

RECENT BOOKS

EXPANDING THE ARCHIVES

Under the Cover of War: The Zionist Expulsion of the Palestinians, by Rosemarie M. Esber. Alexandria, VA: Arabicus Books and Media, 2008. 423 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

Reviewed by Nur Masalha

The Nakba—a mini-holocaust for the Palestinians—is a key point in the history of Palestine and Israel: In 1948, a country and its people disappeared from international maps and dictionaries. The Nakba resulted in the destruction of much of Palestinian society, and much of the Arab and Islamic landscape was obliterated by the Israeli state—a state created by a European settler-colonial community that immigrated into Palestine in the period between 1882 and 1948. About 90 percent of the Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from the territory occupied by Israel in 1948–49—many by psychological warfare, a large number at gunpoint. After 1948, the historic Arabic names of geographical sites were replaced by newly coined Hebrew names, some of which resembled biblical names.

Since 1948, Palestinian attempts to constitute a coherent narrative of their past have often been challenged and silenced. Until recently, the exclusion of the Nakba from Western discourses on Israel-Palestine was reflected in the fact the Palestinians would be referred to by general, conveniently vague terms such as “Arab refugees” or, in the case of a minority that had managed to escape the generalized expulsion, “Israeli Arabs.” Denied the right to self-determination and statehood, Palestinians after 1948 were treated either as “Jordanians” (in the West Bank until 1967), “Israeli Arabs” (inside Israel), or as “Arab refugees” (outside historic Palestine); they were a “humanitarian problem” deserving the support of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency or an “economic problem” requiring “dissolution” through resettlement and em-

ployment schemes in neighboring Arab countries.

Coinciding with the sixtieth anniversary of the Nakba, Rosemarie M. Esber’s *Under the Cover of War* is an important addition to the growing body of scholarship on 1948. The book also helps to make sense of the ferocity of the recent Israeli onslaught against the people of Gaza, 85 percent of whom are refugees from 1948.

The book consists of ten chapters and four appendices. The appendices include two particularly useful ones, the first on the Palestinian cities, towns, and villages depopulated by 15 May 1948, and the second on oral sources and interview methods. Building on a revised and substantially updated doctoral dissertation submitted to SOAS (University of London) several years ago, Esber’s book combines three types of sources: a) refugee testimonials, including 130 interviews with refugees from Jordan, Lebanon, and the United States; b) a range of documents from UN, U.S., and British archives; and c) recent works by Israeli revisionist historians relying on Hebrew archival sources.

Israeli historians generally believe they are both ideologically and empirically impartial, and that the only reliable sources for the reconstruction of the 1948 war are in Israeli official documents and the archives of the Israel Defense Forces. Esber, who is highly critical of Benny Morris’s conclusions on 1948, rightly argues that (with the exception of Ilan Pappé) the Israeli “new” historians’ excessive or even exclusive reliance on Israeli archives has limited their narrative and conclusions.

Esber brings to light new documentation to show that the scale of 1948 expulsions can only be understood as an integral part of a mindset and premeditated plans to “transfer” and ethnically cleanse the Palestinians. She also quotes the American Red Cross, which estimated that “pregnant and nursing women, children under 15, and the elderly [people over 60] and infirm composed 84 percent of Palestinian refugees by October 1948” and that “only 25 to 28 percent of the refugees were able-bodied men; the rest were dependents and broken family groups, which had lost their men” (pp. 23 and 28). Unfortunately, Esber does not explain how these figures were arrived at. This and other

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sources ought to be critically interrogated. However, the overwhelming evidence presented here highlights the magnitude of suffering and gives the impression of a largely defenseless civilian population systematically ethnically cleansed from its homeland.

Although the main focus of Esber's work is on what she calls the "civil war period" (November 1947–May 1948), the evidence produced here shows that the mass expulsions carried out by the Haganah during the first phase of conquest were crucial for the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. By mid-May, 400,000 Palestinian men, women, and children had been driven out from some 220 villages, towns, and key cities. The book, in particular, has two useful chapters on two pivotal cities: one on the de-Arabization of Haifa, and one on the ethnic cleansing of Jaffa—ethnic cleansing which took place while British colonial officials and officers did nothing but watch.

Many historians in the West continue to display a bias in favor of Israeli archival sources and Israeli revisionist historiography on 1948. The overall bias toward "archives" has contributed to silencing the Palestinian past. Esber, by contrast, highlights the vitality of Palestinian oral testimony as an essential methodology in the reconstruction of the past and understanding the Nakba. As is the case with other subaltern groups, Esber shows, refugee oral testimony is a crucial source for recovering the voice of the victims of ethnic cleansing and for constructing a more comprehensible narrative of the *experience* of ordinary Palestinian refugees. Esber's work both challenges and complements the archival historiography of 1948.

COLONIAL SYMPATHIES

Reporting from Palestine 1943–1944, by Barbara Board. Edited by Jacqueline Karp. Nottingham, U.K.: Five Leaves Publications, 2008. 280 pages. Notes to p. 288. £9.99 paper.

Reviewed by Ted Swedenburg

Barbara Board, a freelance reporter who wrote mostly for London's *Daily Mirror*, was based in the Middle East from 1936 until shortly after the end of World War II. Be-

cause she was a female journalist and based in the Middle East, Board was regarded as something of a novelty at the time. This is highlighted in the titles of her first two books, *Newsgirl in Palestine* (1937), an account of conditions in Palestine at the time of the Peel Commission, and *Newsgirl in Egypt* (1938), which deals with the coronation of King Farouk.

Reporting from Palestine 1943–1944 was to have been Board's third book, to be published under the title *The Sword Without*. A wartime paper shortage initially prevented its publication, however, and then Board (for unexplained reasons) decided to withdraw the manuscript. Her daughter, the poet Jacqueline Karp, discovered the manuscript among her mother's papers after Board's death in 1986. More than sixty years later, it has finally seen the light of day, with notes provided by Karp.

Among the important events that Board covers is the run-up to March 1944, when, according to the provisions of the British White Paper of 1939, Jewish immigration into Palestine was set to end. Board also writes about the upsurge of terrorist attacks, mostly against British targets, by the Jewish underground military organizations Irgun Zvai Le'umi and Lehi (the Stern Gang), which aimed at reversing Britain's restrictive immigration policies. In addition, Board provides a vivid sense of the depressed mood of Jewish settlers in Palestine as they received news of the horrors being visited upon Jews in continental Europe.

Overall, Board is much more successful at conveying the feelings among grassroots Jewish communities in Palestine than she is at representing the views of Arabs, primarily because she spends the bulk of her time with the former. She never tells us that Hadera, where Board lived for several months, is where her British Jewish husband's family owned an orange orchard (Karp provides this information in the introduction). Board strives to present herself as an "objective" journalist, but her point of view is most deeply informed by her close Jewish connections and her support for the policies and imperial interests of her country of birth, Britain. She does sample Arab opinion, but mostly that of elites—King

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Arkansas Press, 2003) and coeditor (with Rebecca Stein) of *Palestine, Israel and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Duke University Press, 2005).