
Reviewed by Saʿed Atshan

Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg’s edited volume *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History* is truly a ground-breaking book. These scholars—a Palestinian and an Israeli—partnered with an impressive group of other Arab and Jewish thinkers to delineate an intellectual roadmap for conceptualizing the relationship between the Nakba and the Holocaust. The former is the ongoing catastrophe faced by the Palestinian people in the Middle East, and the latter is the past genocide faced by Jewish communities across Europe. The book demonstrates that both of these were momentous historic events that continue to reverberate in the present. Recognition of their interlinked nature is tremendously fraught, yet all of the authors in the text are committed to elucidating these connections despite the politically sensitive nature of doing so.

Bashir and Goldberg’s introduction is preceded by a Foreword by the renowned Lebanese writer Elias Khoury. These are followed by four parts, each with three or four stand-alone chapters by individual contributors. The volume concludes with an Afterword by Jewish-British scholar Jacqueline Rose. The themes of the book are: “Enabling Conditions to a New Historical and Political Syntax,” (Part One), “History and Counterhistory,” (Part Two), “The Deployment of Trauma Signifiers,” (Part Three), and “Narrating the Nakba with the Holocaust,” (Part Four).

Mark Levene’s chapter opens Part One with an examination of European and “near-European” (47) nation-state building from 1912–48 and its entanglement with violence, ethnic cleansing, and toxicity for minorities. Levene contextualizes Jewish and Palestinian suffering in Israel/Palestine within larger global trends. Populations around the world experience “disasters” as empires and nation-states are being formed or dissolved. The next chapter traces Gil Andijar’s genealogy of the term “Muselmanner,” which Nazis used to describe the Auschwitz inmates who “reached extremities of hunger and exhaustion” (66). Andijar calls for an understanding of the “cartography” of the concept of “Muslims in Auschwitz” as reflecting the European colonial imaginary (75) and leveling the geographic and temporal boundaries between Jewish and Palestinian experiences. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin’s subsequent chapter is an essay that recognizes the ongoing nature of...
the Nakba and its connection to the Holocaust while also severing these events from his analysis. He describes the anxiety that Israelis face because of the “threatening memory of Palestine” (85) as he emphasizes the need to recognize Jewish Israeli national and collective existence. Honaida Ghanim then analyzes Rashid Hussain’s poem “Love and the Ghetto” about the “relationship between the Nakba and the Holocaust in the context of the Zionist colonial enterprise” (93). She draws upon Edward Said’s notion of Palestinians as the “victims of the victims,” in order to shed light on this poem’s attention to the establishment of Israel being predicated on the obliteration of Palestinian life.

In Part Two, we begin with Alon Confino’s chapter lauding the “exceptional” (136) decision of Genya and Henryk Kowalski’s refusal to take over a Palestinian home. The Kowalski family were Polish Jews who escaped anti-Semitism in Europe for Israel. The couple’s refusal represents a divergence from the hegemonic history of the many Holocaust survivors who took advantage of Palestinian properties after the Nakba. The following chapter by Mustafa Kabha examines the impact of Najati Sidqi, “one of the most influential Palestinian intellectuals” (158), on resistance to fascism and Nazism. Sidqi was also opposed to British and Zionist colonialism. As a result, Kabha’s work undermines the assumption that Palestinians writ large were allied with the Nazis. Yochi Fischer’s chapter reflects on the linking of the Holocaust and the Nakba among Jewish Israelis in the 1950s that later receded in Israel, while appearing among Palestinian intellectuals since the 1960s. Fischer insists—implicating her own family—on the need for Israelis to see the connection between their exile and trauma and the “missing [Palestinian] owners of the empty house in Jaffa” (184). Finally, Omer Bartov’s chapter offers his “personal political history” (187) and “what links the generation of Jews and Arabs born into the new state” (197). He acknowledges the indigeneity of Palestinians and the power asymmetry between them and Israelis. Bartov also aspires for Palestinians to be able to see his existence and experience as an Israeli through his eyes.

Part Three opens with Tal Ben-Zvi’s chapter narrating the “exceptional encounter” between Lea Grundig, “one of the first painters of the Holocaust events,” and Abed Abdi, “one of the most important authors of Nakba iconography” (209). The former was a Holocaust survivor, and the latter was a victim of the Nakba. Ben-Zvi writes, “It was actually their communist, cosmopolitan, and a-national identities that enabled their friendship, and great mutual admiration” (224). The chapter ends with juxtaposed artistic images from Abdi and Grundig that are profoundly haunting. Omri Ben-Yehuda’s chapter brings the Mizrahi population (Israelis from the Middle East/North Africa region) into the equation. Ben-Yehuda destabilizes notions of origins, home, and identity, particularly as experienced by the Mizrahim. He hints at tensions with Ashkenazi (European) Israelis, while
Palestinians are able to connect with his trauma, concluding with envisioning a future where they all can “adhere to binationalism” (268). This echoes Bashir and Goldberg’s brief nod towards the need for binationalism in their Introduction to the volume. The chapter then by Hannah Hever examines the poetry of Holocaust survivor Abba Kovner who linked the Holocaust and the Nakba. Hever is interested in Kovner’s conceptions of the state, sovereignty, revenge, his Israeli military service, and the “empathy toward the Palestinians” (289) that he had developed. This also resonates with Bashir and Goldberg’s call for “empathetic unsettlement” (25) in the introduction, namely the need to empathize with the alien, traumatic “other.”

The three chapter contributions of Part Four all grapple with particular aspects of Elias Khoury’s novel *Children of the Ghetto: My Name is Adam*. The novel illustrates the silences and traumas of native Palestinians living in Israel. The protagonist, Adam Dannoun, purposely blurs the lines between the Palestinian ghetto and the ghetto of Warsaw. Refqa Abu-Remaileh’s analysis draws upon Edward Said’s notion of the “contrapuntal” (296). She elaborates that Khoury “records the dissonances, assonances, fragments, and shards of the Palestinian story” (298). Raef Zreik then focuses his chapter on what he calls “Khouryian silence” (323), ending with a critique of the possibility of Khoury “over-compensating” (324) for silence in the novel. Zreik asks whether there was a need for more silence to “break the silence” while “Khoury’s presence [in the novel] became more dominant.” Yet Zreik’s overall appreciation for the tremendous value of *Children of the Ghetto* for Palestinian literature and epistemology is palpably clear. Yehouda Shenhav then reflects on his experience translating Khoury’s work to Hebrew. Shenhav’s chapter is rich and sophisticated, explicating the “responsibility of the translator” (340) and engaging deeply with examples of the politics of language, imagery, and national contestation in Khoury’s novel that gets at the heart of what Atshan and Galor describe as “the Holocaust-Nakba nexus.”

*The Holocaust and the Nakba*, therefore, is a remarkably curated collection of interventions that together constitute a new theoretical approach, methodology, and “grammar” (5) to put into dialogue the Holocaust and the Nakba. It was not always clear who the primary audiences are, while it is likely an intellectual audience, given the book’s academic focus and inaccessibility for those without pre-existing exposure to such conceptual frameworks. The volume also leans heavily in the direction of historical and literary analysis, leaving the reader with a thirst to understand how these brilliant minds would more explicitly connect these insights to the contemporary facts on the ground in Israel/Palestine. The reader is also left eager for more detailed contours from the authors of what the future binational state could look like. Neither does the book explicate a position on the ethical questions surrounding Zionism needing to be answered in order to properly
connect the Holocaust and the Nakba. Nonetheless, one cannot overstate the invaluable nature of this volume and its critical addition to scholarship on Israel/Palestine, trauma, and memory studies. The field is saturated with academic work, but this volume is original in its approach and a must-read for any scholar of the region and beyond. This book is welcome, long overdue, and will quickly become a canonical text in Middle East Studies.

satshan1@swarthmore.edu

Notes
