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Introduction

During the past two decades Israel has been undergoing a historiographic revolution. Scholars in their hundreds have assailed the archives, and a torrent of books, articles, and MA and PhD theses has poured forth. Inevitably, a substantial part of this revolution has focused on the history of Zionism and Israel, and particularly on the main foundational crises—the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948, the Holocaust that preceded it, and the traumatic waves of immigration that followed Israel's establishment.

One may link the historiographic revolution to Israel's growth. Back in the early 1950s, there were about 1 million Israelis and a state budget of 250 to 300 million dollars; today there are 6.5 million Israelis, and a state budget of 30 to 40 billion dollars. Back then, there was one university; today there are six with an additional two dozen or more undergraduate colleges. The growth in spending on education and research has been commensurate.

But the revolution also testifies to a radical intellectual change. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s—as a result of natural processes of social and political maturation and a series of major political-military upheavals, including the 1973 October War, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the first Palestinian Intifada of 1987–91—hearts and minds grew more amenable to exploring in depth the history of the Zionist enterprise and its conflict with the surrounding Arab world.

The revolution was no doubt spurred by the opening of archives and the declassification of masses of documents in the West (in, among others, Britain's Public Record Office (PRO), the U.S. National Archives (NA), and the United Nations Archives) relating to the Middle East and Palestine/the Land of Israel in the 1940s and 1950s. But the key, of course, has been the opening of Israeli archives, including the Israel State Archives (ISA), the repository of the various ministries' papers; the Central Zionist Archives (CZA), which houses the Zionist movement's and institutions' papers; the Haganah and Israel Defense Forces (IDF) archives; and a host

of smaller political party and local archives. Israel enjoys a liberal Archives Law (1955), by comparison with other Western democracies, and during the 1980s and 1990s it was applied liberally (some might say with abandon) in line with the more open, liberal ethos of Israeli society itself. Reams of documents, including many on sensitive subjects, were opened to public scrutiny (although historians like me might legitimately bemoan the continued classification of certain documents or segments of documents).

The revisionist or “New Historiography,” which sought to reexamine the Zionist enterprise, including its conflict with the Arab world and its relationship with the Holocaust, with a new, critical eye, was based on the coupling of this newfound intellectual openness and the newly opened archives. The result was a historiographic earthquake. The work of the New Historians, who began publishing in the mid-1980s, tended to undermine the research, and some of the basic political-ideological assumptions, of the previous generation of historians, today commonly called the “Old Historians,” whose work, produced in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, tended to transfigure Zionism and Israel and sweep under the carpet anything that might tarnish their image. (And, let it be noted, these Old Historians have spawned a generation of younger historians, fine-tuned in their image, who I would call “New Old Historians.” Entrenched in the country’s universities, they continue to purvey a propagandistic view of Israel’s past.)

From the start, with the publication of their first essays and books in the 1980s, the New Historians significantly affected the whole domain of Israeli historiography, including those who opposed and dismissed them as anti-Zionist and pro-PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) and those who took a more neutral stance.

Let me give an illustration of that almost instantaneous (in historiographic terms) impact. In 1994 the Israel Defense Ministry Press published *In the Path of the Desert and Fire: The History of the Ninth Armored Battalion, 1948–1984*, by Col. (Res.) Moshe Giv’ati. The research and writing were facilitated, and, I believe, financed, by the IDF History Department. Alongside straightforward sketches of battles, the book describes the massacre of civilians in the conquered Arab village of Breir in May and the murder of Egyptian prisoners of war in October 1948 by Ninth Battalion troops. Such accounts would never have been included in a book spawned by the History Department and published by the Defense Ministry Press a decade before; for decades the two were redoubts of Israel’s Old Historiography. The appearance of the New

Historiography, replete with descriptions of savagery by Jewish troops and Zionist political skullduggery, without doubt facilitated this new-found openness in the heart of the Israeli defense establishment. The new wave thus contributed to the significant expansion of the realm of the permissible in Israeli historiographic discourse, while at the same time, through its headline-grabbing contentiousness, it increased interest in Zionism's and Israel's history in the Israeli public and the Jewish diaspora.

It is possible that over time the new wave will lead to basic changes in the nation's collective memory. Perhaps it has already done so. About five years ago, Israel's then education minister, Limor Livnat, spoke blandly on Israel State Television (IST) about "the expulsion of the Arabs" (*geirush ha'aravim*) in 1948. (I would use a softer more nuanced term to describe what happened, as alongside those who were expelled many more simply fled.) This is something no Israeli official would have said, let alone publicly broadcast, only a few years before.

The school—as it came to be seen—of New Historians, unusually, did not spring from within the Israeli university establishment. Indeed, the school's most prominent critics were pillars of that establishment—historians such as professors Itamar Rabinovich, the president of Tel Aviv University (TAU); and Anita Shapira, its former dean of humanities. The early New Historians were essentially outsiders in terms of Israeli academia: Tom Segev (author of *1949: The First Israelis*; *The Seventh Million*; and *One Palestine, Complete*) is a columnist for *HaAretz*, Israel's leading daily newspaper, with a PhD from an American university, and Avi Shlaim (*Collusion across the Jordan*; and *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*) is a professor of international relations at Oxford University, who obtained his BA and PhD in England. I (*The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949*; *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956*; and *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–1999*) was a journalist with the *Jerusalem Post* until 1991, with a PhD in modern European history from Cambridge University. (I have held a university post in Israel, at Ben-Gurion University, only since 1997.) In other words, none of us was trained as a researcher in an Israeli university, none had held a position in one, and none had read Middle Eastern, Israeli, or Jewish history. (Cultural sociologists may one day investigate why it was that Israel's universities, during the first three or four decades of the state's existence, were bastions of conservatism, not to say whitewashing, in all that concerned the history of Zionism and Israel, and why it was that the New Historiography emerged among a set of journalists and non-Israeli academics.)

The first essay in this collection, my “The New Historiography: Israel Confronts Its Past,” was originally published at the end of 1988 in the American Jewish magazine *Tikkun*. Even though it has been republished a number of times since, it is fitting that it open this collection as it both announced the emergence of the New Historiography and defined the main terms of the debate that followed between this historiography and its critics.

Various historians have pointed to this essay as the source of the terms *New* and *Old Historiography* and *New* and *Old Historians*; in it, as it were, they were coined. But perhaps this is as good a place as any to clarify that this is not completely accurate. On 28 July 1988 the cultural critic Richard Bernstein published an article in the *New York Times* entitled “Birth of the Land of Israel: A History Is Revisited,” hailing the publication of three revisionist studies of the first Arab-Israeli War of 1947–49: Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (1987); Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (1988); and Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan* (1988). Bernstein spoke of “the new scholarship” and said that it was “more self-critical” than previous Israeli (and Arab) works. My *Tikkun* essay, introducing the new terminology, followed four months later.

The revisionist wave that is passing over Israeli historiography has some exceptional features. The historiography of Western democracies has been characterized by a fixed pattern: a traditional or official narrative is followed by a revisionist wave, which, in turn, generates a round of counterrevisionism, harking back to and reinforcing at least some of the tenets of the official narrative. This is followed by a counter-counterrevisionist wave, upholding the essence of the original revisionism, and so on. Each wave co-opts and synthesizes some of the findings of the previous wave, the upshot usually being a continuous refinement and amplification of the data and their interpretations. Such, for example, has been the course of the historians’ debate about the Cold War.

Usually, relating to revolutions or wars, revisionism takes place decades after the apogee or end of a critical event or process, when passions have cooled and possible political repercussions have diminished. In Israel’s case, the revisionism, or New Historiography, occurred (and is still occurring) while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is still with us and is, indeed, in an upsurge.

Second, as some critics have pointed out, Israel’s Old Historiography was in a sense merely a “prehistory,” not academic historiography at all. Much of it, indeed, was written by politicians, such as Ben-Gurion,

who were players in the events described and was not based on repositories of contemporary documentation (as all good history must be). In this view, then, Israel's current New Historiography is not really revisionist or is revisionist only vis-à-vis the collective memory shaped by the Zionist establishment; indeed, in this reading, the New Historiography is really the *first* wave of serious, academic historiography, and it has yet to be confronted and assailed by a revisionist nemesis.

A question arises about where Israeli historiography is heading. Prediction is always hazardous. But some tentative lines appear to be emerging. Clearly, a relatively large number of MA and PhD students and young lecturers in history and adjacent fields have embarked on highly detailed local, social, and economic histories. What exactly happened in Haifa, Rehovot, and the Jezreel Valley in the course of 1948? How did the Yishuv's economy function under conditions of mass mobilization, siege, and war? What happened to Tel Aviv's nightlife during the war? How was depopulated Arab Jaffa reconstructed by young Israel's town planners and architects? How did women fare in the first years of Israeli statehood? Why did Arab farmers sell land to the Zionist settlement bodies? These are the types of questions being answered by young Israeli academics in articles and books recently published or currently being researched, and one can expect such local, socioeconomic, and gender research to expand in the coming years. One can expect this questioning to be open and forthright in part—I believe—because of the initial spadework done by the New Historians. The upshot will be a further deconstruction of the traditional narrative or narratives—but also interesting reconstructions. How all this will affect Israel's education system and society in general is unclear. (One is forced to recall Chou En Lai's response when asked about the long-term consequences of the French Revolution: "I'm afraid it is too early to say.")

During the summer of 1988, probably prompted by Bernstein's article, the editor of *Tikkun*, Michael Lerner, organized a dialogue between a group of Israeli historians representing the Old and New trends. I recall the presence of the late Netanel Lorch, the author of the Old classic history of the 1948 war, *The Edge of the Sword* (1961, originally published, in Hebrew, in 1958), and Ilan Pappé, a young Haifa University historian, the author of the hesitantly New history, *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948–1951* (1988). Lerner had hoped to publish the dialogue as is but found it lacked focus and force, and so he asked me to write an article describing the dialogue, and the hastily written "The New Historiography: Israel Confronts Its Past" emerged.

During the dialogue itself, or while writing the article, it occurred to me that Israeli historiography had apparently reached a watershed or turned a corner and a New Historiography had been born. The article announced the birth.

The article—along with the new books—came in for vociferous criticism from enraged Old Historians and their champions. The Old Historians by and large shared the common experience and memory of 1948, viewing it as the golden moment of their lives and the pivotal event in their maturation. The New Historiography sullied both their youth and their professional reputations.

The new wave's critics, including the Israeli novelist Aharon Megged and Anita Shapira, have argued that the New Historians constructed, and are spreading, a false, or partially false, picture of Zionist and Israeli history, a picture that aids Israel's enemies in the ongoing propaganda battle that is a component of the state's larger struggle for survival in a very hostile and vicious neighborhood.

More specifically, some have charged that the New Historiography has helped persuade Israel's leaders to be more—or too—conciliatory toward the Palestinians, contributing to the “weakening of Israel.” And there is probably a small measure of truth in this. To be sure, the New Historiography has affected the Israeli leadership's and public's political perceptions and positions.

But I would say that the effect has been far smaller than has been suggested. The gradual change in Israeli attitudes and policies in the late 1980s and early 1990s toward the Palestinians—which led to the recognition by the government, under Yitzhak Rabin, of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and the start of peace negotiations that were designed to lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel—was the product mainly of the maturation and liberalization of Israeli society and of the Palestinian Intifada (or revolt) during 1987–91 against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The bulk of Israeli society came to understand that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) could not indefinitely rule millions of resisting Palestinians and that the Palestinians, too, would need to have a state of their own. In other words, long-term historical processes and a traumatic historical reality were infinitely more important to generating the Oslo peace process than the scribblings of a handful of historians.

What we have here is a case of coincidence rather than causality. The emergence of the New Historiography was not so much a trigger as an expression, one expression, of that wider liberalization of Israeli so-

ciety and values that eventually led to the new political openness toward the Palestinians. They “happened” at the same time. Nevertheless, undeniably the New Historiography in some ways dovetailed with the evolving mind-set of the educated, Ashkenazi-dominated elite that ran Israel during the Rabin years.

And perhaps in one or two individual cases the New Historiography affected, or at least buttressed, political opinions and positions. One of the architects of the Oslo peace process, which began with secret Israeli-Palestinian talks in Scandinavia in late 1992 and early 1993, once told me that he kept a well-annotated copy of *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* by his bedside and instructed his subordinates, who were attempting to negotiate a solution to the refugee problem with the PLO, to read the book.

The New Historians responded energetically to the Old Historians’ criticisms. But, reflecting on the matter over the years, I can now see that some of their criticisms, and those of others, were to the point. I would now add some of my own. The 1988 article had too narrow a focus—the portrayal of the 1948 war—and failed to note that other fields of study (the Sephardi question, the Yishuv and the Holocaust, etc.) were also being revamped by a handful of Israeli sociologists and historians and that the new thinking about 1948 was merely a part—albeit a major part—of a broader historical wave. And the article failed, even within the context of studying the Arab-Israeli conflict, to give any or at least sufficient credit to a number of scholars who had published on the subject before 1987–88. More tellingly, the article painted a picture in strokes that were too rough and broad (and merciless), lacking in nuance and bereft of compassion for several Old Historians who had labored under difficult censorial constraints and, despite their failings, had significantly contributed to historical understanding and, yes, had occasionally even strayed from the consensual narrative.

Nonetheless, the article was immediately perceived by historians in the field as a benchmark and a manifesto, as it were, of the New Historiography that defined the contours of an emergent controversy—the first major controversy in Israeli historiography. This is why it has been included and can be construed as constituting a sort of introduction for the collection that follows.

While most of the books by the New Historians and some by the Old Historians and their successors have appeared in English, much of the historiographical polemic has appeared only in Hebrew publications in Israel. This volume intends to provide the English-speaking reader

with in-depth coverage of the controversy. Side by side with essays by New and Old Historians, the volume includes articles by “neutrals,” who throw an external, if not necessarily objective, light on the issues. The essays touch on, directly or obliquely, the full panoply of subjects tackled during the past two decades, including the historiography of the Zionist-Arab conflict and the relationship between the Yishuv/Israel and the Holocaust. A number of essays deal with the evolution of personal and collective memories and how these have interfaced with historiography. Sociologists, “Old” and “Critical,” analyze the contradictory descriptions of the development of Israeli society, and a historian examines the historiographic treatment of the Sephardi (or Eastern Jewish) immigration to Israel.

The volume can be roughly divided into two parts: essays that relate to the historiography of the relations between the Yishuv/Israel and the Arab world and essays that relate to the historiography of internal Israeli/Jewish problems.

Following my piece, the volume kicks off with an essay by Mordechai Bar-On—a veteran IDF officer who later became a prominent peace activist and a left-wing Knesset member before turning to historiography—on the relationship between personal memory, collective memory, and historiography concerning the 1948 war (in which he participated as a soldier and about which he has written as a historian). Yoav Gelber, a leading political and military historian of Israel, gives us a comprehensive survey of the march of Israeli historiography from its prestate beginnings up to the current Old-New controversy. Avi Shlaim provides us with an overview of the Old-New historiographic controversy concerning the 1948 War. His essay is preceded by Anita Shapira’s on S. Yizhar’s “The Story of Hirbet Hizah.” The story, published in 1949, fictionally depicted the Israeli conquest of an Arab village and the expulsion of its inhabitants, and it is almost unique in Israeli literature in describing part of the “dark side” of Israel’s war of establishment. Shapira, perhaps the doyen of Israeli historians of Zionism, looks at the successive controversies and reactions surrounding the story’s publication and its transposition into film and at what this tells us about Israel and, obliquely, about what happened in 1948.

Yossi Ben-Artzi, an Israeli geographer, veteran IDF officer, and erstwhile prominent Peace Now figure, reviews the evolution of the discipline of historical geography in Israeli academia. While not figuring prominently in the Old-New controversy—for decades the field was

dominated by conservative, Old academics—historical geography is of particular relevance to our subject given the fact that the colonizing Zionist influx into Palestine, and particularly the 1948 war, radically transformed the country's landscape, which once was characterized by Arab villages, Arab agriculture, and (mostly) Arab towns and almost overnight was changed into a modernized “Zionist” landscape largely denuded of these villages, peasants, and towns.

The remaining essays all look at controversies about internal Israeli subjects. Moshe Lissak and Uri Ram explain and examine the sociological controversies surrounding the development of Israeli society. We can see the two scholars speaking a different language, using different categories, and demonstrating their conflicting sociological worldviews. Yaron Tsur, a historian, traces the scholarly scrutiny of a key social issue—the immigration of Sephardi Jews—that still plagues Israeli society, though far less than in the first decades of statehood.

Yechiam Weitz, who has written about Mapai, the Yishuv's/Israel's main socialist party and Herut, the leading right-wing party, in the 1940s, reviews the Israeli historiographic treatment of the relationship between the Yishuv (and then Israel) and the Holocaust. The issue relates both to the years of World War II, when the murder of the six million was proceeding apace, and the postwar years, when the Yishuv/Israeli society confronted the problem of absorbing hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors, who were often physical and emotional wrecks. In addition, the Holocaust served a number of utilitarian and unifying purposes in the Israeli political and societal arenas—against, for example, the Arab enemy.

The volume concludes with an essay by Mustafa Kabha, an Israeli Arab historian, who provides a particular external perspective on the controversy, which is, in effect, an internal Jewish Israeli intellectual dispute. Kabha surveys the Palestinian Arab and outside Arab perceptions of this debate.

In all volumes of essays a question arises about what should be included and what left out. In this case, some potential contributors declined to be included, arguing technical or other reasons. Others were deliberately not approached on the grounds that—in my view—their work fails to attain a minimal level of “scientific” accomplishment or objectivity. Streets—Israeli or Palestinian—awash with blood and political commitments can drive people around the bend, and this unfortunately has happened to a number of protagonists on the Israel historiographic scene. I have preferred to leave them out of this volume.

In all, the essays in this volume should provide a general picture of what is at issue and a taste of the modes of dispute and the arguments proffered on either side of the barricade. For many, this may be sufficient; others—who knows?—may be encouraged to dig deeper and read on.