

New History or Old Nationalism

Israeli New Historians on the Nakba and the Historiography of Nationalism

In the late 1970s, 30 years after the events of 1947-1949 in Israel-Palestine, the Israeli government declassified thousands of documents both from Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine) and Israeli government archives. At around the same time as these documents were released to the public, Israel's right wing Likud government intentionally misled the Knesset and the public in order to garner support for their 1982 invasion of Lebanon. The long, protracted nature of the military operation as well as revelations that prime minister Menachem Begin and defense minister Ariel Sharon had lied about the true reasons for invasion, led to the first major anti-war demonstrations in the state's existence. These two developments, argues Avi Shlaim, resulted in the rise of the New Historians. This group of scholars made use of the new documentary evidence and a growing acceptance of criticism in Israeli society following the Lebanon military operation to drastically revise nationalist historiography.¹ Thus, a revisionist historiography called 'New History' was established by Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, and Simha Flapan who published the first revisionist scholarship of the 1948 Palestine War. Since the publishing of their works in the 1980s, New History has received significant criticism both from the left and the right. This criticism mostly revolves around the New Historians' use and interpretation of official government sources, which form the backbone of evidence in most of their scholarship.

Within the same decade, there was a similar explosion of scholarship on the phenomenon of nationalism, which resulted in a reconsideration of the scholarly treatment of nationalism. In 1983, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* by Benedict

¹ Avi Shlaim, "The War of the Israeli Historians," *Annales* 59, no. 1, (January-February: 2004). <https://users.ox.ac.uk/~ssfc0005/The%20War%20of%20the%20Israeli%20Historians.html>

Anderson, *Nations and Nationalism* by Ernest Gellner, and *The Invention of Tradition* edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, were all published. These influential pieces were later critiqued and built upon by scholars such as Partha Chatterjee and Prasenjit Duara, whose works on nationalism called into question the role of history and academic methods in the construction of national identity. Given the centrality of nationalism to the politics of Israel-Palestine, any serious political history of the region must take into account how it shapes the nationalist narratives. By bringing these theoretical works on nationalism into conversation with the work of the New Historians, we may examine the contributions and limitations of Israeli New History within the broader context of the historiography of nationalism.

The New Historians drastically revised aspects of the earlier Israeli nationalist history by questioning the common narratives of the founding of the state of Israel. According to Avi Shlaim there are five nationalist narratives on the 1948 war that the New Historians sought to revise.² First, that British policy heavily favored the Arabs and supported the Arab states with military equipment during the war. Second, that Jewish military forces were hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned by their Arab counterparts. Third, that the Palestinian exodus was ordered by Arab leadership. Fourth, that the Arab states were hellbent on pushing the Jews into the sea leading to a second holocaust. Fifth, that it was the Arab, rather than Israeli, refusal to negotiate following the war which led to political deadlock. The New Historians generally reject, to varying degrees, all five of these aspects of the nationalist historiography. They argue that the British favored a Jewish state; that Jewish forces were roughly equal to their Arab counterparts; that the Palestinian exodus was induced by Jewish military and paramilitary forces; that the Arab states were more concerned with territorial gain than destruction of Israel; and that it was largely

² Shlaim, "The War".

the Israeli government that prevented a lasting peace.³ The most debated of these revisions is on the Palestinian exodus. This outcome of the war is central to Palestinian identity but is mostly left out of Zionist collective memory, as it calls into question the morality of the state. The New Historians' treatment of the exodus shows the relative lack of cohesion within the movement. The key differences are twofold. First, Morris, Flapan, and Pappé all present alternative explanations for the causes of the exodus. Second, Morris and Flapan are explicitly involved in constructing a new national identity through their historical revisions while Pappé, who is notably anti-Zionist, writes from a non-nationalist perspective.

Section I: Historiography of Nationalism

In 1983 Benedict Anderson published the first edition of *Imagined Communities*. In this influential book, Anderson posits nationalism should be regarded not as a political ideology, but rather a structural concept or imagined community that is closer to kinship or religion than liberalism or conservatism.⁴ While he is mostly interested in the rise and spread of nationalism, he does touch on the historian's role in constructing nationalist identity. Anderson argues that history and nationalism are paradoxical. He asserts that nationalism is a modern phenomenon, yet nationalists always believe the nation originates in antiquity.⁵ The construction of ancient origins is central to the nationalist project. It provides a basis for legitimate control of the land and constructs a shared history amongst its nationals.

Another aspect of nationalist historiography Anderson touches upon are the twin processes of memory and forgetting. The first scholar to write significantly on the phenomenon of forgetting in nationalism was Ernest Renan, who in 1882 argued that "The act of forgetting, I

³ Shlaim, "The War"..

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991), 5.

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined*, 5.

would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation.”⁶ Most often these forgotten or memorialized events are particularly violent chapters. For example, in American history the Civil War itself has been endlessly memorialized as a righteous mission, and yet there remains a distinct lack of memorials to the millions who suffered under slavery. Anderson argues that shared trauma forms an important aspect of shared memory whether it is remembered or forgotten. As Anderson puts it: “to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as our own.”⁷ These two features of nationalist history are essential to the construction of nationalism and illustrate the role of the historian in its construction.

In his work *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), Partha Chatterjee offers a critique of Anderson's work. One of Anderson's major pitfalls is that he is not particularly clear on the human actors involved in constructing nationalism. Instead he argues that nationalism arises somewhat organically due to the development of print-capitalism and the decline of previous structures of power. In contrast, Chatterjee argues that nationalism is an elite project. He posits that nationalism is developed by an educated nationalist elite who formulate a national identity through cultural mediation. Importantly, Chatterjee asserts that this national identity is primarily constructed by defining the other in contrast to the national self. A key theme of elite mediation Chatterjee discusses is the classicization of tradition, which involves the construction of national history.⁸ The nationalist elite builds on previous historical narratives and constructs a national history that may simultaneously incorporate diverse

⁶ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?,” in *What Is a Nation? And Other Political Writings*, trans. M. F. N. Giglioli, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁷ Anderson, *Imagined*, 206.

⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 73.

traditions and reject others as foreign or backwards.⁹ In the case of India, the nationalist elite was overwhelmingly Hindu and incorporated anti-brahmanical traditions, such as Jainism and Buddhism, into the national history, while rejecting Islam as a foreign tradition at odds with the Bengali or Indian nation. Chatterjee's discussion exhibits the role historians play in constructing national identity as they are the central actors who construct national history and in turn national identity.

In his work *Rescuing History from the Nation* (1995) Prasenjit Duara builds on Chatterjee's observations regarding the role of history in the construction of nascent nationalisms with a distinct critique of nationalist historiography. Duara argues that historical consciousness has been largely framed by the nation-state in modern society in that most history is the history of a particular nation, such as American history or French history.¹⁰ He asserts that this tradition of historiography, which he terms capital "H" history, is invariably bound in a repressive telos where the nation is both the sole and constant subject of history as well as the final destination of the narrative.¹¹ By presenting the nation as the beginning and end of history, the nation-state is privileged as the sole inheritor of political legitimacy. This historical tradition limits the way historical narratives are constructed. In order to provide a wider understanding of history beyond the nation, Duara offers his concept of bifurcated history which tracks history as both "transmitted forward in a linear fashion" and "dispersed in space and time."¹² In doing so, Duara attempts to write a non-nationalist history that breaks from the nationalist telos. While Duara's work is compelling, it is also notable that there are alternative ways in which to write histories that break from the nationalist telos. Duara's work exposes how historical study is plagued by its

⁹ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 73.

¹⁰ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1.

¹¹ Ibid, 27-29.

¹² Ibid, 5.

active construction of nationalism and offers potential avenues to break from “History’s” repressive design.

Another issue that Duara’s work exposes, but does not fully address, is the role of the historian’s personal identity in the writing of history. This issue raises the question: Are histories written by nationals whose personal identities are at stake invalid? The obvious answer is no. In fact, decolonization has shown that cultural insiders often have deep contributions to make that cultural outsiders are incapable of seeing, and vice versa. However, this does not mean that historians should not be cognizant of their role in the construction of nationalist narratives. Historians of any personal identity should follow Chatterjee’s framework when writing social and political histories by naming the specific actors involved in certain historical developments, whether that is a single person, organization, or political body. Elusive terms such as “the nation” or “the people” do not adequately show the human agency involved in historical developments.

As discussed by Anderson, Chatterjee, and Duara, historical narrative and nationalism are inextricably linked in that writing nationalist history contributes to both the construction of national identity and the legitimacy of the nation-state. Through the mediation of history discussed by Chatterjee, the nationalist elite decide which histories are remembered or forgotten to construct a hegemonic nationalist narrative. In regions that house competing nationalist movements, this means that nationalism opposes any chance of compromise and reconciliation. Competing national movements can never recognize each other as legitimate. Because of this issue, when writing histories of Israel-Palestine, it is important to not replicate nationalist discourse. Instead historians should show causation by specific human or environmental actions. By writing history that defines clear actors instead of elusive nations, historians may help shift discourse away from endless national conflict and towards resolution.

Section II: The New Historians

The person who coined the term ‘New Historian’ himself, Benny Morris directly challenged conventional nationalist narratives of the Palestinian flight in his 1987 work *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*. In 2004 Morris released a revised version of the book which backed up his claims, but also offered a new chapter on pre-1948 Zionist transfer thinking. Morris’s central claim is that of the many causes of the Palestinian exodus Zionist military action was the main reason for the flight of over 700,000 Palestinians from their homes.¹³ Morris maintains that there was no grand plan to systematically remove Palestinians from their homes, but rather removal was undertaken locally, mainly for strategic purposes as the war unfolded.¹⁴ In his chapter on Zionist transfer thinking, Morris argues that while there was no master plan, talks of population transfer in the years preceding 1948 created a climate where expulsions could be carried out.¹⁵ As a whole Morris asserts that there was no grand plan to expel the Arab population of Palestine but that expulsions, evictions, and massacres were ordered by leaders as high up as David Ben Gurion. While he stops short of indicting the Zionist leadership, Morris drastically revises nationalist narratives of 1948 by accounting blame to the Zionists rather than the Arabs.

Morris’s work is grounded in a historiographical tradition that originates in the 19th century and argues that written sources are the best way to understand the truth of the past. This commitment to written sources means Morris engages almost exclusively in official archival documents from Israeli, American, or British archives.¹⁶ This means Morris’s collection of sources largely excludes the Arab perspective due to a lack of Palestinian state records from the

¹³ Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 589.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 589.

¹⁵ Morris, *The Birth*, 60-61.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

period and a lack of access to Arab state archives. Morris includes some Arab diaries and memoirs in his study, but refrains entirely from including oral histories. This decision, Morris claims, is because “while contemporary documents may misinform, distort, omit or lie, they do so, in my experience, far less than interviewees recalling highly controversial events some 40–50 years ago.”¹⁷ Morris’s methods stem from his belief in conducting history from an apolitical, distanced perspective where human biases are repressed and historians attempt to write the truth of the past. In Morris’s own words: “I embarked upon the research not out of ideological commitment or political interest. I simply wanted to know what happened.”¹⁸ Morris’s views originate in nineteenth century historiography with the work of historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) who argues “History has had assigned to it the office of judging the past and of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices the present work does not presume; it seeks only to show the past as it really was.”¹⁹ However, Morris’s pledged impartiality is somewhat questionable given his long history of espousing hardline Zionist views as well as his insistence that there was no plan to expel the Arabs of Palestine.

Morris is clear in his intention to revise what he calls the “official history” of Israel which tells that the Palestinians either willingly left their homes in 1948 or the Arab authorities directed them to do so. Morris argues that this telling is fundamentally flawed and at odds with the documentary evidence, writing that the official version “helped leave intact the new state’s untarnished image as the haven of a much persecuted people.”²⁰ In addition to arguing that it was principally Israeli actions that caused the flight of the Palestinians, Morris argues that Arab

¹⁷ Ibid, 4.

¹⁸ Ibid, 3.

¹⁹ Leopold von Ranke, *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494-1514*, trans. Philip A. Ashworth, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1824).

²⁰ Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1.

leaders actually directed the residents in the major cities such as Haifa to stay in their homes. However, Morris also insists throughout his work that there was no master plan to remove the Palestinians. Morris's insistence that the Palestinian exodus was the result of tough decisions during wartime, rather than direct human action, absolves the historical actors of culpability and presents a sanitized version of events where the only guilty party is the unfortunate circumstances of war. Here, Morris is involved in the construction of a new nationalist narrative that recognizes past sins but rejects responsibility.

Morris's revision of Israeli nationalist history highlights how the traditional Israeli narrative has intentionally forgotten key events during the war. Morris's main argument rejects the traditional Zionist narrative by arguing that the expulsions, evictions, and massacres that induced the Palestinian exodus had been written out or forgotten by history. As Morris notes, this process of forgetting served both domestic and international purposes. It put forth a narrative of righteous national triumph at home and promoted Israel as a liberal western nation to Europe and the United States. However, while Morris drastically revises traditional Israeli nationalist historiography, he remains within the confines of the national telos described by Duara. Morris's argument is largely a linear account of what happened during the birth of Israel. Indeed, his tendency to protect the Zionist movement from criticism reflects simply a new nationalist narrative of 1948 rather than attempting to displace the nation as the subject of history. Despite his construction of a new nationalist narrative, Morris's revisions of Israeli national history illuminate the ways in which national history forgets aspects of the past in a desire to maintain legitimacy.

While Benny Morris's piece is perhaps the most notable piece of New History, Simha Flapan's posthumous 1987 book *The Birth of Israel* is generally regarded as the first. Flapan's

work is a comprehensive study of Zionist myth-history of the war for independence. Like Morris, Flapan strongly refutes the nationalist narrative, arguing that the vast majority of Palestinian refugees were either forced out or fled in fear.²¹ Where Flapan seems to contradict Morris is in the particulars. While Morris repeatedly argues that there was no premeditated plan to remove the Palestinians from their homes, Flapan argues that even with no direct evidence there is sufficient “circumstantial evidence to show that a design was being implemented by the Haganah, and later the IDF.”²² Importantly, Flapan’s analysis reflects the reality that many official documents from 1948 remain classified by the Israeli government. This key difference from Morris reflects a different strain of New History that is more willing to infer causation rather than employ a strict reading of official documents.

Flapan, like Morris, is more engaged in formulating a new nationalist history than writing a non-nationalist or anti-nationalist critique. He posits that the mistakes of the Zionist political movement do not condemn the character of Zionism as a national identity. Here, Flapan’s personal biography is apparent in his work. The only new historian to belong to the pre-state generation, Flapan emigrated to Mandatory Palestine in 1930 and served as an official in MAPAM, a far left Zionist labor party, after the establishment of the state. Flapan claimed to be an ardent Zionist and Socialist who had, perhaps willfully, been ignorant of the realities of the creation of the state.²³ Indeed, Flapan states he “has never believed that Zionism obviates the rights of Palestinians.”²⁴ Flapan’s own personal narrative illustrates how he remains bound to his personal national identity despite his objective criticisms. Like Morris, Flapan presents an alternative nationalist vision rather than writing a history outside the national telos.

²¹ Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 9.

²² Ibid, 89.

²³ Flapan, *The Birth*, 10.

²⁴ Ibid, 11.

Flapan further argues that key events and decisions have been willfully forgotten by the nationalist history in order to protect the state's status and legitimacy. However, both largely remain within the telos of the nation state. Flapan's concern for the Palestinians is virtuous, yet his and other early Zionists' belief that Zionism and Palestinian nationalism can flourish alongside each other is somewhat utopian. However, in proposing that Zionism and Palestinian nationalism can peacefully coexist (a belief central to the Israeli left but has no historical evidence) Flapan simply reinforces the standard of the nation-state. Flapan is largely engaged in an intra communal debate about the identity of Zionism rather than deconstructing the hardened boundaries that separate Zionists from Arabs. By maintaining the nation as the subject of their histories, Flapan and Morris are participating in the elite mediation of culture through the construction of a new nationalist narrative. Simply put, Flapan and Morris are nationalist elites that represent the modern Israeli nationalist left that believes, much like the American left, in revising the past while retaining the nationalist status quo. Despite their personal relationship with nationalism, Flapan and Morris's work remains critical to understanding how nationalism has been constructed. Both scholars point to both the issues with nationalist history through their revisions as well as to the difficulty of writing a history that conflicts with one's personal identity.

In contrast to Morris and Flapan, Ilan Pappé, who gained prominence as a New Historian after publishing his first major work *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* in 1988, presents a decidedly different interpretation of the Palestinian exodus in his 2006 book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Pappé takes a radical view of the events when compared to other Israeli historiography by defining the expulsion of Palestinians as ethnic cleansing. Unlike Flapan and Morris, Pappé argues that there was an organized plan to expel the Palestinians from the future

state of Israel. This plan was drawn up by David Ben Gurion and a small group of advisors Pappé calls the consultancy.²⁵ Much of Pappé's argument is based on the aims of Plan Dalet (Plan D), a Haganah military operation which he claims was intended to depopulate a significant number of Arab villages on land coveted by the Yishuv. This interpretation is hotly contested by historians of the period. Most mainstream Israeli historiography argues that Plan D was strictly a tactical operation, while Palestinian scholars such as Walid Khalidi align themselves closer to Pappé's interpretation. Pappé is particularly harsh in his criticism of David Ben Gurion, who he labels the 'architect' of the ethnic cleansing.²⁶ This portrayal of Ben Gurion is particularly at odds with the nationalists who exalt Ben Gurion as a national hero and father of the nation. Pappé's radical revision of Ben Gurion's moral authority further revises Morris and Flapan's arguments who concede that Ben Gurion was in favor of a population transfer but stop short of declaring him a war criminal. Pappé's retelling of the Palestinian exodus represents the most radical branch of new history that has completely rejected the Zionist project.

It is important to note that Pappé's work has come under harsh and, at times, justified criticism for his methods and interpretation of evidence. In contrast to most Israeli counterparts, Pappé is far less concerned with the value of documents and often employs a liberal reading of the evidence to support his claims. In fact some Israeli historians, such as Mordechai Bar-On argue, correctly, that Pappé has been unable to find official documentary proof that there was a detailed plan to accomplish ethnic cleansing.²⁷ Instead Pappé's evidence is entirely circumstantial as he draws together sections of Ben Gurion's diaries, oral histories, and some official documents to infer that a planned ethnic cleansing took place. Pappé's techniques are rare in Israeli

²⁵ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 5.

²⁶ Ibid, 25.

²⁷ Mordechai Bar-On, "Cleansing History of its Content: Some Critical Comments on Ilan Pappé's *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*," *The Journal of Israeli History* 27, no. 2 (September, 2008), 273.

historiography, which tends to follow Morris's framework of taking documents at face value. Here, Pappé exposes holes in Israeli historiography, which often limits itself through its doctrinaire approach. Much criticism of Pappé also stems from the fact that he has rejected Zionism after living most of his life in Israel. Critics of Pappé argue that he is on a witch hunt to delegitimize and destroy the state of Israel. These criticisms of Pappé are representative of the role of political ideology in history and how both supporters and critics of Pappé are bound in a political argument as much as an argument around sources. Pappé's broader interpretation of the evidence is useful within the historiography of 1948 but his work should be read critically given the flaws in parts of his argument.

Even if some of Pappé's claims should be judged with skepticism, he does come closest to writing a historical narrative that is non-nationalist. Again Pappé's personal relationship with Zionism is clearly evident here, however, his approach provides good techniques for writing history that should not conflict with personal identity. One important technique Pappé uses is clearly defining the actors involved in his alleged ethnic cleansing. Pappé accuses specific politicians and military officials of planning and carrying out the ethnic cleansing instead of "elusive factors such as 'the circumstances', 'the army' or as Morris has it, '*a guerre comme à la guerre*.'"²⁸ In doing so Pappé prevents sovereign states or political figures from getting off the hook. Additionally, he displaces the nation by showing that these actions were conducted intentionally by specific actors not some faceless national entity. This technique can also be applied to revisions of Palestinian nationalist histories which often blame the elusive 'Israel'. Instead Pappé's work shows how the decisions of specific individuals and organizations led to the Palestinian exodus. This technique is a revision of Morris, who refuses to outright condemn the Zionist leadership, arguing that there were not explicit orders. Instead Morris blames "a

²⁸ Pappé, *The Ethnic*, xvi.

growing readiness in the IDF units to expel.”²⁹ However, just sentences later Morris goes on to defend the morality of the military claiming:

In general, the advancing Haganah and IDF units were spared the need to face morally painful decisions to expel communities; to a large degree, Arab flight let the commanders off the moral hook, though, to be sure, many were subsequently, at the very least, troubled by the need to confront, and repel, would-be returnees.³⁰

By failing to argue causation at the hands of particular actors, Morris repeats the common trope of a clash of nations both of which have moral fortitude. Pappé’s framework provides a means by which to revise nationalist history and displace both Israeli and Palestinian nationalist narratives. By clearly showing the events of 1948 were the result of human actors and not elusive circumstances, historians obtain a tool to construct a narrative that does not reinforce national boundaries and provides a space for reconciliation.

Section III: Critiques from the Right and the Left

The New Historians have come under intense criticism from both the Zionist right and the Palestinian left on their revisions to Israeli nationalist history. On some level, the New Historians please no one. Many rightwing Zionist scholars believe they spout Palestinian propaganda and conspiracy theories, while Palestinian scholars often critique their refusal to engage with Palestinian sources. The Palestinian left and the Zionist right make their critiques largely on the selection and interpretation of historical sources. However, this concern with sources is also wrapped up in political ideology. Both Zionist and Palestinian critics argue that the New Historians’ selection and interpretation of sources leaves out critical evidence that, if included, supports each nationalist narrative. Thus, the critique of source collection in this instance is also nationalist critiques rooted in alternative political orientations.

²⁹ Morris, *The Birth*, 596.

³⁰ Ibid, 596.

In his 2000 revised edition of *Fabricating Israeli History: The New Historians*, Efraim Karsh levels a scathing critique of the New Historians believing them to have, in the aim of delegitimizing Zionism, intentionally misrepresented the documentary evidence. Karsh argues that the New Historians have fundamentally misled their audience in two distinct ways. First, they invented the concept of old or official history in Israeli historiography. Old or official history is defined by Morris and other New Historians as the traditional nationalist narrative that describes Israel's glorious birth in 1948. Karsh argues that the New Historians "have cleverly diverted the debate from where it should actually be conducted, namely good versus bad scholarship" through the construction of old history.³¹ Second, Karsh argues the New Historians fabricated history by misrepresenting or mistranslating certain documents or by leaving out important historical material. He asserts that Morris and other New Historians have intentionally mistranslated key evidence.³² Additionally, Karsh argues that the selection of sources by historians such as Avi Shlaim have incorporated illegitimate partisan material that deliberately misrepresents reality and should therefore be excluded.³³ Interestingly, Karsh goes on to use Benedict Anderson, in a wholly unsuitable way, to further decry the New Historians arguing that they have in fact "Imagined" history despite Morris and Shlaim's professed allegiance to scientific modes of study.³⁴ Karsh's assertion that the New Historians have mistranslated or misrepresented some evidence seems to have some legitimate bearing, however, his concern with partisan evidence shows his own political angle.

While Karsh uses documentary inconsistencies as his main critique of the New Historians, he further asserts that the New Historians are part of an Arabist tradition hellbent on

³¹ Efraim Karsh, *Fabricating Israeli History: The 'New Historians'*, (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 12

³² Ibid, xviii

³³ Ibid 12.

³⁴ Ibid 36.

delegitimizing Israel. Karsh begins his first chapter with a discussion of Edward Said, who he blames for irreparably politicizing Middle East studies and weaponizing orientalism against Zionism.³⁵ Karsh goes on to argue that the New Historians were in the 1980s “pining for admission” into the anti-Israel scholarly “club” that Said’s work apparently gave rise to.³⁶ Here, Karsh makes two key errors, the first of which is associating the New Historians with Said. With the exception of Ilan Pappé, the New Historians are overwhelmingly Zionists and therefore at political odds with Said. Secondly, Karsh seeks to discredit the New Historians for engaging with scholarly work that is highly critical of the state of Israel. By arguing that any work criticizing Israel is illegitimate, Karsh is making a political and personal argument, something he criticizes the New Historians of doing themselves. Karsh’s main issue is he is unable to recognize his own political biases in his work. He claims that he is somehow apolitical while making an explicitly political argument against the New Historians. Karsh’s work is ultimately handicapped by his own partisan views which are incompatible with New History.

Opposite Karsh, Palestinian scholar Nur Masalha offers critiques from the Palestinian left which, like Karsh, are largely based in the New Historians’ selection and engagement with sources. Masalha argues that Morris and other new historian’s commitment to written sources limits their argument by failing to recover the Palestinian narrative. He writes: “Israeli archives can tell us little about the narrative of the Palestinian subaltern or about victims of the Nakba.”³⁷ Masalha aligns himself with Ilan Pappé, arguing that oral histories are essential to forming a nuanced narrative. He further critiques Morris’s assertion that oral histories are inaccurate pointing out that many written documents are the result of oral testimony themselves.³⁸ Unlike

³⁵ Ibid, 9-10.

³⁶ Ibid, 10.

³⁷ Nur Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*, (London: Zed Books, 2021), 224

³⁸ Ibid, 225.

Karsh, Masalha does not argue that the interpretation and use of sources within the New Historian's work is defective, but instead suggests that without the Palestinian perspective key aspects of the Nakba are imperceptible. As compelling as his argument is for the inclusion of oral histories, Masalha too is handicapped by his desire to write a Palestinian national history. A key aspect of Masalha's work is to help retain a Palestinian national identity in the face of repression, an expressly nationalist aim. There is certainly an argument to be made for the incorporation of Palestinian oral histories, but if the inclusion of these sources is simply to tell the Palestinian national narrative, it only serves to reinforce national boundaries.

Masalha's other main critique of the New Historians is that their nationalist framing reflects the Zionist narrative that Israel is responsible for bringing progress and enlightenment to the Middle East.³⁹ The belief that nationalism is a modernizing force originates with Hegelian telos, which believes history ends with the founding of the nation-state. This discourse of modernization fits well with New History, which rejects "old history" inferring a progressive nature to their work. Additionally, Masalha contends that New History is an extension of post-1967 liberal Zionism which projects an ability of a matured Israel's ability to contend with its past.⁴⁰ Masalha also points out that the group is not monolithic and has become increasingly less so as Morris has shifted further to the right and Pappé further to the left. In fact, Masalha argues that Pappé should be considered separate from the other New Historians in methods and objectives.⁴¹ Masalha's treatment of the New Historians sheds light on the nationalist discourse of New History and the ways in which it serves to construct a new elite nationalist narrative. However, his own nationalist objectives render his critique less compelling. Masalha seems to be

³⁹ Nur Masalha, "New History, Post-Zionism, and Neo-Colonialism: A Critique of the Israeli 'New Historians'," *Holy Land Studies* 10, no. 1 (2011), 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 17.

⁴¹ Ibid, 38.

mostly concerned with the inclusion of a Palestinian nationalist narrative. A narrative which, like its counterpart Zionism, does not recognize the other's legitimacy. Simply recovering Palestinian nationalist history instead of displacing nationalist discourse reinforces the boundaries between Zionism and Palestinian nationalism, replicating the conflict.

Conclusion

The New Historians represent a diverse group of scholars who are principally united by a desire to revise history although don't agree on many key arguments. In fact, within the last twenty years, two early leaders of the movement, Morris and Pappé “have traded personal insults in public and accusations of falsifications of history and even outright fabrications of facts.”⁴² On the subject of the Palestinian exodus, Morris, Flapan, and Pappé provide three distinct narratives of the event. Morris argues that Yishuv and later Israeli military operations were the main driver behind Palestinian flight yet maintains that there was no overarching plan to remove the Palestinians from the region. Flapan argues that the body of circumstantial evidence suggests that there was a plan to remove at least some number of Palestinians, but that there is no clear documentary evidence of that plan. While Pappé argues that a systematic ethnic cleansing of Palestinians was planned by David Ben Gurion and carried out by the military. Given the wide range of interpretations written by the New Historians, treating them as an organized group with distinct aims is unhelpful. Doing so simply provides a faceless target for nationalist critics and allows for their work to be discredited on the basis of each other's pitfalls. The only thing that ties together the New Historians is a general desire to revise history with new documents, something decidedly ordinary in historical study.

While the New Historians all revise nationalist history, their goals in writing that history are quite different. Morris and Flapan write from a liberal Zionist angle which succeeds in

⁴² Masalha, “New History,” 48.

revising the traditional nationalist narrative of the Palestinian exodus, but nonetheless constructs a new nationalist narrative. The liberal Zionist narrative of national ability to confront the past still privileges the nation as the subject of history. In contrast, Ilan Pappé rejects the Zionist narrative and seeks to write a history that is explicitly anti-Zionist. His attempts to write a history of the Palestinian “ethnic cleansing” come closest to presenting a narrative that is non-nationalist. His focus on the conduct of certain actors rather than abstract concepts like ‘fear’ or ‘military action’ displace the nation as the subject of history. However, his questionable interpretations harm his work and render it at best interesting and at worst useless. Each historians’ work has been met with significant criticism from both the Zionist right and the Palestinian left. Much of the criticism often relates to source selection and interpretation, a criticism which often hinges on one’s political views. Right wing Zionists argue that violent acts by Palestinians are left out of New History, while on the Palestinian left the lack of Palestinian voices is the main critique. If nothing else, the political nature of these criticisms shows the deep and central role nationalism has played in scholarship on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

It is essential for scholars to write histories that do not replicate nationalist messaging or make the nation the subject of history as doing so only serves to reinforce national boundaries and prevent reconciliation. This is not to say nationalist histories are invalid or useless, but rather that they need revision. One potential way of doing this is by writing microhistories of events that have become symbolic in the national memory. Microhistories can displace the nation by focusing on the close details and enabling the historian to hone in on the actions of specific historical actors. By focusing on the key actors involved in local events, historians do not need to relinquish their personal national identity. However, historians must also keep in mind how these local events have constructed national identity through retelling. By writing microhistories and

tracking how different narratives of the event have been since disseminated, historians can show both how historical developments are the result of human actors as well as how retellings have constructed national identity. The New Historians' revisions of Israeli history are commendable in their rejection of powerful nationalist narratives, however, future histories of the event should be careful not to simply replace one nationalist narrative with a new construction.

Bibliography

- Bar-On, Mordechai. "Cleansing History of its Content: Some Critical Comments on Ilan Pappé's *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*." *The Journal of Israeli History* 27, no. 2 (September, 2008): 269-275.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Duara, Prasenjit. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Flapan, Simha. *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*. 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1987.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
- Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Karsh, Efraim. *Fabricating Israeli history : The "New Historians"* (2nd, rev. ed.). London: Frank Cass, 2000.
- Masalha, Nur. *The Palestine Nakba Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*. London, England: Zed Books, 2021.
- _____. "New History, Post-Zionism and Neo-Colonialism: A Critique of the Israeli 'New Historians'." *Holy Land Studies: A Multidisciplinary Journal* (Edinburgh University Press) 10, no. 1 (2011): 1–53.
- Morris, Benny. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Pappé, Ilan. *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2006.

Renan, Ernest, “What is a Nation?,” in *What Is a Nation? And Other Political Writings*, trans. M.

F. N. Giglioli, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Shlaim, Avi. “The War of the Israeli Historians,” *Annales* 59, no. 1, (January-February: 2004).

<https://users.ox.ac.uk/~ssfc0005/The%20War%20of%20the%20Israeli%20Historians.htm>

1

von Ranke, Leopold. *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494-1514*. Trans. Philip A.

Ashworth, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1824).