

RECENT BOOKS

NATIONALISM, HISTORY, AND THE 1948 WAR

Remembering Palestine in 1948:

Beyond National Narratives, by Efrat Ben-Ze'ev. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xiv + 194 pages. Bibliography to p. 211. Notes to p. 239. Index to p. 243. \$85.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Weldon C. Matthews

Efrat Ben-Ze'ev has produced a brief but thought-provoking response to the literature on the 1948 Palestine war that is bound by the parameters of official and academic nationalist narratives. Implicit in her book is a critique of the historical method that synthesizes textual and oral evidence to understand 1948 as the culmination of the Zionist project or the failure of the Palestinian Arab nationalist enterprise and seeks to assign culpability for the creation of the conflict to either of the nationalist movements. The production of these narratives deploys individuals' memories of 1948 as evidence, and those individuals' identities are consequently defined in terms of the nationalist narratives. Such a methodology obscures the instability of memory and the processes of reproducing it.

Instead of seeking to reconstruct comprehensive accounts of Palestinian, Israeli, and British experiences of 1948, Ben-Ze'ev undertakes the disaggregation of grand narratives and makes individuals and small groups the focus of her study. This is not to say that she ignores official histories, collective memory, or the politics of national commemoration, but that she asks how individuals, families, and veterans

associations experience them. Rather than attempting to reconcile their conflicting memories of 1948, she emphasizes their variation within and across generations, among Palestinians, Israelis, and British, and between men and women. Ben-Ze'ev identifies her method for understanding the meaning of 1948 as anthropological, as opposed to historical. She nonetheless acknowledges the influence on her work of historians, notably Joan Wallach Scott for her conceptualization of the relationship of personal experience to historical evidence and Jay Winter for his studies of popular memory and war.

The book's first chapter is a short and generally conventional overview of the history and historiography of the Mandate and the 1948 war. The two subsequent chapters focus on mapmaking and the usage of maps during the Mandate by the British administration and the Zionist movement, and to a much lesser extent by the Palestinian Arabs. The second of the two chapters on mapping describes how the Haganah appropriated government maps and cartographic methods for intelligence in anticipation of conflict with the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab states.

The subsequent three chapters constitute a unit focusing on Palestinians' memories of the war and how they assigned meaning to it. In chapter 4, Ben-Ze'ev relies on interviews she conducted with refugees from the village Ijzim, comparing their accounts of its conquest by the Israeli Defense Forces in July 1948 with Israeli and United Nations archival sources. Chapter 5 recounts interviews she conducted with women refugees from the villages of Tirat Haifa, Ijzim, and 'Ayn Hawd and reflects on interviewing as an anthropological practice. Chapter 6, which is probably the book's most original contribution, is an exploration of Israeli-Palestinians' contemporary pilgrimages and visitations to sites of villages from which they were exiled during the war.

In the next two chapters, Ben-Ze'ev shifts her subject of study to Israelis

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who experienced the war. The core of chapter 7 is her interviews with male veterans of a Palmach unit, and in chapter 8, her interviews are with female Palmach veterans. The last substantive chapter draws primarily on transcripts of interviews with former British police officers who served in Palestine to analyze their remembrance of the Zionist revolt at the end of the Mandate.

The author's fidelity to her methodology of focusing on the subnational experience and memory of 1948 has some necessary consequences for the content of the book. The questions that have dominated the historiography such as why Palestinian Arabs evacuated a particular area or to what extent the parties to the conflict perpetrated war crimes are found primarily on the margins of Ben-Ze'ev's analysis. She also does not examine in any depth the Israeli and Palestinian Arab nationalist narratives against which individual experiences could be compared. A more jarring void in the book is an absence of the consideration of the relationship of Zionism and Palestinian Arab nationalism to colonialism and anticolonial resistance.

Historians are likely to find the book disjointed, lacking a unifying structure or a strong theme, due in part to the author's decision to eschew a single narrative. For example, her interviews with Palmach veterans offer few additional perspectives on the events around Ijzim in 1948, and the police veterans' accounts do not have much to say about the 1948 war itself. The two chapters on maps and mapmaking constitute, in the author's words, "a detour into the world of geography" (p. 26) and do not seem well integrated into the rest of the work. Because of this, the book would have benefited by a stronger conclusion that could pull together its disparate elements.

Nonetheless, the book contains revealing details about the events of 1948 and the collective memory of Israelis and Palestinians. More importantly, the book demands that its reader rethink historical practice and its relationship to nationalism. Anyone interested in these issues would benefit by reading it.