

D68. "Debunking Israel," The Weekly Standard, (January 17, 2000), pages 33-35.

The Iron Wall

Israel and the Arab World by Avi Shlaim
Norton, 670 pp., \$ 32.50

Righteous Victims

A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999 by Benny Morris
Knopf, 751 pp., \$ 40

In preparation for Thanksgiving, Public School 87 in New York City teaches fourth graders what it felt like to be a Native American when the Pilgrims arrived: "Strange-looking people" came and "ransacked our houses, cut down our trees, killed our pets and took our tomatoes." In Arlington, Virginia, kids learn about the "brutality" of the Pilgrims. But much of the rest of the nation has been spared.

In Israel, by contrast, beginning this school year, ninth graders are being taught what it felt like to be a Palestinian Arab living in Jaffa or Jerusalem when the first Zionist settlers arrived. This lesson is part of a deliberate drive to change the national consciousness. New textbooks, in use nationwide, as well as an extensive series on Zionist and Israeli history on public television, call into question previously sacred Israeli tenets: that Jewish immigrants to Palestine settled largely on swamps they drained, hillsides they cleared, or land they bought at full price from Arabs; that the settlers sought to live in peace with the "natives"; and that they would have been content to accept various compromises dividing Palestine between a Jewish and an Arab state -- a plan scuttled by the Arabs time and again. Instead, children are being exposed to an "alternate narrative," according to which Jews drove Arabs off their land and rejected numerous peace feelers from Arab leaders. Far from defending themselves heroically, the Israelis are now said merely to have exploited their military superiority in their numerous confrontations with the surrounding Arab nations.

Superficially, these new teachings mandated by the minister of education reflect the rising influence of a new group of largely leftist Israeli historians, often referred to as revisionists. They have gained much power over the Israeli education establishment as well as the media. The revisionists include more than a dozen figures, ranging from the relatively moderate Benny Morris, a professor at Ben-Gurion University, to Ilan Pappé, an immoderate Marxist. Somewhere in between is Avi Shlaim, a professor of international relations at Oxford. The works of these and other revisionists spilled out of academe into the public debate and deeply influenced a group of educators working in the government of Yitzhak Rabin. This group continued quietly to develop the new curriculum under the administration of Bibi Netanyahu and introduced it this year, during the administration of Ehud Barak. While neither Rabin nor Barak endorsed the new viewpoint, both tolerated the antics of the Left for narrow political reasons.

Two major works of revisionist Israeli history have just been published in English. Benny Morris's book is comparatively scholarly and relatively free of overt editorializing and spin. It covers, battle by battle, more than a hundred years of Zionist settlement in Palestine and Israel, up to 1997. Morris's thesis is that the clash between Jews and Palestinians is the clash of two rights; both sides are victims of the situation.

Avi Shlaim builds his new book around an argument made by the dissident Zionist Ze'ev Jabotinsky in the 1920s. Jabotinsky argued that Palestine was not a land without people, looking for a people without a land, as some of the original Zionists naively assumed. Hence,

a protracted fight between the settlers and the native people was inevitable. He further maintained that the Jewish settlers must steel themselves, act resolutely, and focus on their self-interest without sentimental attention to others -- before the Arabs would be ready to work out a compromise. Shlaim claims that this paradigm, consciously or unwittingly, guided all that followed. Actually, given that the founding fathers and mothers of Israel and most of their followers were social democrats who considered Jabotinsky unacceptably right-wing and fought him and his followers bitterly, this seems implausible.

As a leading Israeli scholar, Anita Shapira, has pointed out, Shlaim, unlike Morris, takes it for granted that the Arabs were the natural occupants of the land, while the Jews were the interlopers. In the process, Shlaim disregards the Jews' historical roots in Palestine and the fact that hundreds of thousands of Jews were driven out of Iraq, Yemen, and North Africa and had to be settled somewhere.

Morris, Shlaim, and the other revisionists draw on documents newly available from the Israeli state archives. These documents do reveal dark moments in Israel's fifty-year history and in the history of the Jewish community that preceded it. For instance, Morris found copies of an order by a low-ranking member of the Palmach commandos, Yitzhak Rabin, expelling the Arab civilian population from Lod and Ramle, two towns blocking what was then the only road from the main parts of Israel to Jerusalem. (I served in the Palmach at the time and can confirm that these expulsions took place.) Morris uses these events to challenge the traditional Israeli claim that the Arabs left voluntarily, hoping to return victorious. Other revisions go much further, citing a few such incidents to argue that by and large Israel was the aggressor, driving Palestinians out of their homes. Ilan Pappé is a strong proponent of this view, arguing that Israel "deliberately uprooted the Palestinian population and justified it on the basis of Jewish uniqueness and as a consequence of the Holocaust."

To be sure, Israel had its My Lai and No Gun Ri. For instance, Morris shows that Deir Yassin was overrun by Jewish forces in 1948 and some -- possibly many -- of the casualties were inflicted after the town surrendered. There is no denying such events, and they should not be dismissed with the claim that "such things happen in war"; they are morally troubling. However, to exploit them to tar Israel is like claiming that most of the bombs the United States dropped on Kosovo were mistargeted because one of them hit the Chinese embassy, or that the United States should not try to pre-empt terrorist acts because an American missile hit the wrong chemical factory in Sudan.

Grossly exaggerating the implications of truly distressing facts is the stock in trade of these revisionists, but they are also capable of concocting wholly misleading interpretive frameworks. Shlaim is much better at this sorry business than Morris. In a previous book, *Collusion Across the Jordan*, he depicted Israel as a colonial power conspiring with Jordan to carve up territory that should have been set aside for a Palestinian Arab state. Pappé goes even further; he depicts the Jewish community in Palestine, preceding the formation of Israel, as an extension of Western imperialism, which flourished during the British colonial occupation of the area. In reality, the British played both sides against each other, favoring sometimes one, sometimes the other. Clearly, Zionism is a product of the impulse toward national liberation that swept across Eastern Europe (leading to the formation of several of the Balkan countries out of the Austro-Hungarian empire), then to Asia and Africa. Jews and Arabs fought British colonial rule, just as Indians did, each people seeking to form its own nation. (Indeed, the first target hit by my Palmach unit was a British radar station in Haifa.)

When it comes to military matters, the revisionists reject the traditional view -- that the beleaguered Israelis stood up time and again to a vast sea of Arabs. Instead, they claim, the Israelis always enjoyed military superiority. This argument is partly tautological: Given that,

so far, Israel has managed to survive, it was superior by definition. In the Israeli War of Independence, however, this superiority was often a matter of dedication and courage, not of arms, as a detailed comparison of the weapons available to both sides shows. Moreover, the Arabs overran several Jewish settlements, including the whole region of Gush Etzion, besieged old Jerusalem, and expelled its Jews. Syria grabbed and kept territory bordering on the sea of Galilee; Egypt occupied Gaza and held onto it for more than a decade.

Some of the reasons given for the recent avalanche of revisionist books are rather superficial, though not necessarily wrong. Rabbi Berel Wein points out that one way for young historians to make a splash is by radically departing from established interpretations. Others note that Israeli professors and intellectuals increasingly view themselves not as the elite of a local community but as members of an international set. They aspire to be accepted by their colleagues in other countries, especially in the West, where leftist and liberal circles have grown more and more critical of Israel, likening its treatment of the Palestinians to South Africa's treatment of blacks under apartheid. For Israelis, championing revisionist views is the ticket to acceptance and respect.

But there is also a deeper reason that revisionists have garnered influence in recent years. Their views feed and are fed by the perspective underlying the Oslo accords, signed in 1993. Though revisionists were writing before the accords, the volume and import of their work has risen since. The recasting of Israeli textbooks in line with their thinking, for example, would have been hard to imagine before Oslo.

The connection between the accords and the revisionist school is profound. From a traditional Israeli standpoint, the idea underlying the accords -- exchanging land for peace -- means a peace-loving, beleaguered, much-attacked nation making major concessions to a movement driven by terrorists and slow to renounce its goal of destroying the state of Israel and "throwing the Jews into the sea." From this standpoint, Oslo means risking Israel's security by permitting the emergence of a potentially hostile Palestinian state.

In this context, the revisionist position is best understood as an extreme version of the Oslo perspective. If Israel is the aggressor, if it has repeatedly victimized Palestinians rather than been their victim, if one ignores the way Arab countries have driven out Jews and instead focuses on incidents in which Israel has driven out Arabs -- then the Oslo concessions become small potatoes, a tardy attempt to right the scales of history. No wonder the revisionists are particularly popular among those leftists who most staunchly support the Oslo agreements -- indeed, who would prefer to go much further to correct past injustices against the Arabs. It should be noted, however, that there are many other supporters of the Oslo agreements who favor them for different reasons and are not revisionists. Oslo merely opens the door wide to revisionism.

Most profoundly, Israeli revisionism is linked to a drive to end the Zionist project and revoke the notion that Israel is a Jewish state. Revisionists seek to annul the Law of Return, which allows Jews, and only Jews, who immigrate to Israel to become citizens automatically. Israel, according to these post-Zionists, should become a small Mediterranean country no different in principle from, say, Lebanon. Its citizens would pay taxes and vote, enjoy coffee shops, nightclubs, malls, and other manifestations of affluence, and cherish their civil liberties. But they would not share a culture or purpose, let alone a destiny, with each other or with Jews everywhere. (Some radical revisionists even argue that Jews have no right to seek a homeland, as they do not constitute a single people but instead speak many languages and partake of many cultures.) Here the revisionist drive to de-Judaize Israel coincides with the bitter culture war between Orthodox Jewry and secular liberal groups -- with the majority of Israelis caught in between.

If Jewish history teaches us anything, it is that Jews in the diaspora have been threatened with annihilation in one society after another, and that wherever they have been welcomed, they have tended to drown themselves in a sea of cultural and social assimilation. Ergo, if Jewish culture, values, and ultimately existence are to be preserved, there is no alternative to a Jewish state.

If Israel somehow ceased to be a Jewish state, then, a new Zionist movement would be needed to find a safe haven somewhere else for Jewish existence and culture. This is, of course, an absurd idea, given that, after two thousand years of Jewish homelessness and persecution culminating in the Holocaust, and following great sacrifices by Jews and Arabs, there finally is a legitimate Jewish state. True, the state of Israel was destroyed once before. Today, its presence vastly improves the odds for Jewish survival. It would be a tragic irony if this time it were destroyed from within.

Amitai Etzioni teaches at the George Washington University and is the author of *The New Golden Rule*.