

Review Essays

Israeli History: Who is Fabricating What?

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Fabricating Israeli History: The 'New Historians'

by Efraim Karsh. Ilford, Essex: Frank Cass, 1997. 210pp. £13.50 paperback.

National Myths

According to Efraim Karsh, 'there is no such thing as "Zionist historiography"' (p. 147). Nonetheless, the purpose of *Fabricating Israeli History* is to discredit what he sees as a recent spate of anti-Zionist historiography – a body of work produced not by Arabs, but by Jewish and mostly Israeli academics. Karsh wants to expose these scholars as anti-Israel hatchet men and to debunk their arguments in the same way that they have sought to debunk myths surrounding Israel's establishment and its relations with the Arabs. There were and are, it seems from Karsh's argument, no rosy myths about Israel's early history worth removing, no improved historical understanding to be gained from new documents, and no new questions worth asking. But however likely readers are to be impressed by the intensity of Karsh's pristine faith in Zionism, they are sure to be stunned by the malevolence of his writing and confused by the erratic, sloppy nature of his analysis. Errors, inconsistencies and over-interpretation there may be in some of the new Israeli histories, but nothing in them can match the howlers, contradictions and distortions contained in this volume.

Historians write and rewrite history based on relics of the past – stone tablets, monuments, documents and so on – and questions produced by their experience in the present. We can, accordingly, learn more about the past whenever new sources are discovered or made accessible, but what we can learn is multiplied when we are able to ask new questions about both old and new sources. The body of 'new Israeli historiography' – the target of Karsh's book – is the product of such a combination – a flood of new archival material, made available under British and Israeli 30-year rules, coupled with new questions and frameworks of analysis encouraged by a political situation that has convinced most Israelis of Palestinian national rights and mutually valid claims to the same land.

National histories, however, do not easily accommodate new information or new questions. It is therefore unsurprising that, whether fresh historical accounts are based on new sources, new questions, or both, efforts to revise official or conventional historical accounts of any national community's heroism and

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blamelessness generally provoke fierce resistance. That is why, as most professional historians know, much of the least reliable history around is national history. Still, the arguments and polemics surrounding these sometimes arcane historical debates are important, not only for the corrective they may provide to an exposé mentality that can easily arise from the availability of previously secret documents, but because the arguments are part of a public process of cultural learning which can be psychologically just as painful, but just as important, as the political and territorial compromises pursued at the negotiating table.

This is the context for understanding the explosion of angst and anger in Israel triggered by the 'new Israeli history' and the 'critical Israeli sociology'. The best criticism of these new works accepts the profound change in scholarly orientations towards the 1948 war and its aftermath that they require, while reminding us that older questions remain valid even as new sources and conditions suggest that earlier answers were incorrect.¹ By contrast, most reactions to the new Israeli history have been inspired by anger and a narcissistic sense of injury to cherished images of Zionism and Israel. So it is with Karsh's book.

The 'New' Historians

The target of *Fabricating Israeli History* is the whole body of revisionist Israeli history and social science. But the text engages directly with only small pieces of the work of just three (Oxbridge-trained) scholars – Benny Morris, a professor in the History Department at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev; Avi Shlaim, Alastair Buchan Reader in International Relations at St Antony's, Oxford; and Ilan Pappé, a professor at the University of Haifa.

The primary works of these authors are three books by Morris – *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* (Oxford University Press [OUP], 1994) and *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956* (OUP, 1993); two by Shlaim – *Collusion Across the Jordan* (Columbia University Press, 1988) and a shorter, somewhat amended version – *The Politics of Partition* (Columbia University Press, 1990); and two by Pappé – *Britain and the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1948–1951* (Macmillan, 1988) and *The Making of the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1947–1951* (I. B. Tauris, 1992). These works are part of the scholarly core of a larger array of books and articles, some more polemical or journalistic in tone and style, which have made new archival material available to wide audiences.² There is also an even larger number of 'revisionist' works by Israeli and non-Israeli social scientists, whose work has been having the same sort of massive impact on established ways of thinking about Israeli politics and society

¹ One good example is Itamar Rabinovich, *The Road Not Taken: Early Arab–Israeli Negotiations* (New York: OUP, 1991).

² Among the authors of recent accounts reasonably included within the category of 'new Israeli histories' are Uri Bar-Joseph, Mordechai Bar-On, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, Simcha Flapan, Motti Golani, Uri Milstein and Tom Segev. It should be noted, however, that in the process of advancing his parochial view of these matters, Karsh also makes strong attacks on non-Israeli and non-'revisionist' historians such as Alan Bullock, William Roger Louis and Moshe Maoz.

as the 'new histories' have had on our historical understanding. Somewhat unaccountably, Karsh hardly mentions them.³

Morris's book on the causes and dynamics of the fighting and other violence along the Arab–Israeli armistice lines between 1949 and 1956 (*Israel's Border Wars*) is a *tour de force*. It is a compendious account – almost entirely based on previously inaccessible Israeli archives – of the insecurities, political motives, tactical miscalculations, moral callousness and military recklessness that characterised Israel's response to the presence of Arab refugees along its borders and their efforts to return for residence, harvests, pillage or revenge. Yet it is Morris's first book (*The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*) that stands as the most influential and important of all the 'new history' or 'revisionist' works.

Experts on the region had long been aware that there was little truth to official Israeli accounts of the refugee question, and virtually none to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's famous claim – made in the Israeli Parliament in 1961 – that Palestinians left the country on orders from their leaders or in response to radio broadcasts from Arab states urging them to leave and make way for the Arab armies. Even before the (still-partial) opening of the Israeli archives in the early 1980s, it was widely known in academic circles that the causes of the 'displacement' of seven-eighths of the Arabs living in the territory that became the Jewish state primarily lay in the weakness of Arab élites and the terror of a population panicked into flight by massacres, bombardments, intimidation and forced evacuations. These were actions carried out under a general umbrella of protection and encouragement from Ben-Gurion and other political leaders, but with varying degrees of brutality and effectiveness depending on the time and location of the fighting and the inclinations of local commanders.

To appreciate the reason for the hysteria in Karsh's attack on Morris, one must understand that, however widely scholars appreciated the general outlines of what really happened in 1948, these matters were unknown to the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews until Morris's book appeared. Previous accounts of the 'War of Independence' were written in the 1950s and 1960s by official Israeli military historians such as Netanel Lorch, journalists and Israeli intelligence-service operatives, such as Jon and David Kimche, and political and military heroes of the war, most notably Palmach commander Yigal Allon and Ben-Gurion. As Anita Shapira, perhaps the best Israeli historian still working within the pre-Morris paradigm of Zionist and Israeli historiography, has written, 'Not only was [Ben-Gurion] the leader of the War of Independence, he also wrote its history'. It was his interpretation, Shapira points out, that has 'usually been accepted almost unchallenged' in Israel.⁴

³ I refer especially to social scientists Uri Ben-Eliezer, Lev Grinberg, Baruch Kimmerling, Yagil Levy, Joel Migdal, Yoav Peled, Uri Ram, Gershon Shafir, Michael Shalev and Yael Zerubavel, most of whose works have substantial, and substantially new, historical content and range widely over Zionist and Palestinian history.

⁴ Quoted and cited, respectively, by Moshe Lissak in Lissak, 'Ben-Gurion and the Palmach: Two Points of View', *Israel: State and Society, 1945–1988*, in Peter Y. Medding (ed.), *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. V (New York: OUP, 1989), p. 317.

These authors knew how prominent a role was played by various forms of 'ethnic cleansing' and they employed a variety of strategies to avoid having to share this knowledge with their readers. Some simply did not mention the fate of the Arab inhabitants of the country or the causes for their displacement. In Lorch's nine-page index, for example, there is no listing for 'refugees' or 'Arab refugees'. Indeed, the matter is not discussed anywhere in his 450-page book, *The Edge of the Sword: Israel's War of Independence, 1947–1949* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1961). Another tactic employed by authors of the 'official version' was to focus on Haifa, where, remarkably and almost uniquely, some local Jewish officials tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Arabs not to leave.⁵

A more general and ultimately more important tactic – employed by virtually all of these authors, including Ben-Gurion and the Kimches – was to present their accounts as the heroic struggle of a peaceable and reasonable Jewish 'David' against a 'Goliath' comprising an implacably and monolithically hostile Arab world allied with the fading, but treacherous, resentful and still-powerful British Empire. With this awe-inspiring theme as the central organisational framework, the question of why Arabs fled or were expelled falls beyond the scope of research or is treated as part of the mystery and the miracle of Jewish victory. The point is that these histories effectively discouraged their audiences from considering the fate of the country's Arabs as a significant question. A fashionable and accurate way of putting this is that the master narratives used by those who wrote the histories of Israel's founding with which most Israelis are familiar did not include, within the tale they were trying to tell, the dramatic struggle over how many Arabs would actually remain within the boundaries of the nascent Jewish state. Of course, this struggle and its *dénouement* is a key 'plot line' in Arab accounts of the 'Disaster' of 1948.

To be sure, even before Morris there were independent-minded Israelis inclined to think outside the grooves laid down for them by official histories. But when some did turn their attention to the dynamics of the Arab flight, suggesting how significant were armed Jewish efforts to precipitate and accelerate the flight of the refugees, they were treated as political and intellectual pariahs (Aharon Cohen and Simcha Flapan) or they found all doors to a career in Israeli academia closed (Rony Gabbay). As a last resort, the Israeli government occasionally resorted to censorship. Just before his death in June 1997, Lorch publicly admitted that he left his post as head of the Israeli Army's History Division after the 1948 war because politically motivated censorship made good professional history writing impossible.⁶ The role of censorship in preserving a sanitised official narrative of the war was most spectacularly illustrated when former

⁵ See, for example, Dan Kurzman, *Genesis 1948: The First Arab–Israeli War* (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 158. For an unprecedentedly thorough examination of the fate of Haifa's Arab population in 1948, see Benny Morris, 'Haifa's Arabs: Displacement and Concentration, July 1948', in Morris, *1948 and After*, pp. 215–38.

⁶ Netanel Lorch, 'A Word From an Old Historian', *Ha'aretz*, 23 June 1997. On the intense political pressures to which Lorch was subjected, see also Amir Orren, 'Military Units or Political Parties,' *Ha'aretz*, 13 June 1997.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin published his memoirs in 1979. As a commander of the units that forcibly expelled 50,000 Arab men, women and children from Lydda (Lod) and Ramle, Rabin knew exactly what had caused the refugee problem. The Israeli government, however, refused to allow Rabin's memoirs to be published in Israel until the passages describing this expulsion were excised. The portions that were deleted, however, were published by the *New York Times*. They included the following:

We walked outside, Ben-Gurion accompanying us. Allon [head of the Palmach] repeated his question: 'What is to be done with the population?'. B.G. [Ben-Gurion] waved his hand in a gesture which said, 'Drive them out!' ... Allon and I held a consultation. I agreed it was essential to drive the inhabitants out. We took them on foot towards the Bet Horon Road ... 'Driving out' is a term with a harsh ring ... Psychologically, this was one of the most difficult actions we undertook. The population of Lod did not leave willingly. There was no way of avoiding the use of force and warning shots in order to make the inhabitants march the 10 to 15 miles to the point where they met up with the Legion ... There were some fellows who refused to take part in the expulsion action. Prolonged propaganda activities were required after the action, to remove the bitterness of these youth-movement groups, and explain why we were obliged to undertake such a harsh and cruel action.⁷

After Morris's books and articles, Shlaim's work has been the most influential of that produced by the 'new Israeli historians'. His best-known works focus on understandings and agreements between the Jewish Agency and Emir Abdullah of Transjordan and between Britain and Abdullah concerning how to limit hostilities between the developing Jewish state and Transjordan and how to manage the complex game that was emerging among the Jewish state, Transjordan and the United Kingdom over the political fate of the territories designated by the UN as a Palestinian Arab state. He has also undertaken important research on Ben-Gurion's rejection, in 1949, of offers from the short-lived government of General Husni Zaim in Syria to make peace and resettle 300,000 Palestinian refugees.⁸

Shlaim's contribution in his account of Jewish relations with Abdullah is not so much that he uncovered a great deal of new material, but that he fleshed out, with interviews, archival material and a graceful writing style, a subtler and more balanced story than those available from either the official Israeli or official Arab versions. The traditional Zionist narrative depends for its effect on an image of Jews standing alone and drawing courageously on their meagre resources to overcome implacable Arab hostility. The questions it naturally raises relate to how this amazing political feat of national survival and liberation

⁷ David K. Shipler, 'Israel Bars Rabin from Relating '48 Eviction of Arabs', *New York Times*, 23 October 1979, p. A3.

⁸ Avi Shlaim, 'Husni Za'im and the Plan to Resettle Palestinian Refugees in Syria', *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1986, pp. 68–80.

was accomplished. The official Arab narrative relies on an image of Zionism, backed by Western imperialism, as acting with ruthless efficiency to steal the land of Palestine, expel its native population, and maintain the overall political subordination of the Arab world. The questions it naturally provokes pertain to the betrayals, errors or perfidies that can explain such an unjust and tragic outcome. The basic narrative structure of Shlaim's account treats both the Arab and the Jewish sides as seeking to achieve far-reaching political ambitions (political sovereignty in as much of the Land of Israel as possible for the Jews; a large Hashemite-ruled United Arab Kingdom for Abdullah), while scrambling to avoid disaster by seeking whatever short-term assistance was available from erstwhile allies who might turn out to be enemies – the British, the Mufti or the Egyptians, for example. The questions this much more complex and sophisticated narrative produces regard the changing interpretations which the sides placed on each other's behaviour, the influence of political rivalries within each camp on what policies would be adopted and what judgements would be accepted as decisive, the importance of the unintended consequences of policies adopted for mistaken or oblique reasons, and how the changing balance of forces and shifting sands of international politics led the sides to escalate or de-escalate their demands on one another, and thus move through stages of enmity, understanding, limited alliance and limited enmity.

In the case of the relationship between the Zionists and Abdullah, because of its length (three decades) and its subtle and rapidly changing texture, there is no simple way to describe it accurately. Herein lies Shlaim's biggest problem. Although he gained notoriety by using the term 'collusion' in the title of his book to describe the Abdullah–Jewish Agency relationship, the term is at best accurate only for a short period late in 1947. That is why, in the revised version, Shlaim corrects his use of the term as a blanket description and provides a more nuanced interpretation of an evolving relationship that matches the evidence he examines. 'The relationship between King Abdullah and the emergent State of Israel', he says, 'is so complex, many-sided, and fluctuating that no single adjective can do it justice'.⁹

The plain, if not simple, truth is that in 1947, neither the Israelis-to-be, nor Abdullah, nor Great Britain, knew exactly what was going to happen in Palestine. Each realised, however, that their worst fears could be avoided by engaging in secret negotiations and unwritten agreements – arrangements with enough 'plausible deniability' to allow each side to pursue maximum objectives under some scenarios, while gaining reassurance that their most serious worries could be assuaged. The Jews were concerned at the prospect of a full mobilisation of the Arab Legion, with British support, in a coordinated Arab campaign against their new state. Abdullah feared that if events ran out of control he would be abandoned by the UK, isolated in an Arab world dominated by Egypt, and forced to accept domination of Arab Palestine by either an expansionist Jewish state or by the forces of his arch-rival in Palestine – the Grand Mufti, Haj Amin El-Husseini. The British worried that the British-trained

⁹ Shlaim, *The Politics of Partition*, p. viii.

and -officered Arab Legion would be decimated in an all-out war with the Jews and that their position in Palestine and Transjordan would be so severely weakened that their base in Egypt and wider strategic interests in the region would also be endangered. Differences of opinion among politicians and advisers in each camp, and their different estimates of what was happening and would happen, complicate the story even more.

Karsh's Assault on the Revisionists

How then does Karsh's book relate to these studies? The work of Morris, Shlaim and Pappé, writes Karsh, 'violates every tenet of bona fide research', comprises a 'New Israeli Distoriography', and constructs a 'fictitious historical edifice'. It is shrouded in a 'cloud of innuendo', and reflects 'perverted thinking' and 'utter hypocrisy'. Adjectives such as 'absurd', 'crude', 'mind-boggling', 'sinister', 'patently false', and 'preposterous', are sprinkled liberally throughout the text. Yet despite its hyperbolic and often sarcastic tone, Karsh advertises *Fabricating Israeli History* as a sober attempt to 'set the record straight and to make the case for fair play in the study of the Arab-Israel conflict in general, and Israeli history in particular' (p. 205). This claim, along with a further admonition that historians are responsible for taking 'a hardnosed look at the past and, without political intent, to debunk old myths', suggest that Karsh wants his readers to view his work as a detached and scrupulous application of scholarly norms. Both the book's style and title signal Karsh's belief that by applying these norms to the arguments and evidence of Morris and Shlaim (Pappé receives less attention) he has exposed their work as an academic Big Lie, a scholarly hoax, a thoroughly disreputable exercise in the vilification of Zionism and Israel.

In fact it is Karsh's volume, especially given the solemn invocation of scholarly norms it contains, which comes perilously close to falling within the category of a hoax. Far from 'debunking old myths', Karsh resurrects them. Ben-Gurion, in Karsh's account, looked forward to a state wherein Jewish-Arab relations would be based on 'a true partnership among equal citizens' (p. 68). A decisive element in British policy during the 1948 war, in Karsh's view, was anti-Semitism, reflecting 'the real British approach to the "Jewish Question"' (p. 161). The whole enterprise of the 'new historians' seeking to correct false impressions is misguided, according to Karsh, since no official or 'conventional view of the Arab-Israeli conflict ... ever existed' (p. 19). Ben-Gurion and the Zionist movement struggled in vain, according to Karsh, to enhance prospects for the UN plan to create a Palestinian Arab state next to the Jewish state, and participated in no understanding or agreement with Abdullah, nor even in any real negotiations with him on the terms of such an agreement. Peace agreements after the war were rendered impossible, according to Karsh (and the old official orthodoxy), not because the price of peace, in terms of territory and return of refugees, was deemed too high by Israel's leaders, but because of Arab hostility to the very idea of making peace with the Jewish state as long as Arabs retained hopes of destroying Israel in a 'second round' (pp. 84-85).

Instead of applying clear methodological standards and consistent rules of interpretation in a 'hardnosed' manner and 'without political intent', Karsh's

treatment of sources and evidence is almost wholly determined by a passionately delivered political argument. The resulting inconsistencies and contradictions are breathtaking. Karsh castigates Morris for ‘donning the mind-reader’s mantle’ when offering a possible interpretation of a Ben-Gurion speech (p. 61). Yet Karsh also attacks the ‘new historians’ work for a ‘pretentious ... archaic “fetishism of facts”’, proclaiming the historian’s proper role to be precisely that of ‘interpretation’ – ‘it is the historian who constructs reality out of the facts’ [p. 34]). Karsh derides Morris for supposedly not following ‘the elementary rule of historical investigation [which] is to rely on original sources whenever possible’, while contending that ‘facts’ *per se* are not to be found in archive documents (p. 34) and attacking Shlaim for going back to primary sources instead of relying on available secondary-source accounts (p. 17). While denouncing in elaborate detail what he describes as ambiguities or malicious misrepresentations of quoted material by Morris and Shlaim, Karsh regularly presents quotations, some quite lengthy, which say the very opposite of what Karsh tells his readers they say (pp. 84, 93, 118, 132n, 133, and 137). Karsh attacks Morris’s emphasis on sanitising changes made to the records of Zionist congresses, party meetings, and published editions of memoirs and diaries as evidence (somehow) of his ‘cavalier approach to historical source material’: ‘As every historian knows fully well, personal diaries are also written with an eye to the future, hence should be handled with great care’ (p. 197). Even so, Karsh finds it convenient to treat some passages from Ben-Gurion’s diaries as transparently true accounts, not of what Ben-Gurion wanted historians to have as evidence, but of his innermost thoughts and motives (see, for example, pp. 45n, 64, 83 and 201). Karsh ridicules Shlaim for treating the arrangement reached between Abdullah and Golda Meir in November 1947 as an ‘agreement’ or even an ‘understanding’ – an arrangement involving Jewish acceptance of Abdullah’s occupation and subsequent annexation of the Palestinian ‘West Bank’ region in return for Abdullah’s commitment not to permit fighting between the Arab Legion and Jewish troops in areas allotted to the Jews by the UN. At the same time, virtually every Israeli historian approvingly cited by Karsh characterises the arrangement as just that – an unwritten but clearly understood agreement that evolved over decades of informal contacts, based in part on Jewish delivery of funds to Abdullah, and that crystallised as the context for Jewish–Transjordanian relations in the meeting between Meir and the King in Naharayim in November 1947.¹⁰

¹⁰ See, for example, Dan Schueftan, *Optzya Yardenit: Israel, Yarden Vehapalestinim* (Yad Tabenkin: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1986); Yoav Gelber, ‘The Negotiations between the Jewish Agency and Transjordan, 1946–1948’, *Studies in Zionism*, vol. 6, no. 1, November 1985, pp. 53–83; Avraham Sela, *Memegaim Lemasah Umatan: Yachasei Hasochnut Hayehudit Vemedinat Yisrael Eem Hamelech Abdallah, 1946–1950* (Tel Aviv: Shiloach Institute, Tel Aviv University, 1985); Avraham Sela, ‘Transjordan, Israel and the 1948 War: Myth, Historiography, and Reality’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4, October 1992, pp. 623–88; Jon and David Kimche, *Both Sides of the Hill: Britain and the Palestine War* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960); and Aharon Klieman, *Du-Kium Lelo Shalom* (Tel Aviv: Maariv, 1986).

While condemning Morris's entire oeuvre, Karsh studiously avoids coming to terms with the massive amount of documentary evidence Morris adduces in support of his depiction of the displacement of Palestinian Arabs or of the policies implemented by Israel along its borders in the early 1950s. Rather, Karsh concentrates on the absence of Arabic-language sources in Morris's work and on a few pages in Morris's first book which briefly discuss the extent to which 'transfer' of the Arab population was entertained as a strategic option in the Zionist movement before 1948. In regard to the first point, Karsh never suggests why Arabic sources, if they even exist, might be more relevant or reliable than Israeli sources as documentation of policies and events Israel was likely to find embarrassing. On the second point, not only is this a minor, almost insignificant, aspect of Morris's work, but Karsh's claim that 'transfer' was not on the Zionist policy agenda on the eve of the 1948 war is wholly consistent with Morris's argument that the displacement of the Arabs was not carried out according to any prearranged or systematically supervised plan. These pin-prick and unsustainable attacks on Morris are illustrative of the nature of Karsh's book – an exercise in the scoring of debating points, all proclaimed as knock-out blows.

Karsh's critique of Shlaim's work brings to mind a humorous definition of the Hebrew term *chutzpah*: a boy, having murdered his parents, throws himself on the mercy of the court on the grounds that he is an orphan. Consistent with the title of his book, Karsh dismisses Shlaim's thorough examination of the long and complex relationship between Abdullah and the Zionist movement as 'totally flawed', as an exercise in the 'fabrication' of Israeli history and the propagation of myths about an agreement between the Hashemites and the Zionists (pp. 69, 77). At the same time, his most repeated specific charge against Shlaim is that nothing Shlaim says is new, that it has all been known and written about before by good Zionist historians! (See, for example, pp. 17–18.)

So does Karsh's book really contain any sustained and substantive argument at all? In fact, it does. It is an argument over what overall story line to have in mind when reflecting on and analysing the rise of Zionism, the establishment of the State of Israel and the development of Arab–Israeli relations. The narrative implicitly surrounding the work of the historiography Karsh attacks can be summarised as a story about how single-minded Jewish efforts to consolidate as much control over as much of Palestine as possible, and the surprising degree to which the Zionist movement and the Israeli state were able to prevail in various military, political and diplomatic arenas, resulted in Arab suffering, conflict with the Arab states and the Palestinians, and missed opportunities for resolving or ameliorating those conflicts.

Needless to say, this is not the narrative Karsh employs or advocates. But it is the promulgation of a different narrative, specifically the 'Zionist narrative', whose existence Karsh denies throughout the book, which is his most coherent theme. It is therefore no coincidence that Karsh's narrative is nearly identical to that articulated in a manual prepared under the auspices of the Israeli Foreign Ministry in 1970 for the Israeli Students' Organization in North America. The

interpretation in a 'hard-nosed' manner and 'without political intent', Karsh's

manual contains sample lectures and advice ‘to thwart Arab propaganda’. The ‘information’ contained is described as useable ‘by any Israeli student within the broad national consensus’. The first lecture is entitled ‘Zionism as a Movement of National Liberation’.¹¹ Karsh’s primary commitment to advancing this particular narrative is apparent throughout the book, but made most explicit in his chapter on ‘Bevin and the Jews’. Thus his explanation for British enmity towards Israel identifies anti-Semitism as important, but secondary to the fact that the UK, as a typical ‘imperialist power’, did not ‘enjoy being ejected from its colonies by a national liberation movement, and in the late 1940s it was the Zionists who were steadily pushing Britain out of Palestine’ (p. 185). British policies towards the emergence of the Jewish state reflected, writes Karsh, ‘the injured pride of an imperialist power unable to come to terms with its humiliation by a national liberation movement’ (p. 192). Prime Minister Aneurin Bevin and Whitehall officials simply could not grasp, according to Karsh, ‘the yearning of peoples and communities for national liberation’ (p. 186). Instead their objective was clear – ‘the severance of Israel from its natural human lifeline and the rendering of the Zionist dream stillborn’ (p. 164).

An important sub-theme within this overall narrative – of Zionism as a heroic national-liberation movement and the UK as racist, imperialist and vengeful – is that the Arabs of Palestine did not mount a worthy movement of national liberation, indicating that they did not deserve what they did not get. Here, then, is Karsh’s fundamental explanation for the refugee problem: not some complex version of ethnic cleansing, nor radio broadcasts urging flight; no, it was the victims’ own fault. They simply did not measure up to what it takes to be a nation:

what makes a certain social group into a nation is precisely the readiness to stay put, to endure the hardships and to make the necessary sacrifices for defending its collective existence on its own land. The Yishuv [Jewish community in Palestine], being the cohesive national movement that it was, mustered these vital resources; the atomized Palestinian community, lacking an equivalent sense of corporate identity, did not – hence the mass desertion of its most vital social classes [pp. 26–27].

Admittedly, there is much to criticise and correct in the historical school represented by Morris, Shlaim and Pappé. For example, Morris’s work is vulnerable to criticism for using a rigidly ‘balanced’ framing of the problem between two ‘straw man’ arguments – was there an overall explicit order to expel the Arabs? Was Israel blameless in the creation of the refugee question?

¹¹ Benjamin Neuberger, *Speaker’s Manual* (New York: Israeli Students’ Organization, 1970), p. 5. The manual is a compendium of the ‘official’ or ‘conventional’ Israeli account of the Arab–Israeli conflict that Karsh, as noted, claims never existed. For example, to the question ‘How did it happen that so many Arabs left Israel?’, the manual instructs Israeli debaters to answer that they were ordered out by Arab leaders, that some fled because civilians always flee during wartime, and that some left for the psychological reason that they did not want the Jews to do to them what they had wanted to do to the Jews. See pp. 35–36.

– to afford some political protection for an argument that would be considerably more pointed if it matched the evidence he adduces. Shlaim waffles on the meaning of ‘collusion’, especially in his first book, and this makes it more difficult than it should be to assess how his work should be understood in the context of the considerable literature, in Hebrew and English, available on Transjordan and the Zionist movement. Pappé’s softly post-modernist epistemological position does affect the credibility of his essentially positivist use of archival material.

In general, however, the scale of the accomplishments of this whole body of scholarship – in history, sociology, political science and cultural studies – is so enormous, the contrast between the sophistication and depth of its evidentiary base compared to anything previously available so dramatic, and the freshness of the questions posed so invigorating, that only professional historians and social scientists intent on moving understanding forwards can do justice to the task of separating the wheat from the chaff and of charting the new avenues of research this work makes possible. Such scholarship also has profound political importance, since it lays the basis for the kind of national reconciliation that alone can secure a true peace in the Middle East. Such a peace will not be based on either side’s understanding of the full requirements of justice, but on a trade by both sides of a considerable measure of forgiveness for a considerable measure of truth.