

Eliezer Domka (ed), Yehiam Weitz, Moshe Zimmermann et al: *Ha-Olam ve-ha-Yehudim ba-Dorot ha-Aharonim; Sefer Limud la-Hativa ha-Elyona (The World and the Jews in the Last Generations; A Textbook for the High School Level)*, Part B, vol. 1 - 1920-1970, Merkaz Zalman Shazar le-Toldot Israel: Jerusalem, 1999-2000

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General Characteristics

This textbook is aimed at students in the “general education” (Hinukh Mamlakhti) stream which includes the majority of the high school population, and it embraces the second half of the period 1870-1970, which is the material for the final examination (Bagrut) in history.

The collection in one textbook of chapters on Jewish and on general history is an attempt, quite new, to treat both histories as part of the same human history, yet the attempts to interweave general history into a chapter on Jewish history (and the opposite) are few and far between in this book. Thus, the history of the Holocaust is treated separately, in a textbook written by Prof. Israel Gutman from the Yad va-Shem Institute, and which is a companion to the book reviewed here.

There are only two chapters devoted to the history of a Jewish community - about the Jews of Poland in 1920-1939 and of Soviet Russia in 1918-1970. The focus in the Jewish chapters is on the Zionist movement and its attempt to build a National Home for the Jewish people in Eretz Israel - Palestine (EIP).

The didactic framework is quite modern. Sources are plentiful and sometimes quite lengthy. They are of various kinds: speeches, documents, paintings, posters and caricatures. From the visual point of view, the book is pleasant to read. Each of the chapters ends with a number of “focus points”, which range from informative (The Jewish Agency, Trotsky) to fairly complex concepts such as “civil equality” or “self-determination”.

Questions to the students are quite common, ranging also from a revision of information in the text (“What were the achievements of the Jewish community in Eretz Israel in the twenties in the areas of economy and agricultural settlement?” - p.99) to a testing of the historical understanding of the student (“What were the hopes of the Jews and the Arabs from the deliberations of the Peel Commission?” - p.143). Some of them demand a synthetic historical imagination. Like this one: “Among the Zionists the events in Eretz Israel in 1936-1939 were called ‘incidents’; the historians employ the term ‘The Arab Revolt’: How can this difference be explained?” (p.148). I especially liked the photograph showing a peasant couple in Soviet Russia during Stalin’s modernization drive, when electricity reaches their cottage for the first time. The question to the student is: “What is the woman in the picture thinking?” (p.16).

Out of 41 chapters included in the book, 325 pages in all, 24 are devoted to general history, 5 to the Jewish Diaspora. Gutman's companion volume "Holocaust and Memory" ("Shoah ve-Zikaron") includes 21 chapters and 220 pages and is also part of the curriculum in the 12th (final) grade. In our book, the Zionist activities are the main story followed by the students, with the 4 chapters on the Middle East serving as a necessary background. It is in the framework of this narrative that the story of the conflict in EIP between the Jews and the Palestinian unfolds, and later becomes a conflict also with Arabs in the surrounding countries.

Questions of Image and Self-image

Self-image

The diversities inside the Jewish communities in the Diaspora are minimalized. Political differences are barely mentioned. But, in chapter 3 on the Jews in Soviet Russia the political war of the "Jewish section" of the communist party ("Yevsektziya", active 1920-1930) on Jewish religious institutions and on Zionism is described (p.29). Other possible sources of diversity such as class distinctions or important religious differences - the three religious streams in the U.S. or the gulf between the observant religious and the secular modernizing groups in Europe - are not mentioned.

In the Jewish community in Eretz Israel (Yishuv) and in the Zionist movement in general, political differences and disagreements are given their due. A whole section, in ch.12 on the Yishuv in the twenties, is devoted to political parties and institutions (pp. 99-101). The tone of this section is purely descriptive, as are other accounts of political struggles. The delicate issue of the violent disagreement between the armed militia of the Yishuv's authorities, the Haganah, and the extremely anti-British militants of the Etzel and Lehi organizations is described in a balanced manner and non-emotional language. The term "terror" is employed once, regarding Lehi (p.95). The collaboration of the Haganah with the British against the extremists, after Lehi assassinated Lord Moyne (the minister for the Middle East) in Cairo, in November 1944, is unblinkingly described, and not omitted like in many previous Israeli textbooks.

The anti-Zionist stance of the Ultra-Orthodox Jews is not mentioned. The views of the members of the small but prestigious group Brith Shalom, who were ready for a bi-national state, are not mentioned. Class distinctions are omitted. Distinctions because of ethnic origin played a large part in the Yishuv society, but are not really described. For example, the contributions of the immigration of the German Jews in the fifth wave of immigration (the fifth Aliya) are described, but there is no mention of the tensions between them and the old-timers who came from Eastern Europe.

An exception in this context is the Aliya from Islamic countries. Witness, for example, the frank statement: "In the period between the two world wars the Jews of the Islamic countries were not the focus of attention for the world Zionist movement" (p.85). In ch.39, on patterns of Aliya in the fifties and sixties, there is a discussion about the difficulties and discrimination which were encountered by immigrants from Arab

countries. In ch.40 which deals with five defining events in the first two decades of the state, the riots in the neighborhood of Wadi Salib in Haifa are described in a balanced manner (pp.323-324). These riots were inspired by the hardship of new immigrants from Islamic countries, chiefly from Morocco. It seems to me that this exception is made because the authors are conscious of the problem of tensions between the Jews from Islamic countries (Mizrahim - Easterners) and those of European origin (Ashkenazim). Present-day reality colors their priorities in describing the past.

All in all, the book presents a fair and detailed account of political differences and struggles, but apart from these dissensions the book also presents an image of a united society intent on the Zionist endeavor, with real-life sources of diversity mostly left unexplored.

The Image of the Adversary

The adversaries in the conflict are called Arabs (in the countries of the region) or Palestinian Arabs (Arviyei Eretz Israel). The inhabitants of the different Arab countries are clearly distinguished (“the Egyptians”, “the Syrians” etc.), and there is an instructive explanation on the forces of unity and diversity in the Arab world - in ch.35. It so happens that the photographs of Arab leaders also show people in the mixture of traditional and European clothes - a further discouragement of stereotypic observations. Any negative language is absent in the portrayal of the Arab populations.

The text offers valuable information on issues like anti-colonialism, reactions to the cold war, Nasserism, the Baath party in Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, there is no discussion of oil politics, of religious divisions (Egypt and Iraq are obvious omissions, though the divide between Christians and Moslems in Lebanon is explained), or of social stresses.

Above all, I think the subject of modernization (presented for example convincingly in ch.3 on the U.S.S.R) with all its attendant issues such as education, the status of women and economic-military strength, is lacking. The Israeli student therefore misses an important element for understanding the Arab world. Another obstacle to understanding is the complete absence of cultural topics, though such topics are sometimes introduced in the chapters on general history - modernist art, rock music and the like.

The Palestinians are presented as a homogeneous population. The different forms of social organization - tribe, extended family, village and town - are hardly mentioned, never described. The differences between Druze, Christians and Moslems are not explained. The system of tenant farmers is not even mentioned, although it played an important part in the acquisition of land for Jewish settlement.

The negative language which appears in the textbooks used in the seventies and eighties is absent - no more “fanatics”, “terror”, “gangs”, “primitive” or the like. Factual, balanced language prevails, such as these two accounts: “the fact that only a small number of Jews immigrated did not calm the Arab community; just the opposite: a much

greater opposition now took on the character of an Arab national awakening...” (p.103), or: “the national Arab Palestinian camp, whose beginning was in the twenties, grew in strength at the start of the thirties. The pressure on the British to activate an anti-Zionist policy increased, and violence against Jews increased on each occasion” (p.106).

To sum up this topic, the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular are described factually quite extensively (four chapters, and more, on the Arab world, generous portions on the Palestinians in the eight chapters which deal with the conflict and with the building of the National Home. The treatment is factual; there are no negative stereotypes or emotional derogatory language. No facts are given about culture, religion, everyday life, which could deepen the understanding of the student.

Who is to Blame?

The question of blame is important for national conflicts: putting the blame on the other side makes one feel a victim of aggression, a righteous seeker after vengeance and reparation. In the eyes of the Arabs, the Jews came from Europe. By stealth, by force and with the assistance of British colonialists, they took Palestine away from its inhabitants and turned hundreds of thousands of them into refugees. According to the Israeli narrative (which is more important for we are dealing with an Israeli textbook), the persecuted Jews returned to their ancestral homeland, tried to build their National Home



Illustration 1: „Jewish immigrants pass from the ship Exodus straight to other ships that again evacuate them“ (p.226)

there peacefully and according to the international guarantees of the Mandate charter, but were attacked repeatedly by the violent inhabitants and their kinsmen in the Arab countries. They had to respond, by force, were victorious, and expanded their territory. In keeping with this version of history, any mention of collusion with

colonialism, or with the British, is absent. As for the sufferings of the refugees, they left their homes after attacking the Jews in 1948, so they have only themselves to blame. This is the popular Israeli narrative, largely accepted in the Israeli textbooks written in the fifties and still used in the seventies.

Like in the previous Israeli textbooks, there is no real question who is to blame for the conflict in Eretz Israel¹. The Zionist desire to construct a Jewish National Home there, best of all a state, is a given. The opposition of the country's Arab inhabitants is also a given.

The violent riots in the Mandate period break out on the Palestinian initiative. The casualty figures are for Jews only, which reinforces the view that they were blameless victims. A partial exception is the treatment of the 1929 "incidents": on one hand vicious incitement, on the other hand Jewish provocation.

The two stages of the War of Independence, the Jewish-Palestinian and the Israeli-Arab, open with aggressive hostilities by the enemy. The refugees are treated in a special section: the refugee problem "was created by the war" (p.219). They became refugees because "they ran away" (p.220). There is no Israeli responsibility, certainly no blame.

Ch.36 on Israel's security doctrine and on its wars shows the Sinai war in 1956 as initiated by Israel (p.228). The story of the Six Day War in 1967 includes the tension on the Syrian border, the cold war background, the Soviet provocation and the precipitous withdrawal of U.N. forces from the Egyptian-Israeli border. A balanced account: "...Israel did nothing to calm the stormy emotions" (p.293), while on the Egyptian side "the concentration of forces [in Sinai] was accompanied by intense propaganda which aroused the Arab crowds until it seemed that Nasser himself lost control of events" (ibid). As for Jordan, it "joined the war" (ibid). The Israeli attack on the Syrian (Golan) Heights is narrated thus: "On the 9th of June began the battle over the Golan Heights and on the 11th the Heights were in Israel's possession" (p.294).

The outflow of over one hundred thousand refugees from the West Bank and from the Golan is not even mentioned. The last three examples show the gymnastics needed to avoid any blame casting.

A few departures from the historical narrative customary in the previous generation of Israeli textbooks should be noted in this context. First, the assistance of the British to the development of the National Home is acknowledged, despite the Arab accusations of Zionist conspiracy with colonialism against them. The British administration saves the pioneers of the third Aliya from economic catastrophe (p.93), cooperates with Jewish militias in suppressing the Arab revolt (pp.145-146). In retrospect, "Britain laid the foundation in Eretz Israel... the infrastructure - physical, juridical and political - for the establishment of the State of Israel..." (p.230)

Second, Israel is no longer pictured exclusively as the passive, innocent victim of terrorists (Mehablīm) or of aggressive Arab states. The very use of the term "Nakba" (disaster) as employed by the Palestinians to describe what happened to them in 1948/9 (p.219) opens a window to perceiving "the other side". There is also an objective, almost a sensitive account how the refugees tried to return after 1949, were bloodily blocked, how the crossing of the lines for purposes of harvest or theft turned gradually into murderous incursions (p.285). On the other hand, no Arab sources are utilized; the two

¹ The persistent use of this term shows that according to this book, the land belongs / should belong to the people of Israel.

sources on the refugees for example are taken from texts written by an Israeli professor (pp.219, 220).



Illustration 2: “Arab refugee camp” (p.284)

All in all, the narrative of the conflict tends to the objective mode rather than to the assigning of blame to the adversary. The violence against the Jewish Yishuv and the state of Israel is described rather than reviled. Jewish reprehensible actions against Palestinian civilians (the massacre in Deir Yassin, “the retaliatory raids” in the fifties against

refugee concentrations) are not hidden away. Aggressive military actions against Arab countries are described and explained. It is a far cry from the previous generation of Israeli textbooks.

Insight into the Conflict

The ongoing conflict will probably affect the whole life of an Israeli student and his / her family. It is therefore reasonable to expect that this book will try to instill some understanding of important elements in the conflict although it deals with a historical period.

As mentioned before, the roots of the conflict are not really explored. The Zionist ambitions in Eretz Israel were described in the previous volume which covered the periods 1870-1920. The resistance of the native inhabitants of the country (the major acts of bloodshed start at the beginning of the period covered by the textbook reviewed here) is not really explained, just assumed. An excellent article, written by Ze’ev Jabotinsky in the twenties, explains why the Arabs native to Palestine will resist the Jewish settlement with all their might until superior force compels them to settle the conflict (“Al Kir ha-Barzel” - The Iron Wall) but his explanation is presented as a source, a short excerpt from the article (p.108). Students usually do not read sources in outdated Hebrew.

A major omission is the lack of analysis of the Palestinian national movement after the “Nakba”. The tensions between the Palestinian nationalists and the Jordanian authorities are only hinted at. The PLO after its founding in 1964 is described much too briefly (p.276).

Another “missing element” is the Palestinian citizens of Israel, whose objective role in the conflict is perhaps a minor one but who weigh heavily on the emotions and considerations of the Jewish majority regarding the conflict. They are barely mentioned in passing, once or twice.

Factors of religion, culture, modernization, demographics - all vital for understanding the Arab side in the conflict - are virtually absent. There is not even a complete map of the Middle East. Two examples will suffice. Moslem fundamentalism and extremism are important ingredients in the conflict; however, when the first such party - the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt - is described, its ideology which serves as a model to Islamic extremists to this very day is not even mentioned! (p.130). Second, the oil factor, especially regarding Saudi Arabia is not explained at all. I wonder if the student gains any idea of the Arab world’s actual or potential weight in world affairs - the number of votes in the U.N., the population, the area, the connections to non-Arab Moslems. The relevant data are not in this text.

The book’s authors did a good job when they traced the strengthening connection between the conflict in EIP and the Arabs in the region. Hajj Amin al-Husayni was nominated the Mufti of Jerusalem in 1921



Illustration 3: „The Palestinian leader, the Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husayni, talks with Nazi Germany’s delegate in Iraq, Fritz Grobba, in Bagdad.” (p.128)

and his figure dominates the Palestinian national movement until the Second World War. The Mufti’s religious, anti-Jewish propaganda prior to the bloody outbreak of 1929 is emphasized, and his role in awakening Moslem anxieties over Al-Haram ash-Sharif (the Temple Mount), “threatened” by the Jews (p.106). In the twenties, the book points out, “the Arabs of Eretz Israel... gained the status of a very important Arab and Moslem factor which influenced regional developments” (p.80). Prof. Yehoshua Porath argues that the religious propaganda of the Supreme Moslem Council in Palestine and the incidents around the Western Wall turned the question of Palestine into an all-Arab and all-Moslem issue (source on p.80). The

book argues that even in the relations between Jews and Moslems in the Diaspora, the events of 1929 in EIP were a turning point: “From that year on, a local conflict between Jews and Arabs became a conflict between the Zionist movement and the Arab world” (p.89).

In ch.16 on the Middle East in the thirties, the section on the Arab Revolt in Palestine in 1936-1939 explains concisely how “the national Arab feeling” in the neighboring

countries led to expressions of support in newspapers, declarations of political parties, diplomatic support and the sending of volunteer fighters (p.132).

After 1949, “the relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors who were defeated [the humiliation and the desire for revenge are explained very briefly] and the Arab world in general became hostile and this hostility had to be dealt with by military or peaceful means” (p.219). This is a key passage for understanding the conflict.

The Palestinian element in this conflict is introduced this time through the refugee issue, which was, in the language of the book, constantly presented to public opinion through “the manipulation of the refugee problem in Arab propaganda against Israel” (p.220). From then on, “it was impossible to advance the settlement of the conflict without a significant advance in solving the Palestinian problem” (ibid).

We should bear in mind that the aftermath of the war of 1967 is not analyzed in this book, so the Israeli occupation, the chance for a Palestinian state, the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and other facts and issues are absent. Still, even today, the judgment of the book’s authors is largely valid: “The impression is that the Arab-Israeli conflict and its significance to the Arab world became the most important issue” (p.219).

The Nuclear Factor

It seems to me that the nuclear factor is an important element in the conflict nowadays and is almost essential to understanding it. However, the Israeli establishment holds to a policy of “nuclear ambiguity” and does not encourage public discussion of this topic.

The building of the atomic reactor in Dimona, with French help, is mentioned in ch.36 on the security doctrine (p.290). As a factor in Israel’s security doctrine, the nuclear deterrent is not analyzed or even mentioned. It may be argued that it became operative only in the seventies. The only mention of the atomic capability on the world stage is in the chapter on Israel’s foreign relations; the nuclear knowledge worried the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, states the text cryptically (p.297), leaving the issue of nuclear proliferation lost in the murk.

There are sections on the nuclear “balance of terror” and on the Cuban missile crisis in ch.31 on the East-West struggle, and also frightening photographs of the ruins of Nagasaki (p.189) and a mushroom cloud in an atomic bomb experiment (p.251). Still, it would take a very intelligent student to connect the nuclear issue as presented there to the minimal statements about the reactor in Israel.

Alternatives to the Conflict

This textbook spans a very violent half-century, yet pictures various alternatives to conflict. After all, the two world wars ended in a settlement, the two super-powers never went to war directly, the Cuban crisis was resolved, even the seemingly eternal Cold War

had its moments of detente. Closer to home, there were almost no armed clashes between the states in the regions; the bloody Iran-Iraq war was still over the horizon.

In our conflict, ch.13 - the first chapter that describes it - starts the section on the attitude of the Arab inhabitants towards the idea of a Jewish National Home on a hopeful note, with the Feisal-Weizman agreement and the rational Zionist hope that it would lead to fruitful cooperation between the two peoples in EIP and outside it (p.102). However, "Feisal's policy was not accepted by the nationalist circles among the Arabs in Eretz Israel" (ibid), and from then on, no peace. The various pauses in the conflict are either the result of British repression as in the Arab Revolt in 1936-1939 or of Jewish/Israeli victories over Arab states as in the three major wars in the period 1948-1967.

In one long passage the text admits openly that the "activists" - Ben Gurion and Dayan - saw in war, a military victory and territorial expansion a good basis for satisfactory terms in a final peace settlement (p.287). The Arab leaders, on their side, desired a "second round" to restore the national prestige ruined in 1948/9. So, the stage was set for the Sinai war (ibid). This sounds like a recipe for eternal conflict, not an alternative to it.

The textbook says nothing about the small minority of Israelis who actively argued for peace with the Arab world. The only exception is in describing the dispute between Ben Gurion and the foreign minister, Moshe Sharett, who represented the anti-activist approach in the first half of the fifties: "we should accommodate ourselves to the armistice lines [the border of 1949, also called "the green line"] and strive to make of them the borders of peace", he said. "According to those who held this opinion", continues the textbook, "...this is the best security to which Israel should aspire" (p.287). Apart from this sober judgment, there is no place for a valid peaceful alternative to conflict in this book.

Maps and Figures

This book is rather sparing in the use of maps; they are not detailed, and sometimes contain minor mistakes.

The best map of the Middle East and North Africa is small, does not show towns at all and omits the southern parts of the region, such as Yemen and Sudan (p.72). These southern parts are shown on a map on p.215. The region also appears (on a very small scale) in a map on the de-colonization of Africa (p.266). The information contained in these three maps is minimal - just the borders. The only Arab country shown in detail - towns, communal areas - is Lebanon (p.78).

A map on p.136 shows Jewish towns, Arab towns and Jewish defensive settlements in EIP. In the small map of the partition plan presented in 1937, the major Jewish, Arab and mixed-population towns are shown. The partition plan of the U.N. in 1947 shows the towns in the same manner (p.222). Interestingly, the map of the armistice lines in 1949 is in the following chapter (p.244), so the students will have some difficulty in grasping the size of the territory annexed to Israel as a result of the war in 1948/9. In fairness, the text

enumerates the major regions annexed, but that is what maps are for. The other two maps are real “conflict maps” - the military moves in the wars of 1956 and 1967.

Figures are only given for EIP - demographic growth of the Jewish and Arab populations (p.134) and the changes in income of both populations in the thirties (p.137). No figures at all are given for Arab countries, which limits the information the student obtains about the adversary / partner to the conflict.