



CONTESTED LAND, CONTESTED MEMORY

*Israel's Jews and Arabs and the
Ghosts of Catastrophe*

JO ROBERTS

Advance Praise for **Contested Land, Contested Memory**

“*Contested Land, Contested Memory* is a beautifully written book that provides an essential perspective on a topic that could not be more urgent: the ongoing conflict in Israel/Palestine as it unfolds against the backdrop of two peoples’ tragic pasts. Working from interviews with scholars, activists, and ordinary people, Jo Roberts captures the voices of Jewish and Palestinian Israelis in all their diversity, pain, and eloquence. Deeply knowledgeable about the history and politics of the region and sensitive to the texture of individual lives, she brings together traumatic memories of the Holocaust and the Nakba without relativizing either history and without losing sight of the claims to justice that remain unfulfilled.

— **Professor Michael Rothberg**, director of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies Initiative at the University of Illinois and author of *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*

“Displaced and traumatized European Jews saw the events of 1948 as an independence war; Palestinian Arabs, displaced and traumatized in their turn, saw this war as *al-Nakba*. This compelling and compassionate book offers fresh insight into how these divergent histories reverberate in Israel today, examining how selective memories of suffering that exclude the ‘other’ impede reconciliation and a just peace.”

— **Mubarak Awad**, founder, Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence; founder and director, Palestinian Center for Democracy and Elections, West Bank and Gaza

“The strength of this thoughtful book is not only its clear, cogent presentation of complex concepts, but also Jo Roberts’ skill in exploring the emotional history of Israelis and Palestinians. Given that emotions guide the political behavior of both parties, this nuanced, empathic, and knowledgeable book is an important read for supporters of each (or of both), and for people seeking a book through which to enter the charged field of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

— **Hillel Cohen**, Israeli historian and journalist, author of *The Rise and Fall of Arab Jerusalem*

“Contemporary Israel is a land haunted by the ghosts of two staggering catastrophes. These ghosts live in the nightmarish knowledge of what was done by the Germans to the Jews of Europe and feed off denial of the raw injustice of what was done by Jews to the Arabs of Palestine. In this moving, lyrical, and very important book, with some of the bravest and most honest of Israelis and Palestinians as guides, Roberts offers readers an intimate, often searing tour of the country’s psychological landscape.”

— **Professor Ian Lustick**, Bess W. Heyman Chair of Political Science, University of

Pennsylvania; founder and past president of the
Association for Israel Studies

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DUNDURN
TORONTO

In memory of

Jane Roberts
1931–2003

David Roberts
1931–2008

and

Kassie Temple
1944–2002

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The State of Israel in 1949



Introduction

Nira Yuval-Davis remembers sitting round the radio with her family in their Tel Aviv apartment, listening as the votes were counted at the United Nations. It was November 1947. If enough delegates voted “yes,” then they, the Jewish people of Palestine, would have a state of their own.

As the results were announced, it seemed like the city could barely contain everyone’s joy. Spilling down onto the street, people danced and sang that night until long after young Nira, finally exhausted, had gone to sleep.

But the U.N. General Assembly’s vote to end Britain’s colonial presence in Palestine by partitioning the land between its Arabs and Jews led to war: nights spent in air raid shelters, days of tension and fear. Nira knew nothing of what happened to the Palestinian Arabs — only that her valiant young nation had stood up against the invading armies of seven Arab nations, David against Goliath, and that it had prevailed.

Each summer, in the years after the war, Nira’s family left the city for Tantura, a small fishing village south of Haifa, where they and neighbours rented an old abandoned house. “We were three families occupying a big building with a yard, a bustan [orchard], a walled garden. We, the children and our mothers, stayed there for about a month in the summer, and our fathers joined us for long weekends,”[\[1\]](#) she writes in her essay, “The Contaminated Paradise.” In Tantura, her parents shed the stresses of their harried city lives. Nira spent idyllic days roaming the beaches and rocky inlets, disappearing for hours into the garden with a book, or exploring the old Roman fort and the empty, half-ruined houses of the seaside village. She watched sunsets over the sea, and moonlight rippling on the water. It was here that she learned to swim. For Nira, Tantura was her “magical childhood paradise.”

As she grew to adulthood, Nira began questioning the beliefs that she’d had about her nation’s founding. After university she left Israel and eventually moved to London. She was already familiar with the Palestinian history of the 1948 War when, as a Leftist activist, she met Rafiq at a meeting on the Occupation. Rafiq was Palestinian, handsome, politically astute. They had a lot in common, and they laughed a lot together. They became lovers.

One night, Rafiq told her how in 1948, at the age of four, he had been abandoned by his mother as she fled the Jewish soldiers attacking her village. Taken in by relatives, he was raised by them in exile. His mother, in a different country, never claimed him, and he had never forgiven her. Moved by his story, she asked him the name of his village. “Tantura,” he replied.

The revelation was so devastating for Nira that she ended the relationship. Her memories felt “invaded,” “dispossessed,” she writes: “He took away my childhood haven.”

Jewish Israelis and Palestinians both remember the land as their own, but their memories, individual and collective, are utterly different. Two competing narratives of historical suffering frame the conflict between them, two peoples whose dreams of nationhood are bound to the same territory.

Israeli Ashkenazi Jews remember how the vision of a new Jewish society in Palestine germinated out of centuries of anti-Semitic persecution and violence. In the 1880s, state-supported pogroms in Russia and Russian-occupied Poland and Ukraine drove the first Zionist settlers to try to make that vision real. They bought land and worked it in hardscrabble pioneer settlements that slowly grew into villages and towns. Then the Nazis overran Europe, with their Final Solution to “the Jewish problem.” Forced into death camps, enslaved, starved, and gassed, six million Jews perished. Under the shadow of the Holocaust, or *Shoah*, settlers and survivors fought together in the 1948 War of Independence to birth their Jewish state.

But Palestinians remember 1948 as the year of the *Nakba*. In a war that most of them never fought in, nearly three-quarters of a million people fled into an exile from which they have never been able to return.^[2] These Arabs of Palestine became a displaced people who lost their historic homeland and everything that went with it: their land, their homes, their possessions, and their entire way of life. Over a million first, second, and third-generation refugees still live in refugee camps in neighbouring territories. Instead of the nation state they too had been promised when Britain’s colonial mandate over Palestine came to an end, the land was divided between the new state of Israel, Jordan, and Egypt.

Nakba (in Arabic) and *Shoah* (in Hebrew) mean the same thing: Catastrophe. For Israelis and for Palestinians, the remembered history of a traumatic past has moulded their common understanding of who they are as a people. These catastrophes continue to mark the generations that follow — the descendants of Jews murdered in Auschwitz or Lodz or Babi Yar, and of Palestinians evicted into impoverished exile — and energize the force fields of collective memory they inhabit.

After the 1948 War, the founding story of the state that took shape in Jewish Israeli collective memory did not include the disquieting narrative of the Palestinian Arabs and their removal. There were few Israelis who had not lost friends or family members in the Holocaust or the War, or been damaged themselves. Their new state was shelter from that traumatic past and security against a similar future, and there was no room for anything that might threaten that — including the story of the Palestinian catastrophe.

As I researched the Palestinian *Nakba*, I became fascinated by Israel’s relationship with this difficult alternative narrative of its founding. How, I wondered, does the shadow of the Holocaust reach from the past into the psyches of Israelis today, and obscure this other history? Some 160,000 Palestinian Arabs remained in the new state after the 1948 War, and now make up some 20 percent of Israel’s population — how do these Palestinian Israelis experience the burden of their antagonistic dual identity, and how do they remember the trauma of their past? And what of Jewish Israelis who hear of the *Nakba* — how does it alter their perceptions of the politics, and the landscape, of Israel?

The path that brought me to write about this troubled history began in a soup kitchen in New York City. I’d trained as a lawyer in my native Britain, but was dissatisfied, yearning for a practical way of integrating my faith and political commitment. I found it at the Catholic Worker, a lay community with an uncompromising anarchist philosophy of nonviolence, simplicity, political activism, and, above all, hospitality to those in need. At Maryhouse, a rambling former music school, some thirty people lived as a large, sometimes chaotic, extended family. Some had come from the streets or from mental hospitals, others were drawn by the desire to live differently; a different kind of need. Maryhouse was home to me for six years.

It was here that I met Kassie Temple. Kassie, who had studied for her Ph.D. in religion under Canadian philosopher George Grant, had been a mainstay of the community since 1976. She had a fierce intellect and total fidelity to the needs of the people she lived with and who she met through out

daily soup kitchen. A devout Christian, she also had a profound reverence for Judaism. For several decades Kassie would travel up to a yeshiva on the Upper West Side for weekly Scripture classes. Tirelessly busy the rest of the time, Saturdays she remained in her room, studying Hebrew scripture, writing, synthesising. Her love of learning spilled over to any who would listen, which I loved to do. While we chopped vegetables for the lunchtime soup-pot, Kassie would passionately recount what she had learned in class that week, or would apply her Jewish exegetical tools to the Christian scriptures. She could talk for hours, and sometimes did.

Kassie taught me about contemporary Christianity's casual erasure of Judaism; how the "Christ-killer" rhetoric of old had largely been replaced by a supercessionist narrative of Jews as the morally rigid and legalistic adherents of a dusty Old Testament, eclipsed by the Christian New Testament of grace, freedom, and love. She lent me André Schwartz-Bart's *Last of the Just*, and I began to learn of the history of economic persecution, blood libel, and pogroms that marked Western Christianity's historical engagement with Judaism, and which paved the way for the Holocaust. An avid student of history, I was amazed by how little of this I knew.

I wrote frequently for the community's newspaper, the *Catholic Worker*, and eventually became managing editor. Co-founded by journalist and social-justice luminary Dorothy Day, the paper had a print run of ninety thousand and was one of the most influential voices in the Catholic Left. Though fearless in tackling some of the day's thorniest issues, it nevertheless avoided speaking about the situation in Israel's Occupied Territories. Like other members of our editorial board, Kassie had little time for specifically Christian peacemaking efforts or commentary on the subject. "Let a couple of hundred years pass. Then maybe we can start telling Jews how to be peaceful," she would say, her voice hardening.

That was why, when I volunteered as a Human Rights Observer in the West Bank some years later it was with a small, secular NGO, the International Women's Peace Service (IWPS). It was early summer. As I walked through Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport with its luminous, Spartan architecture I saw a stack of tourist brochures and picked one up, looking for a map. Since childhood, I've loved maps; pestering a family friend who worked as a travel agent to send me any spare copies, I would memorize cities and coastlines, trace imaginary journeys through Greece and China. The Israeli tourist brochure did not disappoint. I'd planned a few days travelling in Israel and quickly located my route — Tel Aviv–Jaffa, Jerusalem, Masada. But when I looked for Ramallah, the city I'd be passing through in a week's time, it wasn't there. Nor, indeed, was the West Bank. Everything between the 1967 Green Line and Jordan was unmarked empty space.

IWPS was based in Hares, a village not far from Nablus. I'd read a lot about the political situation in the Middle East, but I was unprepared for the myriad humiliations faced by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories: the raw sewage I saw spilling down a hillside from a settlement into a once-fertile valley; the olive groves and farmers' fields torn up to make way for the Wall; the unpredictable, listless hours of waiting at checkpoints; having to apply to the Israeli authorities for a permit to work or to travel, and risking being coerced into spying on your neighbours in order to get the quiet desperation of a middle class who hadn't been paid for months because of economic sanctions.

Perhaps most disturbing were the settlements, sprawling across hilltop after hilltop and dominating the villages and fields beneath them. Hares is close to Ariel, a settlement large enough to be considered an Israeli city. Ariel is primarily an economic rather than an ideological settlement; most people came for the good, cheap housing and tax breaks rather than to reclaim their religious heritage, and most commute daily into Tel Aviv. Yet the impact of their presence is devastating for nearby villagers: the lands around Hares were being ripped by bulldozers for the construction of a new road, parallel to the old, so that commuting settlers would not have to drive on the same roads as

Palestinians.

I'd been in Hares for several weeks before it registered that the road sign at the bottom of the hill did not mention this Palestinian village of two thousand people, but only Revava, the settlement outpost a couple of kilometres beyond. In disbelief, I began looking for signs to the neighbouring villages, Kifl Haris and Marda. There were none. Remembering the tourist map, I was stunned at this exercise of power by an occupying force so confident in its domination that it would deny the physical reality of the land.

Though that moment on the road outside Hares was pivotal in this book's inception, this book is not about the Occupation. My focus is on Israel's engagement with the Palestinian Nakba of 1948: how contested histories of the past press through into the lives of Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel today; and, ultimately, how they affect the possibility of peace between Israel and the Palestinian people. In examining the wounds and scars that defined the original conflict, and have defined its telling, I look through the lens of social suffering, an anthropological perspective that examines how, communally and individually, we experience and respond to social forces of catastrophic violence. To me, this approach gives breathing room to the complexities of human experience, the fears and vulnerabilities of human suffering. Two devastating events, the Holocaust and the Nakba, marked Israel's founding, and how each has been remembered and forgotten has infused both the political and the physical landscape of the country. I do not parallel the Nakba with the Holocaust. It is not logically possible to equate the uprooting of over seven hundred thousand people with the meticulously planned genocide of six million. Where echoes pass between these separate yet entwined catastrophes is in the unfinished trauma lived by the survivors.

In writing this book I became more conscious of how vital an element in reconciliation and healing is the acknowledgement of another's pain. I knew this — it was part of my motivation for writing — but being immersed in that dynamic in my research made me more aware of its workings in my own life. When I was heard, I was more open, and saw this also in the people around me. When I felt silenced or invisible, I saw myself close: become defended, hard. It is part of our human nature, this need to be heard, to have a witness to the testimony of our suffering; and this is as true communally as it is for an individual.

From histories of social suffering come collective memories of trauma and displacement, so powerful that they overshadow present-day attempts at repair. The workings of collective memory can tell us a lot about the ways in which people make sense of historical suffering. Collective memory can, for example, be an essential component in the construction of national identity.

Both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians are driven by a strong sense of nationalism, all the stronger for being contested. A nation is, in the influential definition of political scientist Benedict Anderson, "an imagined political community.... It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."^[3] As such, a nation has need of shared self-conceptions, and shared creation stories, to bind its citizens into a cohesive whole. Collective memories of past events fill this need. Individual remembrances of a common experience are varied, contradictory, partial; collective memory, shaped by sources as diverse as mass media, state memorials and commemorations, and history textbooks, presents a comfortingly unified history of the past. Cultural

critic Edward Said notes that collective memory works “selectively by manipulating certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others in an entirely functional way ... for sometimes urgent purposes in the present.”[\[4\]](#)

Outside the boundaries of the nation lives the Other: the one who is different. The very presence of the Other gives form to the boundaries of the group. Just as a range of hills can mark a territorial boundary, so some perceived difference can act as a barrier to keep the Other out; it also forms the boundaries of the group by defining what the group is not. Jewish Israel, born, like most nation states of war, has the Palestinians as a common enemy to hold its highly diverse population together. Globally scattered Palestinians are defined as a collective by the shared catastrophe of their 1948 defeat and dispersal by Jewish forces.

Vital to the psychic construction of a nation, collective memory has a tendency to render things in black and white. Historian Peter Novick, who has written on collective memory and the Holocaust, describes how it “simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes.... [It] has no sense of the passage of time; it denies the ‘pastness’ of its objects and insists on their continuing presence.”[\[5\]](#) Shared perceptions of the past often stem from one specific memory which, as Novick says, “is understood to express some eternal or essential truth about the group — usually tragic.” For Israeli Jews and for Palestinians that foundational event is the catastrophe that each people suffered in the 1940s.

Both peoples, crippled by an old, still-present pain, see themselves as burdened by a unique and permanent victimhood. Acknowledging the suffering of the Other might lessen the validity of their own, and comes laden with adverse political consequences. Psychologist Dan Bar-On and political scientist Saliba Sarsar note that:

For the Palestinians, accepting the Jewish pain around the Holocaust means accepting the moral ground for the creation of the State of Israel.‡ For the Israeli Jews, accepting the pain of the 1948 Palestinian refugees means sharing responsibility for their plight and their right of return.[\[6\]](#)

The war of 1948 welded into place an asymmetry of power between the Jewish-Israeli state and the stateless Palestinians. While both groups deny the Other’s historical suffering, that radical imbalance of power between them means that Israel can take denial a step further, and make good its felt need to “destroy the collective memory of the Other.”[\[7\]](#)

The landscapes of the State of Israel — the Judean desert, the hills of Galilee, the ancient streets of Jerusalem — root the collective memories and the nationalist aspirations of both Israeli Jews and Palestinians. The Jewish people have finally returned to Israel as the place of their historical belonging, a refuge from the persecutions of diaspora. Simultaneously, Palestine is the stolen paradise of its longtime Arab inhabitants, for whom the Zionists are johnny-come-latelies, colonial settlers who rode on the coattails of the imperial British.[\[8\]](#) Both these narratives have at their beginning the same piece of land. As a concept, then, that land is highly contested: not only its borders, and its ownership, but also its landscape.

History, as we know, is written by the victors: school textbooks in Israel either made no mention of the Palestinian Arabs, or simply stated that they ran away. Similarly, contested landscapes can be refashioned to make manifest the victors’ collective memory of the past. In Israel, as we will see, maps received new legends; Arab names were replaced with Hebrew by a Government Names Commission. Empty Palestinian villages were demolished and new forests planted over their ruins, ensuring that physical traces of centuries of Arab presence in the land became invisible. Those that

remained became part of the landscape: ahistorical ruins, leached of their specific past.

Years later, Nira Yuval-Davis returned to Tantura. The ruined houses had disappeared; the childhood paradise of her memories had been transformed into a tourist spot, and the prefab chalets now dotting the beach were the local kibbutz's main source of income. The old mosque, though, was still there, and Nira went inside. Israeli law forbids the desecration of holy sites, but the building was a hollow shell, full of trash and stinking of urine. Her Tantura was gone, and so too was Rafiq's village: its traces invisible to anyone who did not know to look for them, and its holy place profaned with visitors' garbage. After this, she writes, "I was ready to view Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with somewhat more detached eyes."^[9]

Nira's difficult awakening involved not only stepping out of the collective memory, but also renegotiating the memories of her own past. Bearing reluctant witness to the other, hidden, history of her land, she was able eventually to hold the realities of both.

Eitan Bronstein writes of the need to "talk about the Nakba in Hebrew so that our language will be more peaceful and just."^[10] Eitan is the co-founder of Zochrot, a small, primarily Jewish-Israeli NGO based in downtown Tel Aviv, whose mission is to make their fellow Jewish citizens conscious of the Palestinian Nakba of 1948. Zochrot creates pockets of resistance in the flow of Israeli political imagination through acts of public commemoration: organizing historical tours to the sites of demolished villages, or amending street signs so that they also include the street's former Arab name. Its members accompany mourning Palestinian Israelis on their commemorative marches to the demolished villages on Nakba Day — commemorations that the Knesset, Israel's parliament, has recently taken punitive steps against.

Zochrot makes visible the invisible past, the villages that lie beneath Tel Aviv or the hilltop ruins overlooking a thriving Jewish town. National identity and belonging are rooted in a place, and are destabilized by accepting that another people's history is also rooted there. Zochrot's highly controversial memory-work forces Jewish Israelis to look again at the familiar landscape, undermining the consensus of the past by bringing the hidden history of the Nakba into view.

As Nira and many other Jewish Israelis have discovered, hearing the story of the Other's suffering can initiate a painful process that peels off layers of identity, as much a part of us as our skin. This is a hard, risky thing to do. It's also a sign of hope. The land of Israel/Palestine is small, and for a brokered peace to stabilize and hold there must be some degree of reconciliation between the two peoples, whether they live together in one state or side-by-side in two. Opening oneself to the Other's story, and to the possibility that it may transform one's own story, is an essential step toward reconciliation.

* Jewish and Palestinian Israelis are my subject, rather than Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, in refugee camps in neighbouring states, or elsewhere in diaspora.

† This emerging discipline comes under the umbrella of medical anthropology. It suggests that suffering, while generally presented as a pathologised and individual concern, may often be a response to broader, structural issues, such as the violence of war, political oppression, or economic exploitation. While these sufferings are ultimately experienced by individuals, they are suffered

collectively rather than singly. How to articulate or bear witness to suffering, one's own or another's is a central concern; in their foundational work, *Social Suffering*, Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock describe the incapacity to acknowledge another's pain as being "at the bottom of the cultural process of political abuse." *Social Suffering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), xiii.

‡ Holocaust denial is rife in the Occupied Territories.

Chapter One

1948

“Here,” calls Dahoud, “Here, this is where my home was.”^[1] All I can see are a few piles of stones, almost lost under tall grass. These stones made up the walls of the house Dahoud Badr grew up in some sixty years ago, when this was al-Ghabsiya, an Arab village in the Galilee. Turning off from the highway that crosses northern Israel, Dahoud had driven me through farmed fields and woodland up onto this isolated hilltop, the track petering out beneath us. There’s a derelict mosque behind rolls of barbed wire a few hundred metres away from where we’re standing, the empty arches of its windows boarded up. The walls are intact, but grass grows on the roof and in the crevices between the sand-coloured stones. It’s the only building up here. Across the few acres of the hilltop, among the almond trees and the cactus, lies more rubble, small heaps of rock. Otherwise there is little to show that Dahoud’s village ever existed. “I was six,” he says, “when the soldiers came. They had guns. We had to leave.”

The villagers were expelled on May 1, 1948, two weeks before the declaration of the new state of Israel. The Badrs and their neighbours became refugees in a land whose territorial boundaries were in massive flux, and whose inhabitants were living through the convulsions of an increasingly brutal war. These were, for some, the birth pangs of a new Jewish nation. For others, this agony was the end of Arab Palestine.

The expulsion of the villagers of al-Ghabsiya was a microcosm of a much larger pattern; across the Galilee, and across the country, Arab villagers were fleeing their homes. At the same time, Jewish refugees in flight from the post-Holocaust chaos in Europe were pouring into the new state, the first Jewish homeland in two thousand years.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, some 14 million displaced people found themselves in transit on the roads of Europe. Some were returning to their place of origin, to seek out what remained of their families, their homes and communities; others were heading as far away as they could, in hopes of starting a new life.

Many of these migrants were Jewish, survivors of Hitler’s “Final Solution.” Two-thirds of the Jews of Europe had been murdered, including 90 percent of the Jewish population of Poland, the Baltic states, Germany, and Austria. As the concentration camps and forced labour camps were liberated by advancing Allied troops, the freed survivors found themselves in alien territory, with no place to go. For most, returning home was not an option. The Jewish quarters of European cities and the rural *shtetls* of Central and Eastern Europe had been destroyed. And people were all too aware that across the continent, many of their fellow citizens had assisted in the rounding-up and deportation of Jews: only in Denmark and Bulgaria did the local authorities simply refuse the Nazi demand. In places such as the Ukraine, Poland, and Estonia, many locals had willingly joined in the mass killing.

Anti-Semitism was deeply entrenched in Europe, and it didn't suddenly disappear with the end of the Nazi regime. Those Jews who did return home often faced hostility and even violence. Landlords in Paris banded together to prevent returning Jews getting their old apartments back.^[2] There were even anti-Jewish riots in Britain.^[3] In July 1946, forty-two Polish Jews returning home to Kielce were massacred by the local population, precipitating a mass exodus of Poland's remaining Jews. Most survivors fled westward, into territories now administered by the Allies: Germany, Austria, Italy. There they were kept under military guard in Displaced Persons camps, run by the Allies' United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

Many Jews wanted to go to the United States.^[4] There was a long tradition of persecuted Jews finding shelter in the U.S.: between 1881 and 1924, over two million Jewish émigrés had passed through Ellis Island from Russia alone. But in 1924, under the National Origins Act, quotas had been imposed. Fueled by racism, anti-Semitism, and fears of loss of jobs to foreign workers, these quotas had slashed immigration from Eastern Europe. Rising U.S. anti-Semitism in the 1930s and '40s helped ensure that, despite the massive need, immigration quotas in the U.S. remained rigidly in place for the duration of the Holocaust. Increasing numbers of Jewish refugees saw Palestine as their only option: their ancient land, now home to a growing and politicized Jewish community.

Ever since the 1880s, when systematic, state-sponsored persecution forced a mass migration of Russian Jewry, the small Yishuv, or Jewish population of Palestine, had been growing. From 1880 to 1923, some 115,000 new immigrants arrived, some from Yemen, but the vast majority from the Russian empire. These refugees were highly politically motivated. Driven from their Russian shtetls and towns by nationalist persecution, they wanted to re-establish in Palestine a Jewish homeland, their own nation, where Jews would no longer be a minority in danger of oppression. They called themselves Zionists, and immigration and settlement were crucial to the furtherance of their goals. The Yishuv developed its own culture and institutions, and even its own language — the revived Hebrew of the Jewish Scriptures. Knowing themselves to be still very much at the mercy of the imperial powers jockeying for position in the Middle East, they used the influence of a few well-placed Zionist supporters in the diaspora to lobby foreign governments for support.

In 1917, mired in the later stages of World War I, the British government was looking ahead to the likely collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which included the tiny backwater of Palestine. Wanting to preserve its strategic interests in the area, and inspired by both a desire to solve what he considered “the Jewish problem” and his Christian belief that the return of the exiled Hebrews to the Land of Israel would fulfill Biblical prophecy,^[5] foreign secretary Arthur Balfour wrote to prominent Zionist Lord Rothschild telling him that “His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object....” (see Appendix 1).^{*} This ambiguously worded document, alas, was in direct conflict with the elusive assurances made as to the future of Palestine by Sir Henry MacMahon, British High Commissioner in Egypt, in his correspondence with Husayn bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca.

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, Britain and France carved up the near Middle East into Mandates — territories with more autonomy than a colony, but still administered by a colonial power. Even before Britain's Mandate over Palestine had begun, the stage was set for an escalating, inevitable conflict between two peoples whose nationalist aspirations were rooted in the same land.

Britain's Mandate was greeted with mixed feelings by the region's Arab inhabitants. The previous sixty years had seen a transformation of the local economy: regular steamboat passage from Europe to the ports of Ottoman Palestine had meant an influx of Christian pilgrims and visitors during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. As these numbers grew, the Ottoman administration had realized that this overlooked corner of their empire could turn a profit. They invested in railways and

roads, and turned the harbours of Jaffa and Haifa into thriving ports. Wheat and citrus, and olive soap and oil, made their way across the Mediterranean to the households of Europe. As Palestine became integrated into the world economy, so new immigrants came looking for work.

These economic changes had influenced the political development of Ottoman Palestine. Most Palestinian Arabs lived in small villages as part of extended families, their lives defined by the rhythms of subsistence farming. But urban centres such as Jerusalem and, in particular, Jaffa now became more prominent, solidifying the power urban elites already held over the rural peasantry.

The arrival of the British marked a significant shift for these notables (men whose family, political alliances, wealth, and acumen defined their place in the top strata of Palestinian Arab society). Their income suffered with the abolition of the right to collect taxes, a traditional perquisite of the Ottoman Empire. And politically, they were on the horns of a dilemma. They wanted to develop and maintain a good relationship with the new British administration, but this meant accepting the terms of the Mandate treaty, which included the Balfour Declaration and thus the negation of Arab self-determination. Their dilemma only sharpened as the years passed, contributing to their inability to form a united front against Zionism and what they perceived as its British allies.

While there was a certain degree of economic interdependence, Jews and Arabs in Palestine inhabited two disparate, largely disconnected systems of social structure and political organization. As the numbers of the Yishuv grew progressively through the 1920s and 1930s, frictions between the two communities began sparking into violence.

Miki Cohen grew up in Tel Aviv during the 1930s.^[6] His mother's Algerian-Jewish family had lived in Jaffa since 1840, but had moved to the new Jewish suburb just to the north of the city when it was founded in 1909. He remembers the growing tensions between Palestinian Arabs and Jews:

I was not born in a mixed community, but Arabs were everywhere — they were here in Tel Aviv, we were going to Jaffa for this and that. My family had business connections, and friendships as well. We spoke the language, knew the culture. But animosity between the two communities had already started. There was growing Arab nationalism, and the rapid development of the Zionist movement, whose Number One target was to establish a Jewish state in Palestine.

Britain's 1917 Balfour Declaration, giving recognition for a national Jewish homeland in Palestine, fueled the animosity. Jews were killed in Jaffa in 1921, and in 1929, there was tension in the air. World War Two gave a push to the idea of a state, when the Jews had to leave Europe. By the end of the 1930s, people were openly talking about it. On a personal level, I never thought of Arabs as a whole as my enemy, but on a national level, all over the country, there was a growing clash, and it has its effect in everyday life.

With the rise of Nazism in the early 1930s, the steady stream of European-Jewish migrants arriving in the British Mandate of Palestine became a flood. For Palestinian Arabs, already angered by the bleed of arable land sold by their notables into Jewish ownership, and the evictions of tenant farmers that inevitably followed, this was too much. In 1936, the surge in Jewish immigration precipitated a full-scale rebellion. This took the British three years to put down, and its pacification entailed harsh collective punishment and the deportation of the Arab leadership — an act of political emasculation that was to have dire consequences for Palestine's Arabs. The British, who had been striving to keep a balance between the increasingly divergent aspirations of the Arab and Jewish populations, now clamped down on the Yishuv. Jewish land purchase and immigration were strictly

curtailed. As the war against the Axis powers spread to the Mediterranean, it became imperative to keep the Arabs loyal: despite the news from Germany, Britain's immigration policy continued throughout the war.

By the summer of 1945, some 250,000 Holocaust survivors were being housed in Displaced Persons camps in Allied territory. In August, Earl G. Harrison reported to President Truman that they were "living under guard behind barbed-wire fences, in camps of several descriptions (built by the Germans for slave-laborers and Jews), including some of the most notorious of the concentration camps, amidst crowded, frequently unsanitary and generally grim conditions." He noted that "many of the Jewish displaced persons, late in July, had no clothing other than their concentration camp garb — a rather hideous striped pajama effect — while others, to their chagrin, were obliged to wear German SS uniforms.... As matters now stand, we appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them except that we do not exterminate them." Harrison concluded that "Their desire to leave Germany is an urgent one.... They want to be evacuated to Palestine now, just as other national groups are being repatriated to their homes."^[7] His words echoed a common sentiment that, despite their two-thousand-year diaspora, and the long-time presence of other peoples in the land, the natural home of the Jewish people was in Palestine.

Truman's letter to the British government requesting the immediate admission of one hundred thousand Jewish refugees into Palestine was ignored. The Yishuv had thrown its small weight behind the Allied war effort, but, seeing that the immigration quotas remained firmly in place, began a campaign of insurgency against the British. Bridges and telephone cables were destroyed, and Etzel, breakaway rightwing militia, dynamited Jerusalem's prestigious King David Hotel, the headquarters of British administration in Palestine. Illegal immigration, already underway, became a priority.

Purchasing what ships they could, Zionist organisers crammed them with refugees in the ports of southern Europe and navigated them across the Mediterranean to Palestine. Small boats sailed out from fishing villages and deserted bays, bringing more passengers. Ninety percent of these ships were intercepted by the Royal Navy, which barred their entry. The pitched battles between British sailors and unarmed refugees ended, inevitably, with detainment and deportation to British internment camps, most of them on Cyprus. By 1948, these camps held over fifty thousand people. Sixteen hundred refugees had drowned at sea.

Of the 142 voyages made to Palestine after the war, it was the story of the *Exodus 1947* that made international headlines. Once a Chesapeake Bay excursion boat, the battered, leaky *Exodus* was now tightly packed with 4,554 Jewish refugees. It had been shadowed by Royal Navy vessels since leaving France. Twenty miles from the coast of Palestine, two of them rammed the *Exodus*, and she was boarded by sailors armed with truncheons and tear gas. They were met with volleys of bottles and tins of corned beef — the desperation of people with nothing to lose. After three hours of hand-to-hand fighting, the sailors opened fire; three passengers were killed, and the rest became prisoners once again. The *Exodus* was escorted by six battleships into the harbour at Haifa where, singing defiantly in Hebrew, the refugees were transferred onto three other more seaworthy vessels and taken to Port-de-Bouc in southern France.

On arrival in Port-de-Bouc, the refugees went on a twenty-four-hour hunger strike and refused to disembark. "We wish to go to Palestine," they declared. "We shall not land in Europe as long as we are alive."^[8] Kept below decks by an iron grille, they remained in the holds of their prison ships for three weeks. The British authorities announced that if they did not leave the ships, they would be taken to a Displaced Persons camp in Germany, location of the only camps big enough to house them. National and international media were not impressed. "British conduct ... is moving rapidly to the ultimate stage of lunacy," commented Britain's *News Chronicle*. "No one but a fool would try to compel a Jew to go to Germany of all countries...."^[9] But that is exactly what happened.

The refugees, most of whom had survived the death camps, were forcibly disembarked in Hamburg. Reports vary as to precisely what occurred, but, fearing resistance, the British sent three hundred military personnel on to one of the ships, the *Runnymede Park*, to encourage its passengers to leave. Dr. Noah Barou, an official observer, was horrified by the violence he witnessed. “They went into the operation as a football match ... it seemed evident that they had not had it explained to them that they were dealing with people who had suffered a lot and who are resisting in accordance with their convictions.”^[10] Reporters watched as people were dragged down the gangplank; at least one was dragged by his feet, his head bumping down the wooden boards. Jazz music was played at high volume over loudspeakers to drown out the screams and shouting.

Conditions at Camp Poppendorf were difficult, and the British public-relations disaster was compounded by accurate reports that the prisoners were monitored not by British soldiers but by German guards. Many of the *Exodus* passengers were smuggled out of Germany by Zionist organizers headed for Palestine, and ended up in the internment camps on Cyprus.

The *Exodus* debacle, widely covered by the American and European press, helped firm up international pressure for a Jewish state in Palestine. Britain, weakened from the intensity of its conflict with Germany, had already decided to quit Palestine, and was handing over the question of its governance to the newly created United Nations. Two representatives of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) had been on the pier in Haifa, watching the transfer of the defiant refugees to the prison ships. It was clear to them that Britain’s policy of restricting Jewish immigration was ill-advised. “What can I think of all this?” asked Vladimir Simic. “It’s the best possible evidence that we can have.”^[11] The report he co-authored came out six weeks later.

UNSCOP’s report suggested partition of Mandate Palestine into two separate states: one for the Jews, one for the Arabs. Partition was not a new idea, the 1937 Peel Commission having made a similar proposal to the British government. But, while Peel’s proposals gave both sides contiguous territories, with the larger share to an Arab state, UNSCOP’s plan left a jigsaw puzzle of pieces of land, which for either nation would be almost impossible to secure. What horrified the Palestinian Arabs, however, was that, although Jews accounted for barely a third of the population, these borders would give them 55 percent of the land.

Countries that had done very little to take in Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe during the bitter years of the war were now convinced that a Jewish state was a moral imperative. President Truman pushed Partition through the U.N., letting reluctant delegates know that a “no” vote could have unfortunate economic consequences for their country. On November 29, 1947, thirty-three nations voted in favour of Partition, thirteen against. Ten nations abstained.

David Ben-Gurion, who would be the first prime minister of the new state, described partition as “Western civilization’s gesture of repentance for the Holocaust.”^[12] The irony of this was not lost on the heads of Arab states. Reading the writing on the wall, in 1944 they had issued a joint statement, declaring in part that they were “second to none in regretting the woes that have been inflicted upon the Jews of Europe by European dictatorial states. But the question of these Jews should not be confused with Zionism, for there can be no greater injustice and aggression than solving the problem of the Jews of Europe by another injustice, that is, by inflicting injustice on the Palestine Arabs of various religions and denominations.”^[13]

Naftali Kadmon vividly recalls the U.N. Partition vote. In his Jerusalem apartment he has an album of small black and white photographs; serrated edges, mounted on black pages. The tiny images convey the jubilant celebrations in Tel Aviv on November 29, 1947. “I well remember how joyful we were that night, everyone was out on the streets. The next day the Arabs began fighting, and we had our first dead.”^[14]

Partition and Armistice Borders



White - Territories granted to a Jewish state under the U.N.'s 1947 Partition plan for Mandate Palestine.

Light Grey - Territories granted to an Arab state under the U.N.'s 1947 Partition plan that became part of the new State of Israel after the 1948 War.

The West Bank and the Gaza Strip were slated to become part of a new Arab state under Partition. The West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was occupied by Jordan during the 1948 War. Egypt occupied, and later annexed, the Gaza Strip.

Naftali was then a young meteorologist at the British RAF Lydda airport. His brother was living in a youth village not far away, and he went to visit him. "When I passed through the town of Lydda I heard the Mufti's [Palestinian Arab leader's] anti-Jewish propaganda, which wasn't very pleasant. It was broadcast by loudspeaker from the minarets. They said, 'We will drive out the Jews, and if there

is a war they will leave and you will get their homes.’”

Britain, wary of antagonizing its Arab allies, had abstained during the U.N. partition vote, simply announcing that it would end its Mandate and pull out of Palestine on May 14, 1948. Nothing was done to negotiate or even ease any transition of power. The Yishuv, as a relatively new and highly politically focused presence in Mandate Palestine, already had an administrative structure in place that could easily be developed into self-governance. The Arab community, still reeling from the brutal suppression of their three-year revolt, did not. Nor could it match the Jewish defence force, the Haganah, in military experience. As citizens of Mandate Palestine, neither Jews nor Arabs had their own official armed forces. But members of the Yishuv had fought alongside the British in the Second World War, and these veterans, with their expertise and their weapons, now formed the core of Israel’s nascent army.

The first six months after the U.N. vote saw a brutal spiralling of attacks by both Arab and Jewish armed militia. This, effectively, was a civil war. Villages and settlements were attacked, convoys ambushed, bombs were planted in Arab and Jewish centres. Acts of retaliation became increasingly savage. The Palestinian Arab fighters were joined by the “Arab Liberation Army,” ill-trained and ill-equipped volunteers from neighbouring states. Foreign volunteers also came to help the Jewish cause.

As the chaos and violence spread, wealthier urban Arabs began leaving their homes to wait out the war in the relative safety of the Galilee, or of bordering countries. This was not unusual. Many had left during the 1936 Arab Uprising, returning when things had quieted down; inhabitants of Jewish settlements and districts had done the same. But soon, Arab departures were becoming involuntary. Ben-Gurion ordered the forced evacuation of Jerusalem’s Arabs, and of those living in the previously mixed coastal town of Caesarea. Similar stories of intimidation, violence, and expulsion began to flow through the towns and villages of Arab Palestine.

By April 1948, the Haganah had adopted a strategy of aggression into areas granted to an Israeli state under the U.N. Partition plan but as yet not militarily secured. The purpose of “Plan D,” authored by the Zionist leadership, was to give them contiguous territory that could be defended from anticipated attack by forces from the surrounding Arab states. Consolidation of the Jewish population within the Jewish state was also a goal. As well, there were about a dozen significant Jewish settlements in the regions granted to Palestinian Arabs. Now that war had broken out, the problematics of the U.N.’s Partition map could be resolved by unilaterally shifting the borders to incorporate those settlements, and their land, into the territory of the new state.

Similarly, the regions granted to the Yishuv were currently home to 350,000 Arabs. Plan D was specific on how they could be dealt with:

[By] mounting operations against enemy population centers located inside or near our defensive system in order to prevent them from being used as bases by an active armed force. These operations can be divided into the following categories:

- Destruction of villages (setting fire to, blowing up, and planting mines in the debris), especially those population centers which are difficult to control continuously.
- Mounting combing and control operations according to the following guidelines: encirclement of the village and conducting a search inside it. In the event of resistance, the armed force must be wiped out and the population must be expelled outside the borders of the state.[\[15\]](#)

These policies also applied to villages in Palestinian Arab territory that was deemed strategically valuable — given the awkward border divisions under Partition that could cover a significant amount

of land. It is also worth noting that “resistance” is an ambiguous term: it can as comfortably encompass a few shots fired at invaders from a barn as a pitched battle.

Through the spring, summer and autumn of 1948, Plan D was put into brutal effect. Stories of rape and the massacre of over two hundred villagers at Deir Yassin,[†] a village close to Jerusalem that had declared its neutrality, travelled ahead of the soldiers, precipitating what an Israeli intelligence report termed a “psychosis of flight.”[\[16\]](#)

On May 14, 1948, as the British terminated their Mandate over Palestine, Ben-Gurion proclaimed the Declaration of Independence and the creation of the State of Israel. The Arab League had already made plain its intention to invade once the new nation was declared, and its soldiers began crossing the borders the following day. The Arab armies were uncoordinated, fatally riven by inter-state rivalry, and the total numbers of troops fielded by the seven states (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, with small numbers of Saudi and Yemeni soldiers), was actually less than those of the Haganah. But, at the time, that was not apparent to the people of the Yishuv. This war came hard on the heels of the Holocaust with all its attendant terrors, which were fed by radio broadcasts from Arab states warning that the Jews would be thrown into the sea. Ben-Gurion, distracted by the loss of the Kfar Etzion bloc of settlements in the Hebron Hills and the killing of their defenders, tersely noted in his diary on May 14: “At four o’clock in the afternoon, Jewish independence was announced and the state officially came into being. Our fate is in the hands of the defense forces.”[\[17\]](#) The entry ends, “Will Tel-Aviv be bombed tonight?”

Miki Cohen fought in the war, in the campaign in the Negev desert. He recalls what happened:

After Ben-Gurion declared Independence on May 14, the next day six armies invaded Palestine, and we were at war. They rejected Partition, and they wanted Palestine to become an Arab state.

What would have happened to the Yishuv? I asked him.

There were different voices: some said, “We should throw the Jews into the sea,” others said, “Those who were born here can stay, those who came recently should go back to where they came from.”

We had no army, only the Haganah, which consisted of forty to forty-five thousand people. The Haganah had a small unit, the Palmach, which was the Yishuv’s only so-called standing army: young men and women who trained more than the others did; say, half a month of training, half a month on our own business. We had very basic equipment, only small rifles and guns. I was already in the Palmach, and was fully mobilized in February 1948. My unit became part of the Negev Brigade, because by then it was already clear that Egypt would move into Palestine from the south, and would try to cut the Negev off from the rest of the country. And on May 15, that is exactly what they did.

There were about twenty small Jewish settlements in the desert, which had been established during the previous twenty years in different locations. Supplies could not get through. We came in to defend them. We were in a besieged area, surrounded by the Egyptian army, a regular army, which had been armed by the British.

The totality and raw immediacy of the experience of being under fire is hard to recount:

In the early days, we were stationed near Kibbutz Dorot. Every morning at 7 a.m., we

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