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## Tom Segev Critically Reviews Benny Morris' new book, '1948'

by Richard Silverstein on [July 19, 2010](#) · [30 comments](#)

in [Mideast Peace](#)

### “1948: A History of the first Arab-Israeli War” by Benny Morris – A War of Necessity

Translated from English: Yaacov Sharet. Published by Am Oved

*In his new book, 1948, Benny Morris presents his readers with a readable, well-edited story...The writer focuses on the fate of the Palestinians...but his attitude toward their tragedy is troublesome in terms of both humaneness and morality.*

[Review by Tom Segev](#) [translated by Dena Shunra]

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Benny Morris'...attempt to author a popular history of the War of Independence is praise-worthy, and as a former journalist he is skillful at taking into account the limits of his readers' patience. The story he tells is well-edited, the translation from English flows well, and, and the general picture takes shape clearly.

But Morris is now also a history professor, and unfortunately he – like his colleagues – writes primarily about decision-making and processes, armies and military maneuvers, and tends to ignore the people behind the documents. His book therefore demonstrates what the books written by his colleagues tend to prove: it is generally not a good idea to abandon a good story to history professors. Like everything else Morris writes, this book is also very political, and for this reason, too, it is worth reading. Like the books by his colleagues, it also demonstrates that history is written by the winners: Morris's position about the tragedy of the Palestinians is shameful on both humanistic and moral terms.

### Securing the Homeland

The basic thesis appears in the very first sentence: “The 1948 war was an almost inevitable result of nearly half a century of friction and disputes between Arabs and Jews.” In the next 40 pages Morris takes his readers on a whirlwind tour beginning in 1200 B.C. and ending at the end of the British Mandate over Palestine...

Morris focuses on the fate of the Palestinians, and that is indeed the main story. Like other historians, he divides the War of Independence into two primary stages: from the Partition Decision, on November 29<sup>th</sup> 1947, until the declaration of independence, on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1948; and from the invasion of the armies of Arabia until the armistice agreements in 1949. Morris calls the first stage a “civil war” for some reason, as do others. This is a spurious term because even at this stage there was no political dispute between citizens of one state but rather, a national confrontation between two nations. For some reason Morris found it important to prove that the Arabs of the country were not a nation but just “a nation”. He uses quotation marks a great deal: the Arab Rebellion was not a rebellion but a “rebellion”, the Arabs did not have a plan but only “a plan”, a promise made by an Arab prime minister is only “a promise”. The land of Israel is the land of Israel, but Palestine is only “Palestine”, of course, and the justice sought by its Arab residents was not justice but only “justice”.

Most of the Arabs in the country, approximately 400,000, were chased out and expelled during the first stage of the war. In other words, before the Arab armies invaded the country. According to Morris, the expulsion of the Arabs was meant to safeguard the homeland before the invasion of the armies of Arabia. This explanation is problematic, first because according to Morris himself, David Ben Gurion was not at all afraid of the Arabs of Israel, and for good

cause: they were almost powerless. Ben Gurion was afraid of an invasion by the Arab armies. Moreover, Ben Gurion was not certain that they would invade Israel. On May 7<sup>th</sup> 1948 he wrote in his journal: "Will the neighboring countries fight?" Ben Gurion could not know this for certain because, according to Morris, the Arabs themselves hesitated until almost the very last moment. Be that as it may, Morris states that the invasion plans by the Arab armies played no role [in the thinking and decisions of] the Arabs of the land of Israel.

This brings the discussion back to the question of why 400,000 Arabs were expelled before these armies had taken even a single shot at the IDF, and the possibility arises that it did not happen because the Arabs had attacked Israel but vice versa: the Arab states attacked Israel – among other reasons – because it had chased out and expelled 400,000 Palestinians. It is doubtful if any person knows more about this subject than Morris. The thesis which transpires from his book is that almost everything happened as the result of an error: the Jews exaggerated the force of the Arabs and were afraid of another Holocaust. In fact, they did not correctly estimate their weakness and were unjustifiably afraid of them. It seems that it was for this reason that they expelled them, with no justification. But Morris wishes to justify the expulsion of the Arabs: he says that they started the attack, but the concrete information that he brings forth about their harassment of the Jewish settlements cannot explain great extent of the expulsion.

Naturally, the question arises: were the Arabs expelled in order to get rid of them. Morris states at as early as December 1947, at least, which is nearly half a year before the Arab armies invaded, two goals were at the forefront for the Jews of the land of Israel: expanding the territory designated by the United Nations resolution for the founding of a Jewish state; and reducing the number of Arabs living in that territory. And that was what they did. Historiographically, that is sufficient, but Morris brings his readers into an old dispute about a subject with which he is also well-familiar: the Zionist movement's yearning to transfer the Arabs of the country, or at least some of them.

This idea has accompanied the Zionist movement since the time of Herzl himself. It took center stage in the thinking of the leaders of the Zionist movement, including Chaim Weizmann and David Ben Gurion. But Morris makes a great effort to detach the chasing out of the Arabs from the idea of transfer. A similar measure of logic could detach the founding of the state from the Zionist vision.

The rest of the Arabs [300,000 more] were expelled during the war and thereafter. What Morris says about the frontline conditions does not demonstrate the military need to expel the population, especially as Israel's military power was much greater than the armies of Arabia within two or three weeks, and the remaining Arab population did not constitute any kind of threat to the country. The question of why they were expelled remains without an answer in this book. Morris says that they wanted to throw the Jews into the sea and states: "The Arab expulsion clearly derived from the Zionist transferist thinking in the 30s and 40s." This is a perplexing statement, as Morris goes out of his way to prove the marginal status of transferist thinking.

### **Cleansing – without quotation marks**

About six years ago Benny Morris said that Israel had not expelled enough Arabs. In an [interview with Haaretz' Ari Shavit](#), he stated that if Ben Gurion had carried out a full, rather than just a partial expulsion he would have stabilized the State of Israel for generations. It would eventually transpire as his fatal error, warned Morris at the time. He does not repeat this opinion in his current book, but he describes Ben Gurion as an obsessive "generalissimo" who is not always aware of the goings on around him.

Morris' obliviousness to the story of the people behind the documents he quotes is also revealed by an almost complete avoidance of describing the suffering of the refugees. It seems that in his opinion at least some of them, especially the residents of Lyd and Ramleh, should have been grateful for the expulsion: "there is no doubt that after they had experienced battles, massacres, and Israeli occupation, many of the residents wholeheartedly wished to leave and move to areas controlled by Arabs," writes Morris. In his opinion, the loss of their homes was not so terrible for them: "The Palestinians, a mostly rural nation, used to living outdoors, exhibited resilience," he says, wishing to soothe his readers. The decision not to permit the refugees to return is also acceptable to Morris, and in a footnote he states that most of the refugees are not refugees at all, as they had been permitted to remain in the land of Israel, in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip.



### The murdered of Deir Yassin

He exhibits a great deal of understanding for a series of atrocities which went along with the expulsion. He describes some actions which were meant, among others, for the expulsion of residents – as cleansings, with no quotations. This is embarrassing and indeed, in the American original, quotations were added to this phrase in one case. At the same time, he carefully states again and again that Arabs, including prisoners of war and civilians, including women and children, were “executed”. Jews, on the other hand, were generally “murdered”, as he puts it. The civilians who were killed by Arabs in Gush Etzion were murdered in a “massacre” writes Morris. This was after the events of Deir Yassin, but the Deir Yassin incident is not one that he defines as a massacre. Even those of the villagers who were shot after the battle were, as he put it, “executed.”

He directs his readers to a footnote in which he complains that the Commissioner General “believed exaggerations” when he cabled his superiors about women and children being stripped, stood in a row, photographed, and then massacred by automatic gunfire in Deir Yassin. Morris sarcastically comments that “it seems like the British were prepared to believe everything that is said about the Etzel and the Lehi.” Horrifically, the State of Israel conceals to this day photographs taken in the course of the attack on Deir Yassin and prevents their publication. The Haaretz newspaper has appealed to the Supreme Court of Justice in this matter, and the State explained that making these photographs public could damage not only the country’s foreign relations but also “the dignity of the deceased.” Having seen the photographs, the Supreme Court justices decided that the State was correct. For this reason it would perhaps be better to wait a bit with the guess about the Commissioner General having “believed exaggerations.”

### Do not forget Saddam Hussein

...It is customary to say that the Israelis won, being “a few against many”, thanks to their fighting spirit, the sense that they have no other country, and the remembrance of the Holocaust. The victory cost the lives of nearly 6,000, nearly 1% of the Jewish population in the country. Morris does not ignore all of these factors, but he tends to focus more on the professional quality of the IDF...The defeat of the Arabs does not, for this reason, come to be seen as a “miracle.”

Morris wishes to persuade his readers that the primary cause which led the Arabs to attempt to throw the Jews into the sea was religious and anti-Semitic. In his opinion, this is not an Israeli problem but rather, a global struggle between the Muslim Orient and the West. In doing so, he meticulously gathers up every Arab call for a Jihad against the Jews. At least in one case, he adapts his source to his own needs, using an ellipsis: King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud did indeed write President Roosevelt about the religious hostility between Jews and Muslims and mentioned the “treacherous conduct” of the Jews toward the Prophet Muhammad [Peace Be Upon Him], but where Morris placed an ellipsis the king suggested that the religious issue be put aside and stated that even without it, the land of Israel could not resolve the problem of the Jews. And indeed, the Arabs did not need the Quran in order to object to the intention by the Zionists to take over the land of Israel. The expulsion of the Palestinians proved to them that they had been right.

Morris knows what he does about the Arabs, primarily from having read the reports of the *Hagana* intelligence service. This is a doubtful source, as according to Morris himself, the foundational perceptions of the Jews about the power of the Palestinians and the Arab armies were entirely mistaken. His choice of sources to quote is sometimes odd. In one case he quotes a news item, translated into English, which had appeared in German in a Swiss newspaper, which stated that hundreds of Jews had been murdered in Egypt. It is not clear why Morris did not find a better source for this than the Basle National Zeitung, and he states in a note to this that there apparently were not hundreds of casualties.

To remove any doubt that the Arabs are really scoundrels, he also gets carried away and quotes the Palestinian National Covenant of 1964 and does not forget Saddam Hussein. A long line of such quotes reminds one of Morris' own scolding of the Palestinians: they do not have serious historiography.

The bottom line is this: the IDF won because it was stronger than the Arabs of the land of Israel and the Arab armies put together, it carried out more atrocities than the Arabs, some of which were perpetrated in order to cause the Arabs to escape and to expel them, but not to worry: "a total number" of approximately 800 Arab citizens and prisoners of war were murdered in the war, writes Morris; the war crimes in Yugoslavia and Sudan are worse.



Tagged as: [ethnic cleansing](#), [Israel Defense Forces](#), [israeli wars](#), [nakba](#), [population transfer](#), [war](#), [zionism](#)

{ 30 comments... read them below or [add one](#) }



Koshiro [July 19, 2010 at 12:50 AM](#)

One of the very first things I learned when studying history:

Use quotation marks when you quote something. That's why they're called quotation marks. If you use them for other purposes, it's very likely because you're either not sure about something, which is bad, or because you're dishonest about something, which is also bad.

One of the things I learned a little later: There's no such thing as an inevitable development. There is no reason to believe that the past had no freedom of decision, but the present does. (If you have a strictly deterministic world view, you're off the hook. But then you gotta keep your mouth shut about morality.)

[Reply](#)



Gene Schulman [July 19, 2010 at 3:03 AM](#)

Though not grammatically correct, many writers use quotation marks to express irony. Usage evolves.

[Reply](#)



Koshiro [July 19, 2010 at 5:20 AM](#)

What "many writers" do isn't that relevant regarding the standards of scholarly writing in the discipline of history. Note the correct use above, with footnote and citation omitted.

In any case, irony is a form of being dishonest. It's got its place, which is usually not in a scholarly history text.

[Reply](#)



Donald [July 19, 2010 at 8:48 AM](#)

"In any case, irony is a form of being dishonest. "

You might be right about what should appear in a scholarly article or book, as people otherwise might misunderstand. But saying that "irony is a form of being dishonest" is silly—irony is a way of making a point which sometimes has more impact than a bald statement. The risk, of course, is that it might be misunderstood, either because the writer did a poor job or because the reader is stupid. I suppose one should not take for granted the intelligence of people who read scholarly works.

[Reply](#)



Elisabeth [July 19, 2010 at 3:30 PM](#)

I thought your post was terrific. Could not agree more.

[Reply](#)



Richard Silverstein [July 19, 2010 at 11:33 PM](#)

I don't think I'd call what Morris did in abusing quotation marks to be "irony." I don't know what the proper word would be—condescension perhaps.

[Reply](#)



Gene Schulman [July 19, 2010 at 3:05 AM](#)

A great review of Morris' questionable history. I'll take Segev over Morris, any day.

[Reply](#)



mary [July 19, 2010 at 6:04 AM](#)

And I'll take Ramzy Baroud over either one of them, at the very least to cancel out the subtle, and not so subtle, dehumanization of the Palestinians that is found in most Zionist narratives.

[Reply](#)



Lisa [July 19, 2010 at 7:20 AM](#)

True that, Mary (although I would have said Edward Said or Rashid Khalidi because I haven't read anything by Ramzy Baroud). That being said, however, I haven't noticed any subtle or not-so-subtle dehumanization of Palestinians by Tom Segev. In fact, it seems to be his point as one of the "new" historians, to dispell the Zionist mythology and give credence and humanity to the Palestinian narrative.

[Reply](#)



Gene Schulman [July 19, 2010 at 7:36 AM](#)

I agree with both Mary and Lisa (except that, for all his value, Said was not a historian).

My comparison of Segev to Morris in this case was due only to the fact that Segev was the reviewer. I, too, could have mentioned others – too many for this limited space.

[Reply](#)



Richard Silverstein [July 19, 2010 at 11:31 PM](#)

Not fair.

[Reply](#)



[Shunra July 19, 2010 at 7:14 AM](#)

I want to know what is in those photographs that Israel's government is hiding. Too many members of my family were stripped & lined up against walls and shot due to their ethnicity. Anyone who does this – anyone! – is a criminal and needs to be behind bars.

[Reply](#)



[Gene Schulman July 19, 2010 at 7:44 AM](#)

Shunra, you won't get any photographs, but you will get a marvelous graphic picture of what happened in Khan Younis and Rafah, which are comparable, in Joe Sacco's brilliant cartoon illustrated, "Footnotes to Gaza."

[Reply](#)



[Shunra July 19, 2010 at 7:48 AM](#)

Sacco's work is indeed an excellent piece of historical revelation (a graphic novel in too much of the word).

But what I want is for the Israeli government to come clean about the crimes that it is hiding.

[Reply](#)



[Medawar July 19, 2010 at 8:19 AM](#)

The only real surprise is that the legal proceedings imply that the photographs still exist.

Unless Mr Morris can describe the capital crime these women and children committed as individuals (the UN Charter does not allow collective punishments), and document a due legal process with evidence, representation and all, then these killings cannot be "executions" they can only be murders.

When someone told Queen Elizabeth about Kuwaitis "executed" by Saddam Hussein's men, she politely corrected them with the word "murdered". It is the Queen's English, after all.

[Reply](#)



[Elisabeth July 19, 2010 at 3:58 PM](#)

I agree Shunra. I have seen so many similar photographs of what happened to the Jews and other Nazi victims since I was young. Outrage and empathy is what they bring out, not a sense of degradation of the victims. (My parents had an extensive collection of books, and WW2 formed part of it. I am not sure they realized I was always reading everything. I only remember my father once gently pulling "Nacht und Nebel" by Floris Bakels from my hands saying: "Are you sure you want to read this?")

To say that respect for the victims is the reason behind hiding these photographs is hardly convincing: Haven't we all grown up with the pictures of those emaciated corpses from the Nazi camps? And has it not been a lesson to us?

[Reply](#)



[Rod Such July 19, 2010 at 8:04 AM](#)

Segev has a very disappointing review of Avi Shlaim's new book in a recent New York Review of Books. In it he praises Shlaim, another of the "new" historians, because he upholds the right of Jews to self-determination, yet Segev says nothing about the right of Palestinians to self-determination. Instead, Segev suggests that the Palestinians should simply end their struggle and go and live in Egypt and Jordan. I guess Tom Segev alone has the right to determine their future. Note that in this review there is no Palestine, only the "land of Israel".

[Reply](#)



[Richard Silverstein July 20, 2010 at 12:17 AM](#)

I just found it & you're right—[Segev presents an absolutely ludicrous "solution"](#) for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

The two-state solution is a widely accepted principle, but by no means the only possible or necessarily the best way to guarantee the Palestinians a better future. They might be better off if they lived in internationally administered areas, a solution that might be particularly appropriate for Gaza. Alternatively the West Bank and its Arab inhabitants could become part of Jordan, where, as Shlaim points out, Palestinians already form a majority of the population. Notwithstanding the complex internal problems of Palestinian representation in an enlarged Jordan, there is no reason not to reconsider the possibility that Jordan would become a free and democratic Palestinian state, including the West Bank, perhaps also Gaza. As part of Jordan, the Palestinians may find it easier to give up some of the relatively small parts of the West Bank now inhabited by Israeli settlers, who are most likely to stay where they are.

Shlaim is a strong supporter of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The late King Hussein granted him a fascinating interview about his secret contacts with the Israelis, which was published in these pages and is included in this volume, and Shlaim wrote a biography of the king.[2] About five years before he died in 1999, Hussein made peace with Israel, giving up the West Bank and East Jerusalem; and Shlaim lists the many possibilities for a settlement that Israel has neglected to pursue, but the major one he never mentions: that as a condition for peace, Hussein should have taken back the West Bank and its Palestinian inhabitants, just as Egypt should have taken back Gaza as part of the 1978 peace agreement with Israel. Instead Israel decided to continue the occupation of those territories with their hostile populations.

I thought better of Segev before this and never read anything by him that sounds as ludicrous.

[Reply](#)



[Helena July 19, 2010 at 8:57 AM](#)

Richard, thanks so much for posting this.

[Reply](#)



[Andrew July 19, 2010 at 11:49 AM](#)

Whenever most Israelis write or speak, I hear Nazis.

[Reply](#)



[uncle joe mccarthy July 19, 2010 at 2:07 PM](#)

see richard,

even when you post something where one new historian disagrees with another, you get guys like andrew....who use a broad brush to paint all israelis as nazis

very nice....on the eve of tisha b'av

[Reply](#)



Elisabeth [July 19, 2010 at 3:36 PM](#)

???

[Reply](#)



Richard Silverstein [July 19, 2010 at 11:22 PM](#)

Whoa, talk about overstatement & exaggeration!

[Reply](#)



david [July 20, 2010 at 11:41 AM](#)

When I see the garbage someone like you posts I see ignorant Anti-Semite whose comment reflects his own Facist thinking.

Shame on Richard for not warning you on such a degrading and false remark.

Oh, excuse me, he'd only comment if someone had said that about Palestinians.

Correct me if I'm wrong... where's your reprimand?

[Reply](#)



Richard Silverstein [July 20, 2010 at 9:58 PM](#)

When I see the garbage someone like you posts

READ THE COMMENT RULES! I mean it. Read them. If you disagree or don't like another comment use real arguments instead of grandstanding rhetoric like this. If you continue using such language you will lose yr comment privileges. And DO NOT tell me how to run my blog. Don't do it. EVER.

[Reply](#)



Michael Levin [July 19, 2010 at 2:47 PM](#)

Thanks to Dena Shunra for translating, and to Richard for posting.

[Reply](#)



Geoff [December 17, 2010 at 4:40 PM](#)

I am puzzled by this review because I just read Segev's "One Palestine, Complete," and in it he states that the flight of Arabs was a mix of panic and expulsions, I think he said something to the effect of "50/50." He also started referring to Arab acts of terror that long preceded Jewish acts of, as he put it in the book, "counter-terrorism." Now they were all expelled? Now its all the Jews' fault? Hmmm. This review seems every bit as ideological as he claims Morris' book to be.

[Reply](#)



[Richard Silverstein](#) [December 17, 2010 at 6:53 PM](#)

I doubt it was 50/50 & as far as I'm concerned the panic was induced by the Jewish violence so in effect all were expelled. If you flee for yr life & escape w/o a scratch on you you've still been expelled if a Palmachnik could've come along & put a bullet through yr eyes if you'd stayed.

[Reply](#)



[Jesse W. Collins](#) [February 11, 2011 at 1:50 PM](#)

Mr. Silverstein,

I'm from US Texas and New Mexico. I'm studying various writers' renditions of Jewish and Arab history where the two overlap. I've worked in the field of trauma management for nearly thirty-five years. My work now is focused upon the use of individual and systemic trauma by offensive trauma managers (people, organizations and movements) who and which use terrorism as a means of achieving their various goals. I'm looking for a literature (books) referral that addresses, covers or otherwise attempts to portray-represent a Mideast history beginning at the end (2001) of Morris' book "Righteous Victims" of and continuing until the current period for this comment (Feb 2011). If there are instead chronologies of the period provided on websites that you might recommend, I would appreciate that as well.

I've just completed the referenced (above) Morris text, "Death Orders," "A New Shoah," and Melanie Phillips' most recent work. I read Morris' book because it was referenced to provide a revisionist perspective. I found all of those efforts to be valuable for my interests, no matter any criticisms I might have had of them.

If you or any of those adding comments to this Blog respond to this request for referral, I thank you for your consideration of it.

Jesse W. Collins

[Reply](#)



[Richard Silverstein](#) [February 12, 2011 at 1:20 AM](#)

I'm not sure why you're only reading texts with a far-right slant. If that's your personal angle we probably don't have much to add that would help you. Your comment is very vague and hard to follow in terms of what specifically you're seeking. Perhaps you can clarify and others can recommend books for you. But if you have your mind made up, please don't waste our time.

[Reply](#)