



Distorting Ben-Gurion

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,309, October 11, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: By ignoring millions of declassified documents from the period of the British Mandate (1920-48) and Israel's early days that show the claim of premeditated dispossession of the Palestinian Arabs to be completely unfounded, "revisionist" journalist Tom Segev's rewrites David Ben-Gurion's personal story, and, by extension, the story of Israel's creation, in an image of his own making in which aggressors are transformed into hapless victims and vice versa.

It is only recently that David Ben-Gurion ceased to be, for the sake of the official record books, Israel's longest-serving prime minister. That honor now belongs to Benjamin Netanyahu, even as his political future becomes ever more uncertain. Ben-Gurion's stature as Israel's founding father, however, would seem to be eminently secure, given his crucial, perhaps indispensable, role in salvaging the Jewish people from political oblivion and reinstating it in its ancestral homeland.

A host of biographies over the years—largely complimentary though by no means uncritical—have recorded the details of Ben-Gurion's busy life without diminishing his almost mythological status. Still, a group of "revisionist" Israeli academics and journalists seem determined to tarnish his reputation as part of their decades-long project to reinterpret Israel's founding period. Tom Segev's *A State at Any Cost* is the latest such effort.

David Ben-Gurion was born in 1886 to a Zionist family in the small Polish town of Płońsk and in 1906 moved to the Ottoman district of Jerusalem (Palestine didn't exist as a unified territory at the time), where he combined political activity with work as a farmer. Deported after the outbreak of World War I alongside many Zionist leaders, Ben-Gurion spent most of the war years in New York, where he met and married his wife, before returning to Palestine at the end of the war.

By then, Britain had defeated the Ottoman Empire and issued the Balfour Declaration pledging a Jewish national home in Palestine, and Ben-Gurion immersed himself in laying the groundwork to expedite this goal. In 1920, he played the key role in establishing the Histadrut—the foremost trade union in mandatory Palestine, which also oversaw the Hagana underground military organization. Ten years later, he played a similar role in the creation of Mapai, the Land of Israel Workers Party, which, in one form or another, was to dominate Zionist/Israeli politics until 1977.

In 1935 he became the head of the world Zionist movement, steering it through the tumultuous World War II years and the struggle for independence in their wake. On May 14, 1948, he proclaimed the establishment of the state of Israel, becoming its first prime minister and defense minister, posts he held until 1963 (with a brief retirement from office in 1953-55). Two years later, he established a new political party only to be defeated in the general elections. He retired from politics in 1970 and spent his last years in his modest home in a Negev kibbutz before dying on Dec. 1, 1973, at age 87.

Segev lays out some of this detail in a straightforward fashion, adding little to what has already been told by earlier biographers. But at the core of his chronicle is a desire to cast Israel's founding father as the destroyer of Palestinian Arab society—that is, as a leader deeply implicated in what Segev and his fellow revisionists see as the “original sin” of Israel's creation: the supposedly deliberate and aggressive dispossession of the Palestinian Arab population.

The lens through which Segev views his subject is generally polemical. For instance, he says that, as late as mid-1942, Ben-Gurion had yet “to internalize the unique nature of Nazi racial anti-Semitism”—though his evidence is a misleadingly brief quote from a Ben-Gurion speech in which, as any fair-minded reader would conclude, it is clear that he did fully grasp Hitler's “campaign of extermination of the whole of the Jewish people” (as Ben-Gurion put it elsewhere in the speech). But the book's main distortive effort is aimed at Ben-Gurion's ideological outlook—and, more generally, at the outlook of the Zionist movement—toward the Palestinian Arabs.

Segev traces the alleged “hope of emptying Palestine of its Arab inhabitants” to the father of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, yet bases his indictment on a single truncated quote from Herzl's June 12, 1895, diary entry, which supposedly implied this intention. But this quote, which has been a regular feature of Palestinian propaganda for decades, makes no mention of either Arabs or Palestine for the simple reason that at the time Herzl was not yet a Zionist. He didn't seek to re-establish the Jews in their ancestral homeland but to salvage European Jewry from the ravages of anti-Semitism by relocating it as far as possible from the Continent. As he recorded in his diary on June 13, 1895: “I am assuming that we shall go to Argentina. . . . [It] would have a lot in its favor on account of its distance from militarized and seedy Europe.”

Nor did Herzl show the slightest interest in expelling the Palestinian Arabs once he dropped his Argentine ruminations and embraced the Zionist cause: not in his famous political treatise, *The Jewish State* (1896), and not in his 1902 Zionist novel *Altneuland* (*Old-New Land*), where he painted an idyllic picture of Arab-Jewish co-existence in a future Palestine. Nor for that matter is there any allusion to the expulsion of Arabs in Herzl's public writings, his private correspondence, or his speeches.

The truth is that, far from seeking to dispossess the Palestinian Arabs as claimed by Segev, the Zionist movement had always been amenable to the existence of a substantial Arab minority in the prospective Jewish state. No less than Ze'ev Jabotinsky, founder of the faction that was the forebear of today's Likud Party, voiced his readiness (in a famous 1923 essay) "to take an oath binding ourselves and our descendants that we shall never do anything contrary to the principle of equal rights, and that we shall never try to eject anyone." And if this was the position of the more "militant" faction of the Jewish national movement, small wonder that mainstream Zionism took for granted the full equality of the Arab minority in the prospective Jewish state.

Ben-Gurion himself argued as early as 1918 that "had Zionism desired to evict the inhabitants of Palestine it would have been a dangerous utopia and a harmful, reactionary mirage." And as late as December 1947, shortly after Palestinian Arabs had unleashed wholesale violence to subvert the newly passed United Nations partition resolution, he told his Labor Party that "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." In line with this conception, committees laying the groundwork for the nascent Jewish state discussed the establishment of an Arabic-language press, the incorporation of Arab officials in the administration, and Arab-Jewish cultural interaction.

Ignoring these facts altogether, Segev accuses Ben-Gurion of using the partition resolution as a springboard for implementing the age-old "Zionist dream" of "maximum territory, minimum Arabs," though he brings no evidence for this supposed behavior beyond a small number of statements that are either taken out of context or simply distorted or misrepresented. To take one representative example: "Ben-Gurion jotted down [in his diary] a long list of questions that awaited his decision, among which was 'Should the Arabs be expelled?'" Segev writes. Dated May 8, 1948, just under a week before Ben-Gurion proclaimed the state of Israel, the citation seeks to show that he actively entertained the expulsion of the country's Arab population.

The diary entry, however, doesn't read "Should the Arabs be expelled?" but rather "Should Arabs be expelled?" And this question was posed in relation not to the Palestinian Arab community as a whole but to the small number of Arabs caught in the fighting. According to the Hagana's operational plan—adopted in mid-March 1948, two

months ahead of statehood, to reverse then-current Palestinian Arab aggression and rebuff the anticipated invasion by the Arab states—Arab villages that served as bases for attacks on Jewish targets could be destroyed and their residents expelled.

Yet this was an exclusively tactical measure dictated by ad hoc military considerations, notably the need to deny strategic sites to the enemy if there were no available Jewish forces to hold them. Not only did it not reflect any political intention to expel Arabs, but the plan's overarching rationale was predicated, in the explicit instructions of the Hagana's commander in chief, on the Hebrew state without any discrimination, and a desire for coexistence on the basis of mutual freedom and dignity.

There are many more such lost subtleties and distinctions in *A State at Any Cost*. But Segev, like his fellow revisionists, is not bothered with mere facts in his endeavor to rewrite Ben-Gurion and, by extension, Israel's history in an image of his own making. The late Shabtai Teveth's seminal four-volume biography of Ben-Gurion—published between 1976 and 2004—remains the work to consult for a full and fair treatment of Israel's founding father.

This is an edited version of an article that was published in the Wall Street Journal on October 5, 2019.

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