

REVIEW ESSAY

FROM ‘VIRTUOUS BOY’ TO MURDEROUS FANATIC: DAVID BEN-GURION AND THE PALESTINIANS

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‘When I was a boy of three’, remembered David Gruen, the chrysalis of the man who would later turn himself into David Ben-Gurion, ‘I knew that I would not live in the place [where] I had been born. Neither did I want to learn the language of that place’ (15). In time he did go to a different land, at the heart of the Middle East. He masked his European identity with a name calculated to give him a sense of historical belonging to that land, to which he had no known connection other than religious belief. He never learned the language common to the land, not because he couldn’t but because he didn’t want to. He had no interest in the indigenous people. Unlike him, he believed, they did not belong to the land, he did; he was not the interloper, the intruder, they were, their fate to be pushed out when the time came.

If he was a European, that was because he wanted to remain one, and help build a European ‘rampart against barbarism’ in the Middle East, the sales pitch to the imperial powers of one of his idols, Theodor Herzl. National chauvinists everywhere at the time wanted a national state based on skin colour, religion and ‘race’. David Gruen also wanted an exclusionary state: skin colour was not unimportant but for him religion was the only arbitrary demarcation line. Jews from Yemen might be a cut below their European Ashkenazi coreligionists (like himself and most

Zionist settlers) but they were still Jewish and anyone who was not had no rightful place in the state Gruen envisaged, even though the Palestinians and their ancestors had lived on the land for countless centuries before he arrived. By whatever means it took, they would have to go: statements he later made that they could live together were always designed for public relations purposes.

Born in the small town of Plonsk, not far from Warsaw, in 1886 David Gruen grew up under the slowly spreading influence of Zionism. From the late nineteenth century, Zionism and the Bundists (the General Jewish Labour Bund) competed for support within the town's Jewish community. Both movements were secular, even while drawing on Jewish history and culture; both claimed to be socialist, which was true of the Bundists but not of the Zionists. The Bundists accepted the national idea but insofar as a state was concerned, it would need to have a social democratic federative structure that would integrate politically, socially and culturally different ethno-religious 'national' groups. The Bundists abhorred Zionism and the Zionists loathed them.

A Bundist publication recalled Gruen shouting during a debate 'We have weapons and we will kill you all like dogs' (49). Needing money, Gruen later wrote, 'We would go around with pistols. We would go to rich householders, place the pistol on the table and start talking about money'. This was the same person who described himself at the time as a 'gentle, naïve and virtuous boy' (49).

In 1906 Gruen landed in Jaffa. His biographer puts the population at 'close' to 400,000, including a Jewish population of about 30,000, almost all, with the exception of small communities of pious Jews who had lived in Palestine for centuries, settlers who had arrived in the previous 25 years. In fact, the Palestinian Muslim and Christian population at the time was upwards of half a million: by 1918, it had reached about 600,000, compared to a largely recently arrived Jewish settler population of 60,000. To Zionists the Palestinians were not Palestinian but 'Arabs'. There was a Palestine but they could not admit the presence of a Palestinian people. When 'Arab' rowers pulled up alongside Gruen's ship to take the passengers ashore he saw 'human beasts' with 'predatory eyes and entirely feral visages' (60). He settled in at the colony of Petah Tivkah. Moshe Sharett, another settler, and later politician, surely expressed Gruen's innermost thoughts when he wrote that 'We are not coming to a desolate land to inherit it; rather we are coming to conquer the land from the nation that resides here' (76).

The contempt of the settlers for the native people spilled out from the beginning. Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg) one of the few Jewish visitors to Palestine who was not taken in by the Zionist sales pitch of 'a land without people for a people without land', wrote that the Jewish farmers 'behave

towards the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, commit unwarranted trespass, beat them shamefully without any good reason and brag about doing so'. (76). Moshe Smilansky, one of the farmers, but honest about what they were doing, wrote of the reaction: 'The fellahin are closely bound to their land and will not easily leave it. They have put down roots on it, built their homes and yards there and buried there their loved ones and saints. The land is dear to the fellahin and it is increasingly being taken by [Jewish] settlers . . . we should not take the hatred of the fellahin lightly' (77). For the Zionist settlers, most of them from eastern Europe, it was the 'Arabs' who were foreigners and aliens, not them.

Working as a labour organiser for what was to become the Histadrut, Gruen's prime task was to replace 'Arab' labour in factories and on farms with Jewish workers. 'Arab' labour was *avodah zara*, 'foreign', which in Jewish religious texts amounts to idolatry, apart from the fact that in Zionist eyes the 'conquest' of labour would lead to conquest of the land. The best workers to replace the 'Arabs' were the Jews of Yemen; Ashkenazi Jews, mentally and culturally, were superior, Gruen believed, but unfortunately, they were not given to physical labour (104).

In 1910, at the age of 23 or 24, David Gruen changed his surname to Ben-Gurion. Changing names to a Hebrew equivalent was a standard practice among the European settlers for decades to come. Ethnically they had no connection with Palestine: mostly they were Poles or Russians whose forebears had converted at some time in the past. Even physically they were clearly not of any Middle Eastern ancestral origin but the name change concealed their origins and made them appear to belong to the region and its history. David Gruen took his name from Yusif Ben-Gurion, described as a 'statesman' of the first century AD.

From the late nineteenth century the Zionists had been searching for a European sponsor. First they turned to the Ottoman Empire, much of which (until the Balkan wars of 1912) lay in southeastern Europe but Sultan Abdulhamid was not interested, passing on the message that the land was not his to give but his people's: only after his death might the Zionists be able to get what they wanted.

They turned to the Kaiser but no luck there; then it was the turn of Russia whose Interior Minister, Vyacheslav von Plehve was notoriously anti-semitic and therefore interested in a project to remove Russian Jews to Palestine. Herzl met him in 1903, a year before his own death and von Plehve's assassination in 1904: the project was taken no further by the Russian government.

Then it was the turn of the British Empire, and here there was a sharp tug at the end of the line Herzl had thrown into the water. The Jews were not quite like 'us' but like us enough for them to be considered as loyal colonists somewhere in the empire. Perhaps East Africa: the Zionists

thought of Cyprus, of Sinai, of the Kimberleys in western Australia, but nothing had been settled when the war broke out.

In late 1914 the Ottoman government deported thousands of foreigners, including Zionist settlers in Palestine whom they knew were planning to establish a Jewish state. Ben-Gurion was sent to an internment camp in Egypt. The authorities in Istanbul would have been aware of the connections between the Zionist movement and the British government. Their suspicions proved to be well founded: in 1917 the Ottoman authorities finally caught up with the Nili group, which had been passing intelligence to the British for two years.

Ben-Gurion's statements about how the 'Arabs' would benefit from Zionist settlement and how the two peoples could live together on the same piece of land were designed to mask his real intentions. He knew that what the Zionists wanted they would have to take: he knew there was no possibility of genuine dialogue despite the occasional conversations he had with Palestinian notables such as Musa Alami and George Antonius. 'Everyone sees the difficulty of relations between Jews and Arabs', he said in 1919, 'but not everyone sees that there is no solution to that question. There is no solution. There is an abyss and nothing can fill that abyss'. (158). In fact, as he well knew, the abyss was destined by Zionists to be filled by Arab Palestine.

Inevitably, riots broke out as the Palestinians reacted to Zionist colonisation and what they now increasingly knew, that Britain was going to give their land to the Zionists. Two of the worst outbreaks, 1920 and 1929, were triggered off by Zionist provocations in Jerusalem, where the protocols observed by Muslims, Christians and Jews around the Haram al Sharif had until then kept the peace. In August 1929 the British authorities allowed 300 Jews to rally at the western wall of the Haram: in the evening, thousands more came, with the inevitable result of Arab-Jewish clashes across Palestine, including the attack on Hebron which left 29 Jews dead (169). The ultimate responsibility for these outbreaks clearly lay with the British, whose mandatory administration was top-heavy with Zionists, who had deliberately deferred Palestine's political development until such time as the Zionists had overcome the demographic problem, and the Zionist authorities themselves, whether the Jewish Agency or Vladimir Jabotinsky's breakaway Revisionists. Palestinian resistance to the creeping expropriation of their land was what was called then 'thuggery' and what is now called 'terrorism';

We have the right to Palestine as a nation, not a minority', Ben-Gurion declared. 'We have a right to Palestine, not the Arabs. We should and can, from a moral point of view, use all means to break the opposition of the Arabs . . . When they attack us we have the right to defend ourselves and if necessary, to spill blood as well. (169)

Throughout the 1930s the British government issued a stream of White Papers on Palestine. They knew exactly what the immediate core problems were, the number of Jewish settlers pouring into Palestine, legally and illegally, and the alienation of Palestinian-owned land forever under the charter of the Jewish National Fund once it had been purchased. The Zionist reaction to the White Papers naturally depended on their content: any suggestion of restrictions on immigration infuriated them, any program for partition delighted them. Publicly applauding it as a fair solution, Ben-Gurion made it clear in private that partition was accepted only as a step along the way to the establishment of a Jewish state over all of Palestine. 'We will settle first in this place, become a major power and then find a way to revoke partition', Ben-Gurion said after partition and the transfer of part of the Palestinian population was recommended by the Peel Commission in 1936. Although abusing the revisionist Jabotinsky, Ben-Gurion agreed that his 'iron wall' would have to be erected against the 'Arabs' (249).

Herzl had written of 'spiriting' the penniless 'Arab' population out of Palestine. A whistle would be blown and somehow they would disappear. Ben-Gurion repeatedly denied that it was one of Zionism's aims: in private he said it should be done but quietly, even knowing that it never could be. Later he opted for forced transfer: 'I do not see it as something immoral but forced transfer is only possible by England and not by the Jews' (272):

until, of course, they were strong enough. Golda Myerson (Meir) said 'I would agree to the Arabs leaving the country and my conscience would be entirely clean'. (270)

The First World War destroyed three empires, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian: the Second World War brought two more to the brink of extinction, the French and the British. Even as this war was being fought the Zionists accurately read the writing on the wall and shifted their international centre of gravity to the US. As the war ended they turned on Britain with ferocity. In 1944 they had already assassinated Britain's minister of state in the Middle East, Lord Moyne, and once the war was over, they launched a campaign of murder and sabotage across Palestine. British soldiers and military lines of communications were the particular targets: when the British responded by executing Zionist killers and rounding up suspects they were — inevitably — accused of launching a pogrom.

On 30 December 1947, Irgun terrorists killed six Palestinians and wounded scores more when they threw hand grenades into a gathering of about 100 Palestinians looking for work and waiting outside the Haifa oil refinery. Only the day before the Irgun had killed 13 Palestinians in a similar attack in Jerusalem. Retaliating inside the refinery, Palestinian

workers ran wild, killing more than 40 Jewish co-workers: a Zionist militia then attacked two Palestinian villages, in what became known as the Balad al Shaikh massacre, killing about 70 people, including women and children. Ben-Gurion supported even the killing of women and children in such actions and raved about how the Zionists would even take on the Arab world: 'We will bomb Port Said, Alexandria and Cairo and that's how we will end the war, settling our forefathers' account with Egypt' (414).

By this time the UN General Assembly had passed the partition resolution, hardly by a 'great majority' as the author of this book claims (397) but by a bare two-thirds majority vote, and that only after intervention of the White House aimed at vulnerable delegations. The open war for Palestine was just beginning. Attacking outside the boundaries allocated to a Jewish state as well as inside them, the Zionists had cleared about 300,000 Palestinians from their homeland by the time the state of Israel was declared in May 1948. Their militias were attacking everywhere, murdering, massacring and ethnically cleansing, yet Ben-Gurion pretended to be puzzled. Watching from a balcony in Haifa he could not understand the flight of refugees in the street below but 'if they want to go why should you impede them' (417).

Ben-Gurion tried to hide the fact but as the overall commander of Zionist forces he was responsible for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948. Sometimes direct orders were given to drive the Palestinians out but often they were not: this made no difference as commanders in the field knew exactly what was required of them and knew, also, that whatever crimes they committed they were not going to be punished.

As far as he can, the author of this book papers over these terrible events. Almost as if the Zionist commander is being generous and humane, the Palestinians trapped in Lydda's Dahmash mosque were allowed by him to go home as long as they agreed to leave the town: no mention is made by the author of the hundreds of people killed in the streets or machine-gunned in the mosque itself. Ben-Gurion said of Lydda and Ramla: 'The residents were given explicit orders not to flee and it turned out they were forced out'. It just *turned out*: the man was full of self-exculpating delusions. 'There may have been cases where they [the refugees] were helped a bit to flee', he once remarked, 'but fundamentally this was an inexplicable phenomenon' (453).

Recent research has revealed how far Ben-Gurion was prepared to go in his determination to turn Palestine into a Jewish state. 'Our movement is maximalist. Even all of Palestine is not our final goal' he once remarked (267). The means he was prepared to use to establish Zionist domination of Palestine and territories beyond its boundaries included bacteriological warfare. In 1948 the Haganah — the Zionist 'defence' force — already

had a science corps (known by the acronym of HAMED) producing bacteria which was carried in test tubes, glass bottles or thermos flasks and dropped into the wells of Palestinian villages, causing outbreaks of typhus, dysentery, malaria and other afflictions as part of operation Cast Thy Bread. How many Palestinians were killed this way is not known but dozens at least seem to have been. Jericho was the first target. Subsequently, the Kabri well on which the city of 'Akka depended was poisoned on 15 May 1948, the same day as the Zionist regime's declaration of 'independence', causing an epidemic of typhus. The mayor said the city was in a state of 'extreme distress'. Panic as the disease spread helped to drive the population out.

The Haganah was prepared to poison wells in Lebanon, Syria and Egypt if necessary. Ben-Gurion took these measures a step further by indicating his support for the destruction of the Aswan low dam, built in 1902, and the flooding of villages. 'You shall receive the necessary funds', if the proposal went ahead, he told the military commander who raised it with him. These aspects of the war are not mentioned in Segev's biography or in an article dealing with HAMED's contribution to the 1948 war, beyond a mention of the 'science corps' further development as the Israeli Institute for Biological Research.¹

Ben-Gurion and the man he had grown to despise, Chaim Weizmann, were delighted at the spectacle of deserted villages and towns and rich agricultural farmland. It was all theirs now. Hundreds of villages were destroyed not as the unavoidable consequence of war but because the Palestinians could not come back to what had been destroyed. Over the years, thousands did: many of them were shot as 'infiltrators'. Some had managed to stay within the boundaries of the state created over their heads but there were still 'too many Arabs in this country' in Ben-Gurion's eyes. (452). He was now free to say openly what he had previously mostly kept to himself or confined to letters and diaries. 'History has now proven who is really connected to this land and for whom it is a luxury that can easily be done without'. (454). 'Our human material has much greater moral and intellectual capacity than that of our neighbors'. (457). 'For our adversaries the number of losses is not critical — they have many millions' (457).

After the war, continuing Palestinian resistance was met with ever more brutal reprisals. Ariel Sharon's attacks on Gaza and Jordan turned him

1 See Benny Morris and Benjamin Z. Kedar, 'Cast Thy Bread: Israel's Biological Warfare During the 1948 War', *Middle Eastern Studies* online, 19 September 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2022.21>. See also Ettay Nevo, 'The Science Behind Israel's Fight for Independence', the Davidson Institute, an affiliate of the Weizmann Institute. <https://davidson.weizmann.ac.il/en/online/sciencepanorama/science-behind-israels-fight-for-independence>

into Ben-Gurion's archetypal Hebrew warrior, irrespective of the scores of civilians he had killed, including women and children. After the Qibya attack of 1953 Ben-Gurion tried to persuade anyone who would listen that the army didn't actually do it. 'The army really did not do it' he said. 'The regular army is not capable of doing that. Just as we have set up a special border police force against infiltrators, there is also something special for reprisals . . . We do not do reprisal actions with our army. We cannot say the army exists for that purpose'. Israelis living along the border were responsible, he claimed, but it was another lie (515).

In 1940 the Haganah bombed the *Patria*, a ship carrying Jewish refugees from Romania to Palestine. About 250 of them plus some British servicemen who had boarded the ship in Haifa port were killed. Asked his opinion, Ben-Gurion approved of the bombing as a 'Zionist action' although 'no-one expected so many victims'. Deluding himself again, he said it was an 'act of God', not of the Haganah. In 1948, another ship, the *Altalena* — Jabotinsky's pen name — arrived with a cargo of refugees, arms and ammunition. Menahim Begin and Ben-Gurion could not agree on how the arms should be shared. Ben-Gurion was prepared to shoot it out and did: the ship was raked with gunfire, 'Jews shooting Jews' as Yitzhak Rabin remarked, and eventually set it on fire. The next morning Ben-Gurion responded with this comment: 'Blessed is the cannon that bombed the ship. The cannon is worthy of standing in the Temple, if it gets built' (435).

Ben-Gurion spent long periods out of Palestine, back in Plonsk or in London or New York, where he could indulge his passion for book-buying in between seeking support for the cause. For all his professed love of Palestine he seemed to need long periods of time away, but wherever he went, the state which he had midwived out of bloodshed and terror was always waiting for him. He liked to see Palestine as his mother, even if at best it could only be called his stepmother. Towards the end of his life he retreated to the desert settlement he had once stumbled across and regarded as the example without peer of the pioneering Zionist spirit.

He fought with Zionist allies and enemies alike. His hatred of his own Jewish stock could be even greater than his contempt for the 'Arabs'. Weizmann was turned into 'loathsome carrion, like a trampled corpse' (351), Jabotinsky was 'Vladimir Hitler' and the Revisionists a 'Jewish Nazi Party'. (252). The insults were returned in full measure.

'At any cost' meant lying and dissembling endlessly: whatever Ben-Gurion said for propaganda purposes, he always knew what he wanted, which was the removal of the Palestinians from the land which belonged to them, according to all logical legal, historical and moral criteria but to which Ben-Gurion believed only Jews had a moral and historic right. On this basis he set the Zionist state on the course it has followed to the present

day, with the devastating consequences it has had for the Palestinians, the surrounding Arab world and the Jewish communities who lived in that world for thousands of years until deliberately uprooted by Zionism's 'ingathering of the exiles'.

For Ben-Gurion the 'Arabs' were no more than one-dimensional objects on the landscape that had to be removed. They had no right to be in Palestine let alone the right to stay there. Had he seen them as equal human beings he could not have been a Zionist. Indeed, he hardly saw them as human beings at all. They were lesser beings, to be disposed of when the time came. The old, the young, women, children, babes in arms, they all had to go, as they did in 1948. Driven out on the orders of this man or what was tacitly understood of what he wanted and moving further away with each step from the massacres that had been the fate of many others, they streamed in long columns towards Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Many died on the road even as the homes they had been forced to abandon were being plundered and destroyed.

Ben-Gurion did not establish 'the only democracy in the Middle East' because it was only a democracy for Jews and therefore — like his socialism — not a democracy at all. What he sowed were the seeds of what has gradually taken shape since 1948, a Jewish supremacist state from which the 'Arabs' must be purged or reduced to ethnic remnants waiting for the next busload of American or Japanese tourists.

Even in the twentieth century, the politician as unindicted war criminal is a familiar figure in history. Ben-Gurion's ethnic cleansing of Palestine earns him his place in this pantheon of the wicked. His crimes were not as great as some but greater than many. In Zionist history he is a heroic figure: across the long span of Jewish history his place is less certain. Herzl, Weizmann and then Ben-Gurion pitched Jewish life out of the sanctity of the metaphysical into the physical, quickly showing that, when given a state, Jews could behave as badly as anyone if not worse than many. Ben-Gurion took the lead in driving them further in this direction.

From the beginning there were Jews, not only but notably Neturei Karta, who regarded Zionism as apostasy and a stain on the Jewish faith. For the Palestinians and other Arab victims of Zionism, the Star of David, embossed on the wings of warplanes and the sides of tanks pulverising Lebanon or Gaza or scribbled on the walls of Palestinian homes on the West Bank are the symbols of a savage, remorseless enemy, just as the Zionists wanted Israel to be seen. The gross historical irony, needless to say, is that the sight of the swastika had the same effect on its victims.

Notoriously humorless, veering in his youth between suicidal thoughts and grandiose ideas, searching for meaning, Ben-Gurion found it in Zionism. It took him out of a small Polish town and eventually projected him on to the world stage, as it had done to Herzl, a dreamer and minor

literary figure, and Weizmann, the practical chemist. Ben-Gurion claimed to be a socialist but socialism only for the Jews and not the 'Arabs' was not socialism to anyone but a doctrinaire Zionist.

Zionism promised redemption, but at the cost of the blood of another people there can be no redemption, only a struggle between occupier and occupied which after more than seven decades shows no sign of ending.