a result. What are we supposed to think when we hear this? What is my mother supposed to think?”²⁷

It is a disturbing comparison to make, especially for a Jewish scholar whose parents survived the persecution of the Nazis. Israelis justify the dehumanization of the Palestinians through *bitachon* because they, or Arabs collectively, are the viewed by the Israelis as the purveyor of a potential second Holocaust. This is the direct result of an “us versus them” mentality.

²⁵Pappé Ilan, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2015), 26.

²⁶ Ibid, 27.

²⁷ Sara Roy, “Living with the Holocaust: The Journey of a Child of Holocaust Survivors,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 2002): pp. 5-12, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2002.32.1.5>, 12.

With regard to the treatment and displacement of Palestinians; Jewish memory and historical narrative falters. It denies the reality of Palestinian suffering and Jewish culpability. It is difficult for Israelis to acknowledge that in order to find their own homeland, they had to take it from and displace the Palestinians. Israeli settlers continue to displace Palestinians within the West Bank today. Palestinians have responded to the ongoing settler colonialism and the denial of the human rights by resisting the military occupation, sometimes through violence and the use of terrorism as a tactic. This resistance then validates the use of Israeli oppressive force in the OPT, thus perpetuating the conflict.

Even the unintentional distortion of history can perpetuate a conflict. In the case of Israel and Palestine, it has resulted in ethnic cleansing, oppression, and the continued displacement of Palestinians through settler-colonialism and apartheid. When the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel are not connected with the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, it distorts the narrative of history. It also prevents the humanist lessons of the Holocaust to be applied to the conflict by either side. The hesitancy of the world to hold Israel accountable for the denial of human rights in the OPT is a result of the magnitude of the Holocaust and denies the Palestinians justice through the international courts of law. When confronted with the unchecked realities of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, silence and inaction by the international community that claimed “never again” indicates that we have not yet learned from the Holocaust. It would also seem as though the law is not enough to prevent crimes against humanity, as Lemkin had hoped. Lemkin would be crying for the Palestinians, just as he did when the UN ratified the Genocide Convention in 1948.²⁸

²⁸ Christopher P. Gilkerson, “Raphael Lemkin: a Brief Biographical Sketch”, (Yale Law School, 1989), 2.

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