

# *A History of Modern Israel*

by Colin Shindler, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 350 pp.

## **Donna Robinson Divine**

Israel typically marks its independence day by calculating the price its citizens pay for Jewish sovereignty. Israelis not only remember the soldiers killed in wars and the people whose lives were cut short by acts of terror, they also count them. But the numbers that produce this holiday's decorum also implicitly include the six million victims of Nazi slaughter whose systematic murder, commemorated the week before, gives Independence Day its explanatory power as sanctifying life over death and as a fresh start for Jews. Israelis might continue to mourn their casualties, but they are no longer expected to have to bear witness to victims. Instead Israel's citizens are intended to see and experience the commemorations as a single narrative: the redemptive vision of the one as the answer to the other.

Comparing these two primal events, so deeply lodged in Jewish memory and consecrated within one week, cannot, however, keep the mind from substituting geographic for chronological juxtapositions and from evaluating not simply the past against the present but rather the contemporary Jewish condition within and without Israel. For Jews in Europe, in the Americas, and in Israel may share the same calendar of holy days; their children may listen to the same music and watch the same videos or movies, but only in the Jewish state must eighteen year olds begin a life-threatening military service. Elsewhere, for the most part, Jewish teens sit comfortably and safely in college classrooms. This military burden hangs with a special weight over a country where economic, scientific, and technical achievements would normally set new standards for the kind of human progress a nation-state can nurture.

But why has Israel's movement away from its point of origin not lightened the nation's burdens? Why have six decades so taken their toll on Israel's image that it is difficult to summon up the spiritual charge of the moment when the Jewish state was founded? After all, what Israel has done with its six decades is remarkable – it can project a profile of extraordinary success with absolute authenticity. But despite all its accomplishments, the country possesses a consciousness of failure that comes primarily from the ongoing conflict with Palestinians and the inescapable questioning of whether the carnage caused by this conflict was inevitable.

## DIVINE | Colin Shindler on Modern Israel

In a magnificent study that retells the country's national story, Shindler focuses on how the developing Jewish state has been unable to fulfil its purpose primarily because of its ongoing dispute with the Palestinians. This is a powerful and original book that puts readers in touch with the visionary power of the past and with the struggle to make Zionist dreams real without turning them into instruments of political manipulation.

Shindler opens up the past and raises serious questions about whether the country's multiple conflicts within and without could have been avoided. He recognises that Zionist ambitions induced what Palestinians most feared: their displacement. Aware that force, alone, cannot resolve the Palestinian problem – particularly since Palestinians are only a generation away from becoming a demographic majority between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River – Shindler also understands that military actions have often benefited Israel and defended the lives of its citizens. Here is his sobering account of what he calls 'Ben-Gurion's almost matter-of-fact statement on the establishment of a Hebrew republic after almost two millennia... [because of] a wider preoccupation by Israelis with basic survival.' [Page 39] The mood was grim for good reason.

The previous day, the isolated four settlements in the Gush Etzion bloc – Massuot Yitzhak, Ein Zurim, Revadim and Kfar Etzion – were ordered to surrender by the Haganah. The defenders of Kfar Etzion, ninety-seven men and twenty-seven women were then killed by local Arab irregular forces on 13 May and their homes looted. It made no difference that the Transjordanian Arab legion responsible for the safety of the prisoners was nominally under British command. Sir John Glubb – Glubb Pasha – the commander of the Arab Legion later claimed that 'not a single Jew was killed at Kfar Etzion.' (pp. 39-40)

Shindler is acutely sensitive to the fact that the logic of violence breeds more violence and harms both perpetrators and victims. He knows that sustaining Israel's independence depends on preserving its people's attachment to a set of humane values that are damaged each time security becomes an excuse to annex Palestinian land or mistreat Arabs. Shindler is not cavalier about the nation's vulnerabilities stemming from a geography that puts it in the crossfire of high-stakes regional, religious and global rivalries, but neither is he willing to ignore how often such threats are conscripted to sanctify military actions.

Shindler organises his study around the various Zionist ideologies that captivated so many of Israel's leaders and mobilised so many of the country's citizens to acts of great courage and altruism. But ideologies have multiple meanings and consequences, and can foster harm as well as care. For example, the commitment to the romantic ideas of uniting Jews and Arabs on the basis of class led some like Ahdut ha-Avodah's Yitzhak Tabenkin to urge that Israel retain the West Bank territories conquered in the June 1967 War. Notwithstanding this urge toward a transcendent socialist Zionism, Tabenkin's stance, in the short run, seemed less like a call for humanistic solidarity than simply another cynical denial of Palestinian national rights.

Shindler follows the trajectory of the wars that seemed decisively won by Israel at the hour of the ceasefire but that later resulted in new kinds of threats to the country. The failed Oslo peace process generated feelings of insecurity in Israel that no military or technological achievements can now remove.

Shindler points out that the Middle East conflict can often be moved to the margins by a range of other troubling issues – education, job security, health care, benefits, social security, how much to honor the Sabbath and keep the country holy – giving rise to the social tensions and clashing interests of the country's public life and politics. Israeli governments always face multiple crises, and the economic problems besetting the country are more difficult to address because of the heavy military expenditures that seem necessary to a government charged with protecting a population living under the shadow of war and destruction.

It seems appropriate to end an account of Israel's sixty year history with the observation that the nation is now caught between two political eras – one, a series of missed opportunities in the past, and the other, the challenge of imagining the restoration of hope for peace in a region saturated with violence. For despite the claims and counterclaims of political ideologies and the country's leaders and experts – and despite the many proposals put forward for resolving Israel's conflict with its enemies – there is probably no single set of policies or actions that will dissolve all animosities and grievances. Thus, Israel's hopes for peace must necessarily be combined with a strategy for living with ambiguity so that the country is not sapped of either its stamina or its humanistic commitments.

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Donna Robinson Divine is the Morningstar Family Professor of Jewish Studies and Professor of Government, Smith College.