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ISRAEL JOURNAL

What Went Wrong?

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What Went Wrong?

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*In loving memory of my father, the last Zionist
Hanoch Bartov (1926–2016)*

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INTRODUCTION

From Liberation to Oppression

This book explores the tragic transformation of Zionism, a movement that sought to emancipate European Jewry from oppression and persecution, into a state ideology of ethno-nationalism increasingly focused on the exclusion and violent domination of Palestinians under Israeli rule. It further asks: How is it possible that a state founded in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust stands today credibly accused of perpetrating large-scale war crimes, forcible displacement of civilian populations, and crimes against humanity? By what bitter cunning of history have we come to the point that not even eight decades after the Jewish state was established in 1948—the same year in which the Genocide Convention was adopted by the United Nations in direct response to the Nazi extermination of European Jewry—Israel engages for two years in a genocidal undertaking with almost total impunity from the very international legal regime set up after World War II to prevent and punish this crime? And how do we come to terms with the fact that Israel's war of destruction was conducted with the wide support, laced with denial and indifference, of most of its own Jewish citizens?

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The chapters that follow trace the roots and the realities of the violent events that unfolded in Israel and the occupied territories since October 7, 2023; in the final pages, I also try to sketch out future scenarios at a time of great uncertainty and confusion. Some would argue that what we watched with shock and horror was the inevitable consequence of Zionist settler colonialism set in motion in the late nineteenth century. In part, that is true. But the focus on the functional reality of settlement in Palestine largely misses the ideological and emotional motivations of this movement, as well as the underlying self-perception of generations of Zionist activists and supporters. What interests me here, and what makes the history leading to this moment all the more tragic, is that the unfolding of events can be seen as inevitable only in retrospect. How is it that the appeal to humanitarianism, tolerance, the rule of law, and protection of minorities that characterized the beginning of Jewish self-emancipation gradually acquired all the traits of the relentless, remorseless, and increasingly racist ethno-nationalisms from which Zionism sought to liberate European Jewry? Was this an unavoidable development, or was it the product of particular circumstances and decisions? Was there a crucial moment at which things began turning in one direction rather than another? Can the grim logic of events still be reversed, or are we observing an unstoppable rush by Israel toward the destruction of others as well as self-annihilation as a society and state proclaiming democratic and liberal values?

These questions have kept me up at night since the Hamas attack on southern Israel, in which some 800 civilians were massacred and about 250 taken hostage. This event was swiftly followed by a fierce Israeli military campaign of utter annihilation against the Gaza Strip as a whole, in which, as of this writing, 68,000 Palestinians were killed, about 80 percent

of whom were civilians, the majority of them children; 10,000 are missing, likely buried under the rubble; and untold thousands of babies, chronically ill persons, and others in need of medical care have become indirect victims of the destruction of Gaza's medical services. But my concern with the larger context of Israel's identity and relationship to the Palestinians is not recent—it has preoccupied me with ever greater intensity, especially in the decade leading to the current crisis. In a certain sense, as I have come to realize, it has been part of my own making since I can remember myself.

I was born and raised in Israel, a member of the first generation that came into the world following the state's creation. Less typically, my father was also born in what was then Mandatory Palestine, shortly after his parents arrived there in the mid-1920s. My paternal grandfather, who grew up in dire poverty in Poland and was exposed to local antisemitism, was a staunch Zionist. Economically, the family did only marginally better in Palestine, and my father had to leave school and seek employment at the age of fifteen to help support the household. Two years later he volunteered to join the Jewish Brigade of the British Army, both to fight the Nazis and to escape the constraints of destitution and religion at a home that to his mind had retained all the hallmarks of a diaspora mentality, or *galutiyut*, as it is called in Hebrew. He, too, was a Zionist throughout his life. His encounter with the survivors of the Holocaust in Europe remained etched on his soul and found expression in several of the novels he subsequently wrote.

Unlike many other members of his generation, my father insisted that despite being a Sabra—a native son of Eretz Israel—he was first and foremost a Jew, rather than an Israeli. But he abandoned his father's religious practice and was always attached to the Left in its various permutations.

He never quite reconciled with my departure from Israel as a young man, but in the last decade of his long life my father clearly detected the direction in which his beloved country was headed. In many ways he could no longer recognize it. He insisted with growing vehemence that Benjamin Netanyahu was the great destroyer of Zionism as my father had understood the movement to which he dedicated his life. Very few people listened to him, and even fewer were willing to grant the octogenarian journalist a space to publicly air his views. Nowadays, despite all the noise and fury about current-day Zionism, I think of my father as the last Zionist.

My mother, who was born in Poland, came to Palestine with her parents and two brothers at the age of eleven in 1935. Her father, too, was a staunch Zionist and an observant Jew. Economically quite well-off in Poland, the family was plunged into poverty upon arrival in the Promised Land. But no one ever complained about my grandfather's choice to leave Poland, which was growing increasingly unstable, poor, and antisemitic. I was born in Israel thanks to my grandfather's decision to leave that land where my family had lived for centuries. Had he stayed, I would likely have not been born at all.

Hebrew was my mother's third or fourth language, but like my father, she pulled herself out of the mire by her own bootstraps, thanks to an educational system that rewarded talent, ambition, and perseverance, all of which she had in abundance. My parents were both students at the Hebrew University in 1948 when the war over Israel's independence broke out. They went to fight straight out of the classroom, losing many of their friends who, like them, had joined those early "students' platoons." She, too, was a Zionist, though perhaps not as fervent as my father. Had he let her continue her studies in the United States in the late 1950s and early

1960s instead of insisting that the family go back to the Jewish state, I suspect she would have had an academic career at an American university, and I would have been a full-fledged American.

As I grew up, I realized that, although all families are different, most of those I knew in Israel had one thing in common—they had lost virtually all their relatives who stayed behind in Europe. I was lucky to have two sets of grandparents, but my father's and my mother's extended families in Poland were all murdered. We lived in mutilated families, and the sense of loss and mourning, compounded by personal trauma in those families that included Holocaust survivors, was ubiquitous, though rarely articulated. Told that we were the first generation of our people's resurrection, we never questioned our presence, existence, and future in Israel. Yet over time, even as the visible signs of the destruction of Palestinian culture all around us were gradually demolished or covered over, some of us became increasingly aware that our resurrection had come at the price of another people's catastrophe. That awareness could generate contradictory responses—guilt and regret, or negation and denial; a hope for redress and reconciliation, or a conscious and, just as important, unconscious will to eradicate and erase. The mental landscape of contemporary Israel is still filled with traces of these contradictory sentiments, although at the moment the urge for destruction and erasure has by far the upper hand.

Born in a resolutely left-wing kibbutz, I spent the first eighteen months of my life at a children's home, as socialist ideology at the time perceived the family as an obstacle to collective solidarity. But I grew up in Tel Aviv, in neighborhoods built right next to or over the remnants of Palestinian villages whose residents had fled Israeli troops. In deliberating the issues discussed in this book, I cannot but draw on my personal

and professional background. I served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) for four years, a term that included the 1973 Yom Kippur War and postings in the West Bank, northern Sinai, and Gaza, ending my service as an infantry company commander. During my time in Gaza, I saw firsthand the poverty and hopelessness of Palestinian refugees eking out a living in congested, decrepit neighborhoods. Most vividly, I remember patrolling the shadeless, silent streets of the Egyptian town of Al-Arish—which was then occupied by Israel—pierced by the gazes of the fearful, resentful population observing us from their shuttered windows. For the first time, I understood what it meant to occupy another people.

Military service is mandatory for Jewish Israelis when they turn eighteen—though there are a few exceptions—and afterward, you can be called upon to serve again in the IDF, for training or operational duties or in case of emergencies such as a war. When I was called up in 1976, I was an undergraduate studying at Tel Aviv University. During that first deployment as a reserve officer, I was severely wounded in a training accident, along with a score of my soldiers. The IDF covered up the circumstances of this event, which was caused by negligence in allocating training areas at the base. I spent most of that first semester in the hospital of Be'er Sheva, but returned to my studies, graduating in 1979 with a specialty in history.

These personal experiences made me all the more interested in a question that had long preoccupied me: What motivates soldiers to fight? In the decades after World War II, many American sociologists argued that first and foremost, soldiers fight for one another rather than for some bigger ideological goal. But that didn't quite fit with what I'd experienced as a soldier: we believed we were in it for a bigger cause, which surpassed our own group of buddies. By the time I completed

my undergraduate degree, at the age of twenty-five, I had also begun to ask whether, in the name of that cause, soldiers could be made to act in ways they would otherwise find reprehensible.

Taking the extreme case, I wrote my Oxford PhD thesis, later published as a book, on the Nazi indoctrination of the German Army and the crimes it perpetrated on the Eastern Front in World War II. What I found ran counter to the way Germans in the 1980s understood their past. They preferred to think that the army had fought a “decent” war, even as the Gestapo and the SS perpetrated genocide “behind its back.” It took Germans many more years to realize just how complicit their own fathers and grandfathers had been in the Holocaust and the mass murder of many other groups in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

When the first intifada, or uprising, broke out, in late 1987, I was teaching at Tel Aviv University. I was appalled by Minister of Defense Yitzhak Rabin’s instruction to the IDF to “break the arms and legs” of Palestinian youths who were throwing rocks at heavily armed troops. I wrote a letter to him warning that, based on my research on the indoctrination of the armed forces of Nazi Germany, I feared that under his leadership the IDF was heading down a similarly slippery slope.

As my research had shown, young German men, even before their conscription, had internalized core elements of Nazi ideology, especially the view that the “subhuman” Slav masses, led by insidious Bolshevik Jews, were threatening Germany and the rest of the civilized world with destruction, and that therefore Germany had the right and duty to create for itself a “living space” in the East and to decimate or enslave that region’s population. This worldview was then further inculcated into the troops, so that by the time they marched into the So-

viet Union, they perceived their enemies through that prism. The fierce resistance put up by the Red Army only confirmed the need to utterly destroy Soviet soldiers and civilians alike, most especially the Jews, who were seen as the main instigators of Bolshevism. The more destruction the German troops wrought, the more fearful they became of the revenge they could expect if their enemies prevailed. The result was the killing of up to twenty-seven million Soviet soldiers and citizens.

To my astonishment, a few days after writing to Rabin, I received a one-line response from him, chiding me for daring to compare the IDF to the German military. This gave me the opportunity to write him a more detailed letter, explaining my research and my anxiety about using the IDF as a tool of oppression against unarmed occupied civilians. Rabin responded again, with the same statement: "How dare you compare the IDF to the Wehrmacht." In retrospect, I believe this exchange reveals something about his subsequent intellectual journey. For as we know from his later engagement in the Oslo peace process, however flawed, he did eventually recognize that in the long run Israel could not sustain the military, political, and moral price of the occupation.

Since 1989 I have been teaching in the United States. I have written profusely on war, genocide, Nazism, antisemitism, and the Holocaust, seeking to understand the links between the industrial killing of soldiers in World War I and the extermination of civilian populations by Hitler's regime. Among other projects, I spent many years researching the transformation of my mother's hometown—Buczacz in Poland (now Ukraine)—from a community of interethnic coexistence into one in which, under the Nazi occupation, the gentile population turned against their Jewish neighbors. While the Germans came to the town with the express goal of murdering its Jews, the speed and the efficiency of the killing

were greatly facilitated by local collaboration. These locals were motivated by preexisting resentments and hatreds that can be traced back to the rise of ethno-nationalism in the preceding decades and the prevalent view that the Jews did not belong to the new nation-states created after World War I.

In the months since October 7, what I had learned over the course of my life and my career became more painfully relevant than ever before. Like many others, I found this to be an emotionally and intellectually challenging period. Like many others, I saw members of my own and my friends' families directly affected by the violence. There is no dearth of grief wherever you turn.

I have always maintained close links with Israel. My parents are buried in the kibbutz of my birth, and my eldest son lives in Tel Aviv with his family, as do most of my best friends. Until the Gaza war, I regularly visited the country, often three times a year, occasionally staying for lengthy periods. It is, in multiple senses, my home and my homeland. But like my father, I now feel increasingly estranged from it. It seems to be a different, strange, and threatening place, whose people, including some of my friends, have been transformed, perhaps irretrievably. It is a country trapped in its own sense of shock and trauma, in deep denial of the crimes being committed in its name by its people, including the children and grandchildren of those who, at other times under different circumstances, would have easily been able to perceive the horrors they now accept, refute, or strive to ignore.

This book is based on decades of learning, teaching, and writing about war and genocide, European history and the Holocaust, and the history of Israel–Palestine. Since October 7 I have been intensively engaged in speaking and writing about how I understand what is happening on the ground, the immediate and deeper causes of this explosion of violence,

and where things may be heading. The chapters of this book draw on these texts but also include much that I have never published.



There is of course no understanding Israel's current predicament without considering its past and the movement that led to a Jewish state. While much of this history is well known, I'd like to highlight certain themes that inform this book. Zionism was the product of the vast transformation of Jewish life in the European diaspora that followed the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of nationalism. Ironically, just as the Jews "came out of the ghetto" (in the words of the historian Jacob Katz) and joined the mainstream of European society, they found themselves increasingly associated with all the gathering ills of modernity, urbanization, and the erosion of traditional society. It was under these circumstances that modern antisemitism was constituted as an ideology and a political platform for the mass mobilization of movements and parties. Typical of this response was the exclamation by the historian Heinrich von Treitschke that the ever more conspicuous Jews were the "misfortune" of the modern German nation that was being crafted in the years following its unification.

The politicization and popularization of antisemitism led in turn to a Jewish quest to solve the emerging "Jewish Question" through a variety of political movements, one of which was Zionism. In his 1882 essay, *Auto-Emancipation*, the Russian-Jewish physician Leon Pinsker described the Jews in the diaspora as a zombie nation, "the uncanny form of one of the dead walking among the living," a "ghostlike apparition of a living corpse, . . . a people without unity or organization, without land or other bonds of unity, no longer alive, and yet

walking among the living,” a “spectral form without precedence in history.” The ubiquitous “fear of the Jewish ghost” that was “passed down the generations and the centuries,” Pinsker argued, eventually “culminated in Judeophobia,” his chosen name for antisemitism.

Zionism, then, envisioned itself as the only possible answer to this abnormal, perverse condition—a condition that only worsened with the intensification of antisemitism after World War I in the newly created ethno-national states of Eastern Europe, where most Jews lived. Of course, Zionism sought not only to liberate Jews from persecution, exclusion, and violence, but also to provide them with the same kind of national self-determination that their neighbors had accomplished. At the same time, for Zionists, national liberation could be implemented only outside the territories of mass Jewish habitation, where they were increasingly unwanted. Instead, Zionism envisioned the Jews’ religious, historical, and mythical ancestral land as the site where a newly declared Jewish nation would be resurrected.

That intended resurrection took shape in parallel with mounting persecution and eventual genocide. As the expanding Jewish community in Palestine began creating the infrastructure of a future state under the aegis of the British Mandate, practicing the familiar processes of a settler colonial takeover of land and resources from the indigenous Palestinian population, millions of Jews who remained in Europe were first discriminated against and persecuted and later murdered by the Nazis and their numerous European collaborators. In the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, an exhausted Britain sought to abandon its increasingly burdensome rule in Palestine, while the international community leaned more than ever before toward supporting the creation of an independent Jewish state. The bitter war

that ensued between the Jews and the Palestinian Arabs—who rejected the United Nations’ Partition Plan for Palestine as unfair and unjust—supported by the invasion of several Arab armies, ended up in a Jewish victory and a Palestinian catastrophe. Seeking to ensure a solid Jewish majority, Jewish forces, during the fighting, expelled most of the Palestinian population—which had previously constituted two-thirds of the country’s inhabitants—from the territories they came to control.

These two traumatic events, the Holocaust and the Nakba—the violent mass displacement of the Palestinians in 1948—are rarely discussed together. Indeed, there are those who find merely invoking the Holocaust and the Nakba in the same context to be scandalous, both because of their enduring traumatic effects and thanks to each group’s insistence on the exclusivity of its victimhood, resulting in resistance to comparison and analogy. In fact, the two events are inextricably linked historically, personally, and as part of a politics of memory, and they have respectively become constitutive of Israeli and Palestinian national identities. It has been argued that for this very reason, rather than producing a senseless competition for victimhood, reflecting jointly on these two crucial events can have a transformative effect on Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian mutual understanding. At the current historical juncture, this is a rather tall order.

Understanding the link between the Holocaust and the Nakba also necessitates situating them within the larger context of colonialism, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, all of which entail an urge to homogenize, transfer, or eradicate populations. The Holocaust was part of a Nazi endeavor to create a German “living space” from which the Jews would be removed as a rootless, landless people. The Nakba, for its part,

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was the culmination of colonial views of Palestine as an empty space where “landless Jews” could regain their roots, resulting in the displacement of the indigenous Palestinian population by displaced Jews from Europe.

The year 1948, therefore, saw both the establishment of a Jewish state, perceived as the “answer” to the Holocaust, and the uprooting of Palestinian civilization in Palestine. On May 14, 1948, as the British Mandate was about to expire, the Jewish People’s Council in Palestine promulgated a Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, popularly known in Israel as the Declaration of Independence. Ironically, even as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were being expelled, thereby creating an overwhelming Jewish majority within the new state’s borders, this document included a series of lofty assurances of equality and justice to all citizens of the state, regardless of ethnicity, creed, and gender. As we’ll see, the Declaration set a deadline of October 1, 1948, for a constitution that would provide the legal framework for the state’s institutions and the nature of the regime. But no constitution was ever adopted, and the legal status of the Declaration remains disputed.

As Israel evolved without a constitution reflecting the democratic and liberal principles of the Declaration of Independence, Zionism itself transformed from a movement for Jewish self-emancipation, individual transformation, self-determination, and freedom from persecution and antisemitism into a state ideology. Whereas before 1948 Zionism presented two faces, one of liberation from oppression and the other of settler colonialism and ethno-nationalism, once the state was established, it was the latter that came to dominate Israeli politics. Not unlike other political concepts and philosophies, such as socialism and fascism, that changed

dramatically when they took over states, Zionism began to transform as soon as it became Israel's official ideology. Arguably, as this book will claim, a constitution based on the progressive principles of the Israeli Declaration of Independence would have served to constrain the worst impulses of Zionism and to open a path toward a liberal society for all its citizens. At the very least, a constitution might have prevented or, at a minimum, limited the reach of the military rule imposed on Israel's Arab citizens between 1948 and 1966 even as vast tracts of their lands were confiscated by the state. It might have also facilitated a process of repatriation for part of the Palestinian population that fled or was expelled in 1948.

Instead, as time went by, the focus on Zionism as state ideology determined that in the competition between being Jewish and being democratic, the state tilted increasingly toward the former, first in the sense of being a state strictly for Jews, and then in becoming an ever more Jewish state.

This was a long process and never an inevitable one. There were many forks in the road where the country could have chosen to go one way and not the other. One mechanism that came to play an important role in the transformation of Israel into what it has become in recent years was its politics of memory and commemoration. In the wake of World War II and the Holocaust, memorials went up everywhere proclaiming a commitment to never let such inhumanity happen again. But there was no universal consensus over what it was that would never be repeated, since the Holocaust as a historical event was already over. There were those who pledged never to let genocide of any kind happen. In Israel, however, the pledge was interpreted differently, to mean never again any genocide of Jews. In its early years, Israel was uncomfortable with the legacy of the Shoah as an event in which millions allegedly went like sheep to the slaughter. That would soon change.