

Week 4: Graduate Reading Summary

“The Debate about 1948”

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History of the Modern Middle East 532

June 15, 2018

There are two camps of historical interpretation surrounding the events of 1948. The traditional historians have taken an aggrandizing, hero-worship approach that posits the Israeli actions against a giant coalition of Arab nations as defensive, and, in fact, that defensive action (*ein breira* - where there is no choice) is the only that they would sanction. Newer historians, however, have used access to more recently-released documents to dispute the myopic view that removes any responsibility from newly-formed Israel. It should be noted that these documents are Israeli; the other states involved have largely kept their papers confidential. One wonders if their release will create yet another generation of historical interpretation.¹

As Israel has released 1948 documents, inside perspectives and the academics who analyze them paint a different picture than that promoted by old historians. For example, Prime Minister Begin acknowledged that the Lebanon and Sinai wars were fought with national goals in mind rather than defensively, and “With this admission, unprecedented in the history of the Zionist movement, the national consensus round the notion of *ein breira* began to crumble, creating political space for a critical reexamination of the country's earlier history.” Those on the political right in Israel have been more receptive to the historical reinterpretation, which Shlaim believes is because of their political rather than cultural lens on the issue; when one hinges the entire debate on having the moral high ground rather than any political, economic, social, or military reality, entrenchment follows, explaining why “the debate often resembles a dialogue of the deaf.”² The debate hinges on a number of different interpretations of British policy, military balance, Palestinian refugees, the relationship between Israel and Jordan, the goals of the Arab coalition, and who is holding back the peace-making process.

¹ Shlaim, Avi. "The Debate about 1948." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 3 (1995): 290. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/176252>.

² *Ibid.*, 292.

It seems worth noting that Shlaim is anything but an objective outsider reporting academic findings in this piece; rather, he is embroiled in the historical debate that reflects the animosity between the two sides. He compares the debate to the American historical debate over the origins of the Cold War, but I think the Civil War would be a stronger analogy. Americans do not largely hold an emotional attachment to the origins of the Cold War; however, the way that Southerners and Northerners and their respective textbooks still address states' rights, slavery, and "Northern Aggression" is more akin to the personal, moral, emotional interpretation of 1948. Schlaim himself was criticized at a conference on the End of the War of Independence, and he defends himself and his peers by using language that seems to accuse and editorialize: "In fact, neither Benny Morris nor I have charged Israel with original sin. It is Shabtai Teveth who, in face of all the evidence to the contrary, continues to cling to the doctrine of Israel's immaculate conception."³ As when a journalist becomes part of his own news story, Avi Shlaim has become part of his own historical interpretation.

³ Ibid., 291-292.