



1948: The First Arab-Israeli War

Benny Morris

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This history of the foundational war in the Arab-Israeli conflict is groundbreaking, objective, and deeply revisionist. A riveting account of the military engagements, it also focuses on the war's political dimensions. Benny Morris probes the motives and aims of the protagonists on the basis of newly opened Israeli and Western documentation. The Arab side—where the archives are still closed—is illuminated with the help of intelligence and diplomatic materials.

Morris stresses the *jihadi* character of the two-stage Arab assault on the Jewish community in Palestine. Throughout, he examines the dialectic between the war's military and political developments and highlights the military impetus in the creation of the refugee problem, which was a by-product of the disintegration of Palestinian Arab society. The book thoroughly investigates the role of the Great Powers—Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union—in shaping the conflict and its tentative termination in 1949. Morris looks both at high politics and general staff decision-making processes and at the nitty-gritty of combat in the successive battles that resulted in the emergence of the State of Israel and the humiliation of the Arab world, a humiliation that underlies the continued Arab antagonism toward Israel.

1948: The First Arab-Israeli War Details

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Yogev Rabl says

An excellent book, but I do feel that it is a shorten version of 'Righteous Victims' that Morris wrote several years earlier

Raymond Thomas says

Excellent examination of the causes and course of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War from an unbiased source. Critical examination of the motivations, actions, and decisions of all sides involved in the conflict. Details some of the darker aspects of the war and the reasons for their existence.

Additionally, I would like to add that the author does a brilliant job pointing out the frankly ridiculous position the Arab governments put themselves into when reacting to the 1947 UN Partition Plan, Israeli statehood, and the post-conflict peace process. Very interesting read, definitely recommend.

Alex Goldstein says

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Andreas Schmidt says

Bisogna dare atto all'autore, gode di estrema professionalità. Forse un po' troppa, e questo è il motivo principale per cui questo testo è difficilmente digeribile; una serie di fatti dopo l'altro, senza dare possibilità al lettore di assimilarli (in fondo, lo storico che deve divulgare, deve rendere il testo interessante, non proporgli il fatto in sé). Malgrado la storia del sionismo non sia tra i miei argomenti preferiti (visto che al massimo riesco a ricordarmi Ben-Gurion, Dayan Moshe e Ariel Sharon), questo testo è parecchio illuminante, se non altro sulle origini del conflitto che perdura da secoli e si è accentuato con i nazionalismi degli ultimi 150 anni. E' un lavoro estremamente corposo e per quasi trecento pagine copre solo due anni di conflitto (non oso immaginare le dimensioni di una storiografia che ne copra 100, di anni).

LB says

This is the most horrible book about the 1948 war that I've read and I've read many. This so called historian lies and distorts history on every page. To be honest, I didn't finish the book, I was too appalled by its obnoxious lies. The very name that the writer gives to the Israeli War of Independence is wrong from the get-go. He calls it a civil war. A historian not knowing the difference? Where did he get his degree? In the Ramallah bomb making university? Second and probably the most important lie is that the writer places the blame for the war and displacement of the Arabs on Israel. Morris enlightens us that the five Arab states attacked Israel only bc of the massacre of Deir Yassin, not bc they hated the idea of a Jewish state in their midst and Jews in general, which they still do now, hence the 1967 and 1973 attempts. Were those caused by Deir Yassin too? The Deir Yassin affair, as it's known to us today, is based largely on the testimonies of the

Arabs themselves. Of course, Arab lies matter, no doubt, they did then and do now. In the 1967 war, the honest Arabs declared to the world that it was Americans and Brits who attacked them. Why is it that the writer doesn't say much about the massacres of the Jewish convoys that went through Bab el Wad to supply Jerusalem that was starving under the Arab siege, why not about the convoys en route to Kfar Etzion, why not the destruction of Kfar Etzion itself when the great, kind hearted Arabs shot those ppl who had already surrendered? It was the fault of the Jews too, right? I have a feeling that writers like Morris take blood money from enemies of Israel to produce opuses like this one and help them with their ideological war. I think that here, in the USA, if somebody falsified our history like that, they would be prosecuted.

Anatoly says

Excellent and well written. Though full with military details, the book also covers the political and geostrategic background which I am more interested in. Also, and that is important in a subject like this (and in historical accounts as a whole) is that the book isn't biased to any of the sides.

Dowl Phin says

I first read The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine by Ilan Pappé, one of the "Israeli New Historians" who looked at the archived materials from Cabinet meetings, politician diaries, Israel Defence Force orders etc... after they were eventually released forty years after 1948. I read Pappé following the a challenge by an politically anti-Israel Jewish friend of mine who teaches in Philosophy at UNSW.

I found Pappé's book painful as he outlined the atrocities committed by Israel - even though I was mindful of the one-sided non-contextual facts that Pappé was describing, and the consequent one-sided idealistic anti-Israel interpretation. It was painful because, as a Jew, I couldn't help feeling 'ASHamed' (as a Jew) to be just like all the other racist nationalists the world over - Christian, Buddhist, Leftist, Rightist or Muslim.

I followed Pappé up with Benny Morris' book, knowing that Morris was one of the first of the "New Historians" to look at the historical material. Morris offers the balanced contextual background to Pappé's propaganda diatribe - with a 19th century starting point instead of one which commences in 1948. Morris accepts Pappé's atrocities but he also outlines the earlier Arab atrocities; he describes the self-delusion, corruption and moral bankruptcy of Arab leadership as well as the errors of strategy and internecine rivalries of the Arab elites; and he writes his history aware of the dynamics and uncertainties that are integral to war - in contrast to Pappé's simplistic interpretation of evil consequence being a result of evil desire.

Following the reading of both books I have come to the conclusion that there will NOT be any peace between Israel and the Palestinians until both sides recognise the atrocities and the errors of judgement that they have committed. At this stage, each side only looks at the atrocities the other side has committed, though I suspect that because of more freedom of speech and political-commercial transparency-accountability, there are more Jews, Israelis and Westerners who recognise the 'evils' of their ways than there are Muslims, Arabs and Palestinians who recognise the 'evils' of their ways.

War is evil - no doubt about that. War is two-sided - no doubt about that, either. The tit-for-tat strategy that both sides use has not produced peace in the near-term and there is no reason to believe tit-for-tat will bring peace in the long-term.

It is well to keep in mind that existence and honour seem to be two infinite values. Jews and Israelis see this conflict, following centuries of oppression and last century's attempt at liquidation in terms of existence. Simultaneously, Muslims and Arabs see the past century in terms of humiliation and loss of honour. At this stage in our history, non-indigenous Westerners in general, and non-Aboriginal Australians in particular, have little understanding of either existential threat or humiliation - and so it is that when I discuss the Middle East with them, I have a sense that they are clueless.

Reading Morris after Pappe is a good way to become clued-up.

Jerome says

A broad, nuanced and well-written history of the 1948 war. Most of the book is a straightforward military history, and Morris ably covers the excesses and blunders of all sides.

Morris ably covers the strategic aspects, and suggests that the war was all but inevitable. Morris argues that the Israelis won due to better preparation, planning, motivation and logistics, as well as international sympathy. The Arab nations, on the other hand, were wracked by infighting and often seemed to prefer rhetoric to adequate planning and training, even though they had years to prepare. Morris does acknowledge the atrocities committed by Israeli forces and argues that these were mostly ad hoc rather than deliberately planned. At the same time, he portrays the Palestinian Arabs as unorganized and often unwilling to fight for areas outside their immediate home.

A balanced, well-researched and well-organized work. Some better maps would have helped, though, and Morris seems to portray the war as a sort of east-west struggle, but supports it with little more than random quotes.

AskHistorians says

This book covers the history of the first Arab-Israeli war, with great detail given for how the war was conducted, the events of it, and how the Israelis managed to succeed in winning the war itself. This focuses on the lead-up to war from the Civil War that had been going on before, and discusses the various fronts.

Khader says

This was an excellent read, although sometimes heavier in quantitative military details than I would have personally liked. This is not a shortcoming of the book, but rather a lack of knowledge and interest on the part of the reader, as I was most interested in the political aspects of the 1948 war, as opposed to detailed information about every individual skirmish.

One of my favorite chapters of this book was the final conclusions chapter, where Morris urges Arabs and Palestinians to do the necessary soul searching to try to understand why their history took such a course. As an Arab, and an American Palestinian, I believe that this is critical. I grew up hearing and continue to hear people blame everyone but themselves for the negative turn of events. But the real questions to me are why did passions prevail over levelheadedness among Arab leaders? Why did Arab leaders, with the exception of

King Abdullah, not have a realistic assessment of their military capabilities? Why did Palestinian society collapse in such a dramatic way, where disunity prevailed in such a way as to allow the IDF to pick off one Palestinian Village at a time, without other Villages rallying in their support? The national humiliation faced by the Arab armies during the 1948 war made all future conflicts inevitable.

It's always interesting to wonder what would have happened had the 1947 UN partition plan been implemented in an orderly fashion. Many would argue that regardless of whether it had, the conflict between the two nationalist movements was inevitable. The future however, remains to be seen.

TR Peterson says

Morris does a good job of exploring the various battles of the 1948 war in minute detail including excellent maps which make the troop movements, take overs and losses easy to follow, even for someone who is unfamiliar with the terrain.[return][return]He explores the reasons for the defeat of the armies of the surrounding Arab states, which include poor preparation, a lack of coherent ideology and lack of arms as opposed to the Yishuv which was literally fighting for its life.[return][return]It is clear that Morris is approaching the subject through the Israeli lens but there does seem to be a paucity of information from the side of the Arab states and armies meaning any scholarly attempt at covering this subject will be necessarily limited. In fact one cannot help but admire the tenacity and perseverance of the Israelis when they were underdogs, whatever one's current view of the situation in the Middle East.[return][return]For all this Morris is honest about atrocities committed by both sides in the course of the war and tries to hide nothing. It was a bloody, brutal conflict but likely no more so than the birth of any state. It is certainly worth a read for anyone interested in the issue, international politics or history.

Ram says

A well written account of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

The history of the conflict before the war from the demographic, political, economic and religious aspects.

The various stages of the war and their outcome.

The decisions made by the leaders (military and political) and the priorities that guided them.

The reasons why the war ended as it ended and the reason it ended when it ended.

And much more.

Benny Morris is an Israeli historian. He is a key member of the group of Israeli historians known as the "New Historians" a term Morris coined to describe himself and historians Avi Shlaim and Ilan Pappé.

Morris's work on the Arab–Israeli conflict and especially the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has won praise and criticism from both sides of the political divide. He is accused by some academics in Israel of only using Israeli and never Arab sources, creating an "unbalanced picture". On the other hand, the "New Historians" are accused by many in Israel as presenting a pro Arab point of view.

Regarding himself as a Zionist, he writes, "I embarked upon the research not out of ideological commitment or political interest. I simply wanted to know what happened."

The narrative in the book is different from what I learned in history classes, and as I do not want to get into a long discussion of political aspects of the Israeli Palestinian conflict I will not go into too many details.

While I am familiar with most of the events and battles in the book, I found it interesting.

The political atmosphere of the time is well described and the author goes into many details explaining how the world events, trends, character and type of leaders, public opinion and interests influenced the decisions made by the world leaders, local leaders and people of both sides at various points in time.

From the military point of view, many of the battles occurred in places that I am very familiar with, including the hills surrounding the place I live and the bike paths that I ride on, so this added a personal touch to the experience.

This book is an important book in order to understand some of the roots of the Israeli Arab conflict.

Stu says

Though dry in parts, this history of Israel's War of Independence is a must read for anyone interested in the history of the modern Middle East. It is by far the most balanced (yet not revisionist) history on the subject I have read. In retrospect, all sides (both state and non-state actors) acted according to their interests, not according to the popular myths of both the Jewish and Arab sides. No more, no less.

I could have used better maps throughout, but the maps that were provided allowed for a decent picture of the changing strategic situations throughout the war.

Behzad says

A very insightful read which raises many intriguing questions in mind. Generally the book is very easy to read but contains a lot of details that may make it incoherent and sometimes tedious.

Gerhard Venter says

It would be unfair to expect a balanced view of the 1948 Israeli-Arab war from a Jewish author, and I picked up the book specifically to get the Israeli point of view. What I got, instead, was a pretty even-handed treatment of the events. Morris makes no attempt to disguise the often brutal way the Haganah, the forerunner of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) went about clearing Arab villages of their inhabitants, and making sure they can never return. In my opinion, present-day Palestinian narratives that tell exactly the same events would fare better if they included the Arab side of things, which was characterized by a blood-lust and level of antisemitism we can hardly imagine. What also stands out in the book is the almost

institutionalized cruelty the British government displayed towards holocaust survivors at that time.

I bring from my reading is the impression that there were very few innocents in that piece of history, that the Palestinians had forever just lived and farmed there as subjects of the Ottoman Empire, that they weren't nearly ready to become a country or nation, that the Arab governments of Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt were forced into the war by their "streets," that the Jordanian royals have always (in context) been more wise than the others, that Egyptian soldiers can be very brave but were often made to look like buffoons by corrupt and incompetent government, and that the Israelis fought like devils, often within sight of their farms and houses.

It also leaves me despondent: those displaced Palestinians are never ever tever going to accept the status quo. I don't think I'll see in my lifetime the day when all the nations of the world say: Look, the borders are the borders. Let's work from there.

Extremely interesting, though.
