their preface, this was precisely their purpose in writing the book: "To provide a basis for public debate on the role of the High Court of Justice in Israeli society." One can only hope that this excellent book accomplishes its goal. And if a genuine public debate on this issue does emerge in Israel, then Gavison, Kremnitzer, and Dotan will deserve a healthy share of the credit.

Evelyn Gordon is a journalist, and a Contributing Editor of AZURE.

War and Remembrance

Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds.

The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948

Cambridge, 234 pages.

Reviewed by Yehoshua Porath

Over the past decade, Israel's self-styled "new historians" and their allies around the academic world have fiercely debated more traditional scholars over the nature of Israel's War of Independence. According to the revisionists, the classical historical research was little more than propaganda for the Zionist narrative, distorting the record by obscuring the "crimes" perpetrated by the Zionists against the Palestinian Arabs during fighting that lasted from late 1947 until early 1949. This war, known to Palestinians as "the Catastrophe," resulted in both the establishment of the State of Israel and the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, and therefore both Israelis and Palestinians see it as the beginning of their respective national narratives.

Most of the research being done by the new historians tends to focus primarily on Jewish conduct during the war: How did the nascent State of Israel manage to defeat the Arab armies? Did the Zionists deliberately set

out to expel Palestinian Arabs from their homes? Were they really weaker and outnumbered, an Israeli David to the Arab Goliath?

These questions lie at the heart of *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, edited by two Oxford University scholars, Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim. The Israeli-born Shlaim is one of the best-known representatives of the revisionist school; his first book, *Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine* (1987), helped launch the new history a decade and a half ago, while his *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (2000), covering the entire period since Israel's founding, has already gained canonical status among the new historians. Rogan is a relative newcomer to Zionist history, although he has written extensively on the modern Middle East. The new collection of essays—which includes contributions by prominent scholars such as Benny Morris, Rashid Khalidi, and Edward Said—attempts to debunk many of the traditional Zionist "myths" surrounding the most fateful of Arab-Israeli wars by exposing the truth about Israel's actions during the conflict—a truth which, the authors claim, Israel's political, academic, and educational establishments have done everything in their power to cover up.

In building their case, the contributors to *The War for Palestine* draw upon the wealth of archival records that have been released in Israel and other Western countries over the past fifteen years. One might hope that such a trove of new data would result in a more penetrating, nuanced understanding of the war. Most of the contributors, however, seem to have had a different aim in mind: To discredit the standard historiography and establish themselves as the sole keepers of historical truth by selectively highlighting only those new revelations that advance their own ideological agenda. As a result, they succeed only in repeating the disservice done by some of their predecessors, substituting one set of distortions for another: If some of the traditional historians militated the facts to serve the Zionist cause, this time around it is the Palestinian "truth" that is the beneficiary. This book's most significant contribution, unfortunately, is that it exposes its authors' shoddy research and tendentious analysis.

The War for Palestine opens with an introduction by the editors, which asks a sensible question: Why has a revisionist historiography arisen in Israel to challenge the prevailing account of the war, while no similar school has emerged on the Arab side?

Of course, this question also has a sensible answer, which may be found by looking no further than the list of institutions and archives that appears in the book's opening pages. The great majority of the materials researched by all historians of the period, both traditional and revisionist, comes from archives in the Western countries involved in the affairs of Palestine during the years from 1947 to 1949, and from Israeli archives. The Israeli State Archives, the Archives of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and the Zionist Archives are open to all scholars, regardless of ideology or affiliation. Researchers can scour the materials undisturbed and use whatever they find to support their claims. Anyone intending to minimize the accomplishments of the Israelis in the 1948 war, or even to make outrageously false claims—for instance, that the Israeli victory was the result of an imperialist conspiracy or an overwhelming advantage in manpower and arms—will always be able to find plenty of marginal facts in the Israeli archives on which to build his case.

By contrast, no Arab state has yet opened its archives to researchers studying these or any other important historical events after World War I; in only a few instances have specially authorized historians been granted access to official archival material. But where there is no free access to archival data, there can never emerge a revisionist historiography, which is always based on, or at least purports to be based on, new archival discoveries.

The editors are aware of this imbalance, but they dismiss it as irrelevant. Israel, they argue, can afford to be open, for like all victorious nations, it has had the luxury of dominating the historical discourse with its version of events: "The critical revision of a nation's history," they write, "is a victor's privilege." This is not much of an answer. Israel made its decisions about archival access against the backdrop of a struggle for national independence that in many respects is still unfinished. Israel opened its archives not because it was victorious, but because it sought to follow the tradition of democratic, Western countries in allowing free access to information, even information that could be used to harm it in the long run. Shlaim and Rogan, however, give Israel no credit for its enlightened approach.

Nor do they have any appreciation for the significant research that was done before the debut of the revisionists in the late 1980s. Before then, they seem to believe, all writing on Zionist history was tendentious, every historian falling into line to help create and propagate the myths

underpinning Zionism. Remarkably, they see no substantive difference between historical research on the War of Independence that was conducted in Israel, and that conducted on the Arab side. Scholars on both sides, they say, have equally ignored the historical truth because on both sides, the academy has subordinated itself to the dictates of the state:

> Governments in the region enjoy many direct and indirect powers over the writing of history. Elementary and secondary school texts in history are the preserve of the state. Most universities in the Middle East are state-run and their faculty members are state employees. National historical associations and government printing presses serve as filters to weed out unauthorized histories and to disseminate state-sanctioned truths. As promotion within the historical establishment is closely linked to adherence to the official line, historians have had little incentive to engage in critical history writing. Instead, most Arab and Israeli historians have written in an uncritically nationalist vein. In Israel, nationalist historians reflected the collective memory of the Israeli public in depicting the Palestine War as a desperate fight for survival and an almost miraculous victory. In the Arab world, histories of the Palestine War have been marked by apologetics, self-justification, onus-shifting, and conspiracy theories. Both the Arab and the Israeli nationalist histories are guided more by a "quest for legitimacy" than by an honest reckoning with the past.

Anyone familiar with the way things work in Israel cannot but read these words in utter astonishment. In Israel, private citizens write the school textbooks, and in most cases they do it for private publishing houses. Last year, the Ministry of Education found itself embroiled in a public scandal after releasing a history textbook which was skewed toward the Arab side of the conflict. In the end, the ministry withdrew the textbook, but only after an intensive public campaign, a thorough investigation by a panel of scholars representing a wide range of views, and a change of government. Israeli universities are not state institutions, nor are their faculty members civil servants. Anyone with even a passing acquaintance with Israeli academia is familiar with the wide range of political opinions existing in the country's universities—and with the disproportionate support that the views represented in *The War for Palestine* have enjoyed there for some time now. A considerable number of revisionist historians and "post-Zionist" sociologists, whose criticism touches every aspect of Israel's history and society, currently hold posts at prominent Israeli academic institutions. Many have reached positions of influence and high honor.

Rather than acknowledge the sharp asymmetry in freedom of research and expression between Israel and the Arab world, Shlaim and Rogan try to persuade the reader that Israeli historical writing is in its essence no different from the narratives produced in Arab states—a version of history that attributes the 1948 defeat to a conspiracy of imperialist powers, or to a vast web of international Jewish power, combining corrupt Jewish money, deception, and such devilish tactics as poisoning the wells in Arab villages.

In this spirit, the editors overlook even the most striking examples of integrity by traditional Israeli historians. For example, it was the "official" Israeli historiography that was the first to report on the existence of the Dalet Plan, a controversial Israeli military strategy during the War of Independence which called for the expulsion of Arabs from demographically mixed areas that endangered transportation lines or that could function as guerrilla bases. It was Yigael Alon and Israel Galili's analysis of this plan in the early 1950s, published in *The Book of the Palmah*, that allowed Harvard historian Walid Khalidi to argue famously in 1959 that the Dalet Plan was none other than *the* master plan of the Zionists for the wholesale expulsion of Palestinians from their homes. Furthermore, when the last volume of the monumental work *The History of the Hagana* was published in 1973, the book's editors, led by the prominent defense-establishment official Shaul Avigur, took the bold step of including the Dalet Plan's full text, including the section that provided a justification for the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs. However painful this step was for the Israeli historians, they nevertheless understood it to be a landmark in the history of research on the War of Independence. But this episode, which flies in the face of the claim that no scholarship of substance was done on the war before the new historians came along, does not suit the authors of *The War for Palestine*; indeed, they do not give it so much as a mention.

What is true for the Dalet Plan is doubly true for a whole string of "discoveries" that the new historians have claimed for themselves, but which were in fact well documented in the traditional historiography. Among these claims: That the Arabs failed in part because they lacked a unified command with the allegiance of all the different Arab forces; that sharp disputes and conflicting interests drove apart the various Arab states; and that the Arab regimes, wary of leaving themselves vulnerable to conspiracies back home, hesitated to send large armies to the front. No one familiar

with the traditional literature will find anything new in these claims. Nor will the new historians' depiction of the internal weakness of Palestinian society, which further increased the Israelis' prospects for victory, come as news: The Palestinians' lack of resolve during the war and the breakdown of society resulting from a lack of effective wartime leadership and organization have received extensive attention in many studies over the years. Suffice it to name, in this regard, Nathaniel Lorch's *History of the War of Independence*, the concluding volume of *The History of the Hagana*, the various works of Meir Pa'il, and numerous articles published over the years by the Defense Ministry's journal of military affairs, *Ma'arachot*.

But beyond their unfair depiction of the traditional historiography, the revisionists introduce a degree of bias which is at least as severe as the school they seek to replace, albeit in a different direction. This is evident already in the first few pages of *The War for Palestine*, where a chronology lists November 30, 1947 as "outbreak of civil war in Palestine." Outbreak of civil war? This "civil war" was an assault upon the Jewish civilian population undertaken by the Palestinian Arabs following the Jews' acceptance, and the Arab states' rejection, of the UN Partition Plan that had been approved the day before. In the same list, April 9, 1948 appears as the date of "the massacre of Deir Yassin," in which Jewish fighters killed some 100 Arab civilians. Other massacres during the period in question—such as the murder of about fifty Jewish workers in the refineries in Haifa by their Arab co-workers on December 30, 1947, or the massacre of more than eighty doctors, nurses, and Hebrew University workers in a convoy to Jerusalem's Mount Scopus on April 13, 1948—merit not a word, neither in the chronology nor in the text of the book. The impression created, of course, is that Deir Yassin was the only massacre worth mentioning during the course of the war.

The bias of *The War for Palestine* is not limited to the editors' contribution. The entire collection shows a clear tendency to emphasize certain points while ignoring others, leading to severe distortions in the historical record. Of course, special attention is paid to the question of how many Palestinian Arabs were forcibly expelled by Israel. Benny Morris' essay "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948," for example, reexamines the thesis of his seminal work, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-1949*, and claims that the Israelis intentionally expelled large numbers of Palestinians in 1948. To his credit, Morris rejects the more

extreme charge that these expulsions were part of a larger, premeditated plan—though this argument appears elsewhere in the collection, in Laila Parsons' "The Druze and the Birth of Israel." Although Morris is normally a more careful historian than most of those appearing in *The War for Palestine*, and his factual findings are credible, here he ignores the broader context, without which it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the creation of the refugee problem: Left out of Morris' analysis is any discussion of the specific nature of the war that the Arabs had declared upon the Jews of Palestine and upon the State of Israel.

To understand the character of this war, one need only examine the story of the Palestinians' most important spiritual and political leader of the time, Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem. The Mufti puts in an appearance in *The War for Palestine* in Rashid Khalidi's analysis of the Arab defeat, "The Palestinians and 1948: The Underlying Causes of Failure," which is not overly kind to Husseini. Yet even Khalidi makes no mention of the Mufti's activities before and during World War II, just a few years earlier. Contemporary readers looking for an honest picture of events could certainly have benefited from the knowledge that this revered Palestinian leader was also an ardent and influential supporter of the Nazis and the Holocaust. The day after Hitler's rise to power in January 1933, Husseini went to the German consul in Jerusalem to convey his blessings in the name of "three hundred million Muslims," along with his wishes that "the Nazi regime should spread to the entire world." He spent much of the war in the company of the senior staff of the SS and Heinrich Himmler, the man in charge of implementing the Final Solution. By all reports, the Mufti's aim was to lobby Himmler to stay the course in carrying out the program; when, in 1943 and 1944, Himmler was considering trading the lives of a certain number of Jews for millions of dollars and military hardware needed for the Nazi war effort, the Mufti pressed Himmler not to allow any Jews to escape their fate. He even tried to extract a promise from the Nazis that they would apply their genocidal techniques to the Jews of Palestine.

The Jews of Palestine were fully aware of Husseini's activities during the world war, and as the 1948 war approached, the knowledge that this man was now the principal leader of their assailants contributed greatly to the belief that the Arabs' ultimate aims were not so different from those of the Nazis. The threat of genocide was real: At the end of 1947, the Palestinian Arab leadership declared that their war against the Jews of Palestine and against the UN Partition Plan was

absolute. Their express goals included the total physical destruction of the *yishuv*. And once war had begun, the Palestinians did everything in their power to convince the Jews of the sincerity of their intentions.

One gruesome example from among many: In the middle of May 1948, the defenders of the four Jewish settlements of the Etzion Bloc, south of Jerusalem, surrendered to the Arab forces besieging them. The force that accepted their surrender included a Palestinian unit, arrayed against Kibutz Kfar Etzion, and a unit of the Arab Legion of the Kingdom of Transjordan, which had fought against the other three towns. The Jordanian unit behaved like a disciplined army subject to the rules of war: They took those who surrendered as prisoners of war and brought them to POW camps in Jordan, at Mafraq; the prisoners remained in the camp until the signing of the armistice agreement. Those who surrendered to the Palestinian force, however, were murdered almost to the last man. Out of some 131 people, only two survived to recount what they had witnessed.

Even so, the behavior of the Jordanians is hardly more inspiring, since they were no more willing than the Palestinians to consider the possibility that Jews might continue living under Arab rule in any part of Palestine. For example, when the Jewish defenders of the Old City of Jerusalem surrendered to the Jordanian forces on May 28, 1948, the Jordanians, in addition to evacuating the surrendering soldiers to Mafraq, also undertook to forcibly expel the elderly, pious residents of the Jewish Quarter, who had not participated in the fighting. It seems not to have entered the mind of the Jordanian commanders that they might leave the non-belligerent Jewish population in its place. In light of these facts, can one seriously examine the war of 1948 without noticing that while a significant Arab minority remained in that part of Palestine that became the State of Israel, the Arab parts of the country—whether under Jordanian or Egyptian rule—became *Judenrein*? The Jews had every reason to believe that the Arabs' war was absolute, aiming at nothing less than the mass expulsion or slaughter of the Jewish community in Palestine.

The contributors to *The War for Palestine* do not even mention these events, much less allow them to mitigate their harsh conclusions. Only Rashid Khalidi comes close, when he concedes that "some Jews in Palestine perceived themselves as facing an uphill fight against the Arabs" because they understood, as did the Palestinians themselves, that the neighboring Arab states would not stand aside indefinitely, and that the Arabs' fighting capability would ultimately grow

dramatically. Yet Khalidi's nod to Jewish fears is a far cry from facing up to the reality of Arab aims and resources in the broader context of the war.

Indeed, the most significant effort in *The War for Palestine* to address the question of the relative strengths of the Jewish and Arab forces is steeped in anti-Zionist bias. One of the "myths" which the new historians are most fond of smashing is that the Israelis faced an enemy that was far greater in numbers and strength. In his essay, "Israel and the Arab Coalition in 1948," Avi Shlaim discusses the issue of relative manpower, offering a remarkable study in scholarly distortion. True, his figures are technically accurate: The *yishuv*, pushing its resources to the absolute limit, managed to field 35,000 soldiers by mid-May 1948, against 25,000 Arab fighters; by the war's end it had increased its forces to more than 95,000. Nevertheless, Shlaim's assertion that "at each stage of the war, the IDF outnumbered all the Arab forces arrayed against it" is absurd. Shlaim himself admits that the Arab states sent only a small portion of their armies to fight in Palestine, and that they could have sent additional divisions if they had wished. Furthermore, he ignores the huge difference in manpower reserves available to each side: In early 1949, at the end of the war, Israel's Jewish population numbered no more than 750,000, whereas the seven Arab nations at war with the Jewish state had a combined population of fifty million. By the war's end, the *yishuv* had reached the limits of its ability to draft soldiers, and its economy, with the exception of a small number of vital industries such as electricity, water, and food production, had ground to a complete halt. The Arab states, by comparison, could have fought the war indefinitely without seriously affecting their citizens' way of life.

To think that the question of "the few against the many" can be answered by merely counting heads of soldiers on the battlefield, as Shlaim does, is simplistic at best. Not just available manpower, but the presence of a governmental mechanism capable of leading and organizing it, the capacity for industrial production, and the ability to enlist help from outside all play important roles in determining the strength and durability of warring nations, and any serious comparison must take all these into account. Shlaim undoubtedly sees himself in the vanguard of the iconoclasts, but in this case—as in his earlier theory that a "collusion" between Israel and Jordan's King Abdullah was the real cause of the Palestinians' defeat—all he has succeeded in damaging is his own credibility as a historian.

The climax of *The War for Palestine*, and the most eloquent expression of its guiding spirit, is its closing essay, "The Consequences of 1948," by Edward Said, the respected professor of comparative literature at Columbia University. His essay is not meant as an academic contribution, but is rather a personal account incorporating passages from the author's memoirs. Said tells, for example, of the winter of 1948, when conditions forced his family to leave their home in Jerusalem's Talbieh neighborhood and relocate to their second home, in Cairo. With all due respect to the travails of a family forced to flee one home for another in time of war, this story loses much of its impact when seen against the backdrop of the fate of refugees throughout Europe only a few years earlier. The Polish Jews who fled the German occupation to Siberia or to Soviet Central Asia, or the millions of Germans who fled from East Prussia to Germany in the heart of the winter of 1945, fled on foot or in wagons, with no clear refuge awaiting them at the other end. In the best case, they made their journey in unheated railway cars, constantly harried by Soviet, British, or American bombers. They had no second home in Cairo.

That being said, Said's story does make a useful, if unintended, contribution to the history of the Arab departure from Palestine in 1948. It was always a claim of the traditional Israeli historiography that during the winter of 1948, the urban Palestinian elite grew weary of the difficulties of war, and many chose to abandon their homes until the crisis passed, traveling to distant cities—to stay with relatives, in rented houses, or even in hotels—far from the scene of battle. The memoirs of Palestinian educator Khalil al-Sakakini contain one of the best-known accounts of this voluntary exodus. He describes his family's departure from their home in the Katamon neighborhood of Jerusalem, first to eastern Jerusalem and then to Egypt. Israeli and British sources of the period note that the flight of the upper classes had a disastrous impact on the morale of Palestinian society, and served as a model for the lower classes to emulate. Though Palestinian historiography has preferred to ignore this episode in their history, Said's account matches the testimonies of Sakakini and many others like him, and serves therefore to confirm further the traditional account.

After discussing his own past, Said sets out his vision for the future. Perhaps the most articulate spokesman for the Arab-Palestinian cause in the English language, Said ostensibly seeks to remodel Israel and Palestine along American lines. He envisions a single state, formed among citizens who share

no common ethnic origins or political or cultural traditions. According to Said, only a new political community—egalitarian, secular, and tolerant—in which "citizenship should be based on the just solidarities of coexistence and the gradual dissolving of ethnic lines," can end the Israeli-Arab conflict. But Said never ventures a guess at what kind of identity his ideal community would have, or what sort of relations it would have with neighboring Arab states; nor does he address the feasibility of creating such a community. Apparently, he assumes that secular liberal democracy—which has not been particularly successful in the Arab world—would flourish in Palestine, of all places. With a wave of Said's hand, official secularism would overcome a century of deep antagonism between the two communities, and the Palestinians would adopt a form of government that is more tolerant than any other in the Arab world.

Among other problems with his approach, Said seems unaware of the bitter experience of non-Muslim communities in Arab countries—like the fate of Arab Christians, the Muslims' supposed partners in Arab nationalism. What return should Israelis expect for abandoning their national sovereignty, when Coptic Christian churches in Egypt are burned, and Coptic priests and laymen physically assaulted? The Copts are an integral part of the Egyptian people, yet many of them suffer from persecution at the hands of radical Muslims, and many have fled Egypt. A similar fate has befallen Palestinian Christians, who have lived in perpetual fear of the Palestinian security forces and the armed groups in the areas under their control. Christians have emigrated in large numbers, and the relative proportion of Christians within the Palestinian Authority has steadily declined since its establishment in 1994. At least ten thousand Christian Arabs have fled, including some three thousand since the outbreak of hostilities in September 2000. In the final analysis, Said's humanistic and superficially liberal vision is just another enlightened attempt to justify abolishing the State of Israel, and replace it with a multi-national, democratic, secular state—all without recourse to violence, of course.

The War for Palestine is not completely without scholarly merit; it does provide some valuable information about the events of 1948, especially for those unfamiliar with the extensive research that has already been published in the field. Readers not versed in the history of the Middle East are likely to learn of many things here for the first time—such as the disunity among the Arab forces; the conflicting motives of the Jordanians,

the Syrians, and the Egyptians; and how the infighting and organizational ineffectiveness of Palestinian society facilitated the Israeli victory. They will learn about the *yishuv*'s massive recruitment efforts, through which the Jews managed to field a disproportionately large army relative to its population. And yes, they will discover that the Israeli victory did not come without the expulsion of more than a few Palestinians.

None of this, however, is new. There are only two genuinely innovative claims in this collection: The equivalence it draws between the traditional Israeli historiography and its Arab counterpart, and its accusation that Israel carried out a deliberate and systematic expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs. Neither of these claims is remotely substantiated by the extensive research that has been carried out in the last few decades. Rather, both are the product of an ongoing effort among a small yet vocal group of academics who are willing to go a great distance—including at times the abandonment of their own scholarly integrity—to prove, once and for all, that Israel has no place among the community of enlightened, liberal nations.

Yehoshua Porath is Professor Emeritus of Middle East History at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and a Contributing Editor of Azure.