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## Benny Morris's Reign of Error, Revisited The Post-Zionist Critique

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The collapse and dispersion of Palestine's Arab society during the 1948 war is one of the most charged issues in the politics and historiography of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Initially, Palestinians blamed the Arab world for having promised military support that never materialized.<sup>[1]</sup> Arab host states in turn regarded the Palestinians as having shamefully deserted their homeland. With the passage of time and the dimming of historical memory, the story of the 1948 war was gradually rewritten with Israel rather than the Arab states and the extremist and shortsighted Palestinian leadership becoming the main if not only culprit of the Palestinian dispersion. This false narrative received a major boost in the late 1980s with the rise of several left-leaning Israeli academics and journalists calling themselves the New Historians, who sought to question and revise understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>[2]</sup> Ostensibly basing their research on recently declassified documents from the British Mandate period and the first years of Israeli independence, they systematically redrew the history of Zionism, turning upside down the saga of Israel's struggle for survival. Among the new historians, none has been more visible or more influential than Benny Morris, a professor at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba, whose 1987 book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-1949*, became the New Historian's definitive work.

Prominent Palestinian politicians such as Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Hanan Ashrawi cited the "findings" of the New Historians to support extreme Palestinian territorial and political claims. Academics lauded Morris for using newly available documents to expose the allegedly immoral circumstances of Israel's creation. With frequent media exposure, the New Historians had an impact on mainstream Israeli opinion, which became increasingly receptive to the notion that both the fault and the solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict lay disproportionately with Israel's own actions.

Such plaudits, however, were undeserved. Far from unearthing new facts or offering a novel interpretation of the Palestinian exodus, *The Birth* recycled the standard Arab narrative of the conflict. Morris portrayed the Palestinians as the hapless victims of unprovoked Jewish aggression. Israel's very creation became the "original sin" underlying the perpetuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Had there been an academic foundation to Morris's revisionism, such acclaim may have been warranted. But rather than incorporate new Israeli source material, Morris did little more than

rehash old historiography. While laying blame for the Palestinian refugee crisis on the actions of the Israeli Defense Forces and its pre-state precursor, the Haganah, Morris failed to consult the millions of declassified documents in their archives, even as other historians used them in painstaking research.<sup>[3]</sup>

Once this fact was publicly exposed,<sup>[4]</sup> Morris conceded that he had "no access to the materials in the IDFA [Israel Defense Forces Archive] or Haganah archive and precious little to firsthand military materials deposited elsewhere."<sup>[5]</sup> Yet instead of acknowledging the implications of this omission upon his conclusions, Morris sought to use this "major methodological flaw" as the rationale for a new edition of *The Birth*, which he claimed would include new source-material.<sup>[6]</sup>

### Dishonest Revisionism

Readers will be disappointed if they hope to find evidence of renewed intellectual honesty in this new edition, published in 2004 as *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*.<sup>[7]</sup> Morris continues to ignore archival evidence both of relentless Arab rejection of Jewish statehood and of demonstrated commitment to Israel's destruction. Available Arabic sources little utilized by Morris include not only official documents but also religious incitement and numerous statements by politicians, intellectuals, and journalists.

While Morris perfunctorily acknowledges Palestinian and Arab culpability for the 1948 war,<sup>[8]</sup> *The Birth Revisited* continues to portray Israeli actions as the main trigger of the Palestinian exodus. Morris explains,

this is not a history of the 1948 war or a history of what the Arabs did to the Jews but a history of how and why the Palestinian refugee problem came about. In this context, what Jews did to Arabs, including massacres, played a role; what Arabs did to Jews was barely relevant.<sup>[9]</sup>

It is doubtful whether Morris believes his own assertion. In his writings and interviews over the past few years, he acknowledged that in war, the activities of one belligerent affect all others. "From the moment the Yishuv [the pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine] was attacked by the Palestinians and afterward by the Arab states, there was no choice but to expel the Palestinian population," he argued in January 2004.<sup>[10]</sup> Four months later he put the same idea in somewhat blunter terms: "When an armed thug tries to murder you in your home, you have every right to defend yourself, even by throwing him out."<sup>[11]</sup>

Not only does Morris miss the opportunity to reconcile his evolving positions regarding Arab and

Palestinian culpability for the origin and perpetuation of the refugee problem, but he also intensifies efforts to give academic respectability to the Arab indictment of Zionism as "a colonizing and expansionist ideology and movement ... intent on politically, or even physically, dispossessing and supplanting the Arabs."[\[12\]](#) In the original version of *The Birth*, Morris traced this alleged intention to the late 1930s and 1940s, claiming that Zionist leaders had despaired of achieving a Jewish majority in Palestine through mass immigration and had instead come to view the expulsion or "transfer" of the Arab population as the best means "to establish a Jewish state without an Arab minority, or with as small an Arab minority as possible."[\[13\]](#)

In reality, the archives show that, far from despairing of mass immigration, Zionist leaders in the 1930s worried about the country's short-term absorptive capacity should millions of Jews enter Palestine. While in an implicit acknowledgment of their inaccuracy, Morris removed some of *The Birth's* most inaccurate or distorted quotes about transfer,[\[14\]](#) he, nevertheless, reverts to the problematic technique of relying on a small number of Zionist statements either taken out of context or simply misrepresented. In *The Birth Revisited*, Morris takes his initial claim further by attempting to prove, in a new chapter trumpeted as one of the book's chief innovations, that "the displacement of Arabs from Palestine or from areas of Palestine that would become the Jewish State was inherent in Zionist ideology" and could be traced back to the father of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl.[\[15\]](#)

### **Distorting Herzl**

Consider, for example, Morris's charge that Herzl wished to dispossess Palestinian Arabs because of his fear that the Jewish state would lack viability if it were to contain a large Arab minority. Morris bases this assertion only upon a truncated paragraph from Herzl's June 12, 1895 diary entry, which had already been a feature of Palestinian propaganda for decades.[\[16\]](#) But this entry was not enough to support such a claim. Below is the complete text, with the passages omitted by Morris in italics:

*When we occupy the land, we shall bring immediate benefits to the state that receives us. We must expropriate gently the private property on the estates assigned to us. We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our country. The property owners will come over to our side. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly ... It goes without saying that we shall respectfully tolerate persons of other faiths and protect their property, their honor, and their freedom with the harshest means of coercion. This is another area in which we shall set the entire world a wonderful example ... Should*

*there be many such immovable owners in individual areas [who would not sell their property to us], we shall simply leave them there and develop our commerce in the direction of other areas which belong to us.*<sup>[17]</sup>

By omitting the opening sentence, Morris hides the fact that Herzl viewed Jewish settlement as beneficial to the indigenous population and that he did not conceive of the new Jewish entity as comprising this country in its entirety. This is further underscored by Herzl's confinement of the envisaged expropriation of private property to "the estates assigned to us"—another fact omitted by Morris. Any discussion of relocation was clearly limited to the specific lands assigned to the Jews, rather than to the entire territory. Had Herzl envisaged the mass expulsion of population, as claimed by Morris, there would have been no need to discuss its position in the Jewish entity. Morris further ignored context. There was no trace of a belief in transfer in either Herzl's famous political treatise, *The Jewish State* (1896), or his 1902 Zionist novel, *Altneuland* (*Old-New Land*).<sup>[18]</sup> Nor for this matter is there any allusion to "transfer" in Herzl's public writings, his private correspondence, his speeches, or his political and diplomatic discussions. Morris simply discards the canon of Herzl's life work in favor of a single, isolated quote.

Most importantly, Herzl's diary entry makes no mention of either Arabs or Palestine, and for good reason. A careful reading of Herzl's diary entries for June 1895 reveals that, at the time, he did not consider Palestine to be the future site of Jewish resettlement but rather South America.<sup>[19]</sup> "I am assuming that we shall go to Argentina," Herzl recorded in his diary on June 13. In his view, South America "would have a lot in its favor on account of its distance from militarized and seedy Europe ... If we are in South America, the establishment of our State will not come to Europe's notice for a considerable period of time."<sup>[20]</sup> Indeed, Herzl's diary entries during the same month illustrate that he conceived all political and diplomatic activities for the creation of the future Jewish state, including the question of the land and its settlement, in the Latin American context. "Should we go to South America," Herzl wrote on June 9, "our first state treaties will have to be with South American republics. We shall grant them loans in return for territorial privileges and guarantees." Four days later he wrote, "Through us and with us, an unprecedented commercial prosperity will come to South America."<sup>[21]</sup>

In short, Morris based his arguments on a red herring. He not only parsed a quote to distort its original meaning, but he ignored the context, which had nothing to do with Palestine or Arabs.

### **Misrepresenting the Early Zionists**

Morris applies similar distortions to other early Zionist leaders. He repeatedly takes isolated and

unrepresentative assertions out of context while omitting the often overwhelming evidence that undercut his thesis. For example, Morris takes an extraordinary approach to Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, the founding father of the branch of Zionism that was the forerunner of today's Likud party. While Morris cites a number of quotes showing Jabotinsky's public rejection of transfer—for example, his testimony before the 1936 Peel Commission, which investigated the roots of the Arab uprising—he, nevertheless, makes the unsubstantiated assertion that Jabotinsky "generally supported transfer."[\[22\]](#) Just as with his treatment of Herzl, Morris's conclusions fly in the face of the historical record. In 1934, for example, Jabotinsky's Revisionist Party prepared a draft constitution for Jewish Palestine that put the Arab minority on an equal footing with its Jewish counterpart "throughout all sectors of the country's public life." The two communities were to share the state's duties, both military and civil service, and enjoy its prerogatives. Jabotinsky proposed that Hebrew and Arabic should enjoy equal rights and that "in every cabinet where the prime minister is a Jew, the vice-premiership shall be offered to an Arab and vice versa."[\[23\]](#)

Morris also twists the historical record to indict Arthur Rupin, who headed the Zionist Organization's Palestine office. Morris's condemnation of Rupin revolves around the latter's sole suggestion at a 1911 meeting of "'a limited population transfer' of peasants to Syria."[\[24\]](#) Again, Morris cites selectively in order to make his comment appear to be something it was not. The original document shows that Rupin was not discussing Palestine's Arab population as a whole but rather those Arabs squatting on land purchased by Jews. Far from becoming policy, Rupin's limited proposal was rejected. Morris further makes no mention of Rupin's comments two years later at the eleventh Zionist congress, where he stated, "It is, of course, useless to content ourselves with merely assuring the Arabs that we are coming into the country as their friends. We must prove this by our deeds."[\[25\]](#)

Morris's treatment of Rupin shows shoddy scholarship. Part of the problem is that Morris neglected to examine the original document. He, instead, points readers to his own book, *Righteous Victims*, which in turn cited the polemical book, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of Transfer in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948*,[\[26\]](#) by the London-based Israeli Arab academic, Nur Masalha. Masalha worked from Walter Laqueur's *A History of Zionism* (1972), which itself was based on an earlier study by the Israeli scholar Paul Alsberg, once chief archivist of Israel's State Archives. The inaccuracy developed with Morris's trust of Masalha, who dismissed the historical context. As Laqueur explained in his original work:

[T]he idea of a population transfer was never official Zionist policy. Ben-Gurion emphatically rejected it, saying that even if the Jews were given the right to evict the Arabs, they would not make use of it. Most thought at that time that there would be

sufficient room in Palestine for both Jews and Arabs following the industrialization of the country and the introduction of intensive methods of agriculture. Since no one before 1914 expected the disintegration of the Turkish Empire ... the question of political autonomy did not figure in their thoughts. They were genuinely aggrieved that the Arabs were not more grateful for the economic benefits that they had come to enjoy as the result of Jewish immigration and settlement.[\[27\]](#)

Morris also butchers Chaim Weizmann's record by claiming that Weizmann "suggested to British Colonial Secretary Lord Passfield that a solution to Palestine's problems might lie across the Jordan: Palestine's troublesome Arabs could be transferred over the river."[\[28\]](#) In fact, it was Passfield, not Weizmann, who made this suggestion. As Weizmann recounted:

Lord Passfield agreed with the force of the argument; at the same time he said one had to stabilize conditions in the country. He didn't think it was an insuperable difficulty, and there could be no question of conceding anything to the Arabs which was against the spirit of the Mandate, and the report did not concede anything. Possibly, he said, Transjordan might be a way out.[\[29\]](#)

Morris repeats the same distortion with regard to a January 1941 conversation between Weizmann and Ivan Maiskii, the Soviet ambassador in London, by claiming that Weizmann initiated talk of a transfer when the opposite was true.[\[30\]](#) "The British are hardly likely to agree to this," Weizmann told Maiskii. "And if they don't agree, what happens next?"[\[31\]](#)

In July 1937, the Peel Commission recommended partition of Palestine into two states: a Jewish state to comprise 15 percent of the territory west of the Jordan River and an Arab state, to be united with Transjordan, itself carved from eastern Palestine in 1921. To prevent friction between the two communities, the commission suggested "a transfer of land and, as far as possible, an exchange of population" between the Jewish and the Arab states. The idea was not to transfer either community outside the bounds of Palestine but rather to the territories of the respective Arab and Jewish states, nor even to transfer the Jewish state's entire Arab population.[\[32\]](#) Here is how Morris related Weizmann's reaction to the report:

After seeing a copy of the Peel Commission Report, Weizmann met Colonial Secretary William Ormsby-Gore, in secret, on 19 July 1937, and wholeheartedly endorsed the transfer recommendation: "I said," Weizmann reported, "that the whole success of the [partition] scheme depended on whether the Government ... [carried] out this recommendation." Ormsby-Gore "agreed that once the Galilee was given to the Jews ... the position would be very difficult without transfer."[\[33\]](#)

But, when Morris's omissions are restored, Weizmann's reaction was actually quite different. Again, text removed by Morris is included in italics.

*I said that the whole success of the scheme depended on whether the Government genuinely did or did not wish to carry out this recommendation; the transfer could be carried out only by the British Government, and not by the Jews. I explained the reasons why we considered this proposal of such importance. Mr. Ormsby-Gore said that he was proposing to set up a committee for the twofold purpose (a) of finding land for the transferees (they hoped to find land in Transjordan, and possibly also in the Negev), and (b) of arranging the actual terms of the transfer ... He agreed that once [the] Galilee was given to the Jews, and not the Negev, the position would be very difficult without transfer.*[\[34\]](#)

By twisting quotations to fit his thesis, Morris misrepresents Weizmann, who did not meet Ormsby-Gore to express his delight, as Morris implies, but rather to inform the colonial secretary of Jewish apprehensions about the Peel report. As Weizmann related in his report, "I said that I had come to see him to try and clarify a number of points. The Jews were perplexed, and a great many of them were against the partition scheme."[\[35\]](#) While Weizmann was concerned about the British government's intention to carry out the proposed population exchange, Morris rewrote the passage to imply that Weizmann spoke about its actual implementation.

### **Distorting Ben-Gurion**

Perhaps no figure is a greater victim of Morris's distortions than David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding father and the man who announced the Jewish state's independence. By discrediting Ben-Gurion, Morris seeks to indict Israel's birth. As in the first edition, the base for Morris's assertions that Ben-Gurion was a strong transfer advocate revolves around misreading of the Peel Commission and the subsequent Woodhead Commission.

Morris describes a July 1936 meeting between Ben-Gurion and the high commissioner for Palestine. According to Morris:

by 1936, the mainstream Zionist leaders were more forthright in their support of transfer. In July, Ben-Gurion, the chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive and de facto leader of the Yishuv, and his deputy, Moshe Shertok (Sharett), the director of the agency's political department, went to the high commissioner to plead the Zionist case on immigration, which the Mandatory was considering suspending: Ben-Gurion asked whether the government would make it possible for Arab cultivators displaced through

Jewish land purchase ... to be settled in Transjordan. If Transjordan was for the time being a country closed to the Jews, surely it could not be closed to Arabs, also. The high commissioner thought this a good idea ... He asked whether the Jews would be prepared to spend money on the settlement of such Palestinian Arabs in Transjordan. Mr. Ben-Gurion replied that this might be considered.[\[36\]](#)

By linking the issue of Jewish immigration to expulsion of Palestinians, Morris implies a zero-sum relationship between the two. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Zionists in general and Ben-Gurion in particular had since the early twentieth century emphasized that there was sufficient room in Palestine for the two communities. Indeed, the "transfer issue" was not raised at the above meeting at all.

And Morris's first ellipsis in the passage he did quote? He omitted Ben-Gurion's mention of western Palestine, thereby obfuscating the Zionist leader's perception of Transjordan as "eastern Palestine." Such a perception would undercut Morris's thesis that the Zionists sought to expel the Arabs from Palestine.[\[37\]](#)

Further compounding this misrepresentation, Morris takes out-of-context a Ben-Gurion quote from a November 1, 1936 Jewish Agency Executive meeting. In reporting Ben-Gurion's words, he omits those words present in the original document, represented below in italics:

*We will tell [the Peel Commission] that Palestine extends over both banks of the Jordan River, and that we have the right to settle there. But if because of security considerations, the time is not yet ripe for our settlement there (and the government acknowledges our right to do so, albeit not in public), why can't we acquire land there for Arabs, who wish to settle in Transjordan? If it was permissible to move an Arab from the Galilee to Judea, why is it impossible to move an Arab from the Hebron area to Transjordan, which is much closer? He, Mr. Ben-Gurion, sees no fundamental difference between the eastern and the western parts of Palestine.*

*Dr. Hexter: It is clear that any agricultural question in the country is tied to political issues.*

*Mr. Ben-Gurion: If the government agrees to move the Arabs from place to place, why shouldn't it agree to move peasants to Transjordan? There are vast expenses of land there and we [in western Palestine] are over-crowded.*

*Rabbi Fishman asks whether the removal of Arabs to Transjordan does not imply an acknowledgement that we have no rights in Transjordan?*



*Mr. Ben-Gurion: Certainly not.* We now want to create concentrated areas of Jewish settlement, and by transferring the land-selling Arab to Transjordan, we can solve the problem of this concentration.[\[38\]](#)

By misrepresenting the original text, Morris seeks to create an impression that Ben-Gurion endeavored to expel the Arabs out of Palestine when, what he discussed, was resettlement within Palestine. After all, the record demonstrates repeatedly that Zionists viewed Transjordan as an integral part of Palestine in accordance with the League of Nations mandate.[\[39\]](#)

Morris repeats the same distortion when describing a later Jewish Agency Executive meeting:

[T]he Jewish Agency Executive—the "government" of the Yishuv—discussed transfer [Morris writes]. On June 7, 1938, proposing Zionist policy guidelines, Ben-Gurion declared: "The Jewish State will discuss with the neighboring Arab states the matter of voluntarily transferring Arab tenant-farmers, laborers, and peasants from the Jewish state to the neighboring Arab states."[\[40\]](#)

Morris creates the impression that Ben-Gurion proposed his policy guidelines in the midst of a discussion of the transfer idea and that these guidelines revolved around that idea. In fact, there was no discussion of transfer at that particular meeting. The agenda included eight items, of which the question of the Arabs in the prospective Jewish state ranked sixth. Of the eighteen packed pages of the meeting's protocol, only four lines referred to the possibility of the voluntary removal of some Arabs who, "of their free will" (*mi-toch retsonam ha-hofshi*), might choose to leave the Jewish state.[\[41\]](#)

Without evidence, Morris speculates that "some executive members may have regarded this [the granting of full equality to the Arab citizens of the prospective Jewish state] as for-the-record lip service and posturing for posterity."[\[42\]](#) But the fact remains that the meeting dealt with the position of the Arab minority in the prospective Jewish state—not their expulsion. Not only was this tolerant vision of Arab-Jewish coexistence inherent in Ben-Gurion's strategic thinking from the 1910s until the 1948 war, but also many of the guidelines presented at this meeting became Israel's established policy toward its Arab minority.

Such selective rendering is reflective of Morris's method. He repeatedly takes a statement out of context and then dismisses the rest of the text as insincere propaganda. Thus, for example, at the November 1, 1936 Jewish Agency Executive meeting, he ignores Ben-Gurion's statement, "We do not deny the right of the Arab inhabitants of the country, and we do not see this right as a hindrance to the realization of Zionism."[\[43\]](#) He likewise dismisses as phony "professions of liberal

egalitarianism"[44] Ben-Gurion's assertions, in an October 1941 internal policy paper, that "Jewish immigration and colonization in Palestine on a large scale can be carried out without displacing Arabs," and that "in a Jewish Palestine the position of the Arabs will not be worse than the position of the Jews themselves." [45]

The list of Morris's inaccuracies extends even further, though. In April 1944, the British Labor Party adopted an election platform, which among other positions advocated a transfer of Arabs out of Palestine. According to Morris, "the publication of the resolution prompted a debate on May 7 in the Jewish Agency Executive—not so much about the notion of transfer (all were agreed about its merits if not its practicality) as about how the Zionist leadership should react." [46] Reality, however, was quite different. The meeting was not convened in response to the Labor resolution but to hear a political report by Moshe Sharett, then head of the Jewish Agency's political department, upon his return from a working trip to London. This focused on a number of issues that preoccupied the Zionist movement at the time, from the acrimonious working relationship between Ben-Gurion and Weizmann, to the rescue of the remnants of European Jewry, to Jewish immigration to Palestine, to general U.S. and British policy. Labor's election platform occupied a minor place in Sharett's presentation (about two of seventeen pages)—not surprising given Labor's position as an opposition party at the time. There was no debate whatsoever at the May 7 meeting although some participants did express their views.

Again, Morris provides only a truncated rendition of Ben-Gurion's comments, ignoring all that text highlighted with italics below:

*This resolution has three phases: 1) [the creation of] a Jewish state; 2) the expansion of the Jewish state's borders; 3) transfer. The first thing should be received with great satisfaction; at least from a moral point of view, it is very satisfactory. As for the second thing, we will certainly not bemoan it. The third thing [transfer] can be problematic.*

*When I heard about these things from the newspapers, I had some difficult thoughts. This question troubled me last night, and even more so yesterday. I asked myself: "What if I happened to be in London, and they came to ask me whether or not to introduce [the transfer issue], or if after introducing this [clause] they asked me whether or not to leave it in place?" I would like to tell [you] the conclusion I reached, and it might not be the correct one. I can't say that I have a feeling of complete certainty. There are pros and cons in this issue. The question is that of weighing one factor against the other, and should we not be able to do something to keep the first two items alone, should we do this [i.e., support the keeping of the transfer issue as well]?*

*And I reached the conclusion that it is better that this thing remains.*[\[47\]](#)

By ignoring the most important elements of the Labor resolution, Morris withholds the real gist of Ben-Gurion's reasoning. In contrast to Morris's claim, far from relishing the introduction of transfer into Labor's platform, Ben-Gurion viewed it as an unwarranted impediment that might complicate an otherwise historic platform. Had transfer been proposed on its own, Ben-Gurion would have dismissed it out of hand:

Were they to ask [me]: "What should be our [i.e. the British Labor's] program?" I would find it inconceivable to tell them transfer. Were they to ask me whether to introduce this [transfer] as well [in addition to the proposal on a Jewish state], I would not have advised them to do so, because talk on the subject might cause harm ... But now we are confronted with a fait accompli. It is not the Jews who made or publicized this [proposal] but rather gentiles. Englishmen made this proposal and advertised it.[\[48\]](#)

None of this elaborate reasoning is noted by Morris.

In the end, whatever was said at the Jewish Agency Executive meeting is immaterial simply because the Zionist movement rejected the British Labor Party's transfer recommendation. In the original edition of *The Birth*, Morris concedes that "Ben-Gurion, testifying before UNSCOP [United Nations Special Commission on Palestine] on 8 July 1947, went out of his way to reject the 1945 British Labor Party platform 'International Post-war Settlement' which supported the encouragement of the movement of the Palestine Arabs to the neighbouring countries to make room for Jews."[\[49\]](#) In the revised edition, he ignores this fact altogether in an attempt to create the false impression of Zionist endorsement of the proposal.

Morris's misrepresentation is all the more significant since just months after Ben-Gurion's testimony before the U.N. Special Commission on Palestine, the Palestinian Arabs launched a war to abort the U.N.'s partition resolution of November 29, 1947. Having falsified Ben-Gurion's actual position, Morris claims that "by 1948, transfer was in the air." While he concedes that "the Yishuv and its military forces did not enter the 1948 war, which was initiated by the Arab side, with a policy or plan of expulsion," he argues that lack of an official policy made little difference, since "thinking about the possibilities of transfer in the 1930s and 1940s had prepared and conditioned hearts and minds for its implementation in the course of 1948."[\[50\]](#) Morris cites no evidence to support this claim nor could he, for there was never any Zionist attempt to inculcate the "transfer" idea in the hearts and minds of Jews. He could find no evidence of any press campaign, radio broadcasts, public rallies, or political gatherings, for none existed.

In contrast to Morris's thesis—and the rhetoric of many Arab politicians at the time—Ben-Gurion told his party members, "In our state there will be non-Jews as well—and all of them will be equal citizens; equal in everything without any exception; that is: the state will be their state as well."[\[51\]](#) In line with this conception, committees laying the groundwork for the nascent Jewish state discussed in detail the establishment of an Arabic-language press, Arab health care, incorporation of Arab officials into the government, integration of Arabs within the police and the ministry of education, and Arab-Jewish cultural and intellectual interaction. No less importantly, the Haganah's military plan to rebuff an anticipated pan-Arab invasion was itself predicated, in the explicit instructions of Israel Galili, the Haganah's commander-in-chief, on the "acknowledgement of the full rights, needs, and freedom of the Arabs in the Hebrew state without any discrimination, and a desire for coexistence on the basis of mutual freedom and dignity."[\[52\]](#)

## Conclusion

*The Birth Revisited* is a misnomer. Rather than offer a reassessment of Morris's previous writings on the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, *The Birth Revisited* is but a longer replica of its dishonest and shoddy predecessor. To downplay his failure to consult the most important archives in the preparation of *The Birth*, Morris argued that "the new materials ... tend to confirm and reinforce the major lines of description and analysis, and the conclusions, in *The Birth*."[\[53\]](#) And so, *The Birth Revisited* continues the stubborn refusal of Morris to base his arguments and conclusions on archival evidence and the historical record. Far from confirming and reinforcing his arguments, archival documents demonstrate that "the Palestinian refugee problem" was the creation of Palestinian and other Arab leaders, not of the Zionists.

Ironically, Morris's press comments from the time during which he drafted *The Birth Revisited* again contradict his conclusions, squarely putting the blame for the Palestinian tragedy on "the instinctive rejectionism that runs like a dark thread through Palestinian history."[\[54\]](#) Yet this is not good enough. For the damage done by Morris's written words outweighs his more truthful public assertions. His books have become a staple of the academic curriculum in both Western and Israeli universities. And so the younger generation of students will continue to be inculcated with the lies and distortions on the origin of the Palestinian refugee problem. That Morris admits errors, but continues to print them, raises questions about whether the star New Historian is motivated more by headlines than by truth. Regardless, it is both truth and scholarship which suffer.

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- [1] Sir J. Troutbeck, "Summary of general impressions gathered during weekend visit to the Gaza district," June 16, 1949, FO 371/75342/E7816, p. 123.
- [2] Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Reality* (New York: Pantheon, 1987); Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-1951* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992).
- [3] Among these were Uri Milstein, Shabtai Teveth, Elhannan Orren, Michael Bar-Zohar, Dan Kurzman, Yitzhak Levi, Yuval Arnon-Ohana, and Shmuel Dotan.
- [4] See, for example, Efraim Karsh, *Fabricating Israeli History: The "New Historians,"* 2nd rev. ed. (London: Cass, 2000), pp. 195-6.
- [5] Morris, "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948," in Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 37.
- [6] Morris, "For the Record," *The Guardian*, Jan. 14, 2004.
- [7] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- [8] Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 7, 588 (hereinafter *The Birth Revisited*).
- [9] *Ibid.* p. 7.
- [10] Ari Shavit, "Survival of the Fittest," interview with Benny Morris, *Ha'aretz Weekly Magazine* (Tel Aviv), Jan. 1, 2004.
- [11] *The New Republic*, May 3, 2004.
- [12] Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999), pp. 652, 654.
- [13] Morris, *The Birth*, p. 24; *idem*, *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 17.
- [14] The most egregious of these was the distortion of an October 1937 letter from David Ben-Gurion to his son. Morris cited the letter as saying, "We must expel Arabs and take their place," when Ben-Gurion actually said the opposite.
- [15] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, pp. 5, 60, 588.
- [16] See, for example, Walid Khalidi, ed., *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem until 1948* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1971), pp. 118-9; David Hurst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch* (London: Futura, 1978), p. 18; Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 13.
- [17] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, pp. 40-1; Raphael Patai, ed., *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, vol. 1 (New York: Herzl Press and Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), pp. 88, 90 (hereafter Herzl

diaries).

[18] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 41.

[19] Herzl diaries, p. 133. Four days earlier, Herzl recorded in his diary, "In Palestine's disfavor is its proximity to Russia and Europe, its lack of room for expansion as well as its climate, which we are no longer accustomed to." He saw only one major advantage in this location: "the mighty legend" (idem, p. 56).

[20] Herzl diaries, pp. 69-70, 134.

[21] Ibid. pp. 70, 92, 134-5.

[22] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 45.

[23] Vladimir Jabotinsky, *The Jewish War Front* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1940), pp. 216-7.

[24] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 41.

[25] Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: MJF Books, 2003; reprint of the original 1972 edition), pp. 230-1.

[26] Washington D.C., Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992.

[27] Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, p. 232.

[28] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 44.

[29] Chaim Weizmann, "Awaiting the Shaw Report" (report on a conversation with Lord Passfield on Mar. 6, 1930), in *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann, Series B* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1983), p. 591.

[30] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, pp. 52-3.

[31] "Meeting: I.M. Maiskii—Ch. Weizmann (London, 3 February 1941)," in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 1941-1953*, part I (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 4-5.

[32] Palestine Royal Commission, *Report, Presented by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to Parliament by Command of His Majesty, July 1937*, Cmd. 5479 (London: HMSO, 1937), pp. 291-93 (hereinafter, Peel report).

[33] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 62, fn. 24.

[34] Ibid. pp. 56-7.

[35] Chaim Weizmann, "Summary Note of Interview with Mr. Ormsby Gore, Colonial Office, Monday, July 19th, 1937, at 10.45 a.m.," Weizmann Archive, p. 56.

[36] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, pp. 45-6.

[37] "Note of a Conversation between Mr. D. Ben-Gurion and Mr. M. Shertok and His Excellency the High Commissioner on Thursday, July 9th, 1936, at Government Offices," Central Zionist Archives (CZA), S25/19, pp. 4-5.

[38] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 46, compared with "Protocol of the Meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, held in Jerusalem on Nov. 1, 1936," CZA, S100-20A, pp. 8-9.

[39] Peel report, pp. 228, 304.

[40] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 49.

[41] "Protocol of the Meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, held in Jerusalem on Jun. 7, 1938," CZA S100/24b, pp. 5970-1 (lines of action 18, 22).

[42] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 50.

[43] "Protocol of the Meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, held in Jerusalem on Nov. 1, 1936," CZA, p. 7.

[44] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 63, fn. 31.

[45] David Ben-Gurion, "Outlines of Zionist Policy—Private and Confidential," Oct. 15, 1941, CZA Z4/14632, p. 15 (iii & iv).

[46] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 54.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 55, compared with "Protocol of the Meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, held in Jerusalem on May 7, 1944," CZA, S100, p. 10177.

[48] "Protocol of the Meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, May 7, 1944," p. 10178.

[49] Morris, *The Birth*, p. 28

[50] Morris, *The Birth Revisited*, p. 60.

[51] David Ben-Gurion, *Ba-ma'araha*, vol. IV, part 2 (Tel-Aviv: Misrad Ha'bitahon, 1959), p. 260.

[52] Rama to brigade commanders, "Arabs Residing in the Enclaves," Mar. 24, 1948, Haganah Archives 46/109/5.

[53] Morris, "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948," p. 37.

[54] Morris, "The Rejection," review of Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal, *The Palestinian People: A History*, in *The New Republic*, Apr. 21, 2003.