

Dear Palestine: A Social History of the 1948 War. Shay Hazkani. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021. 352 pp. \$28. Paperback ISBN: 9781503627659.

This book seeks to complicate and challenge elite narratives about the 1948 War. Unlike previous historians, who have asserted that we know very little about how the masses of peasants, urban poor, and soldiery felt about this conflict, *Dear Palestine* sets out to illuminate “what sense Arab and Jewish soldiers (and some civilians) made of 1948” (32). To do so, Shay Hazkani draws on hitherto inaccessible and largely untapped archival sources: propaganda material in Hebrew and Arabic, letters sent by and to Arab Liberation Army (ALA) recruits that were later seized by the Israelis, and extracts from and summaries of letters sent by Israel Defence Force (IDF) soldiers.

The first chapter examines “pan-Arab and pan-Judaic mobilization” by using pamphlets and other recruitment material produced to entice potential supporters abroad to come to the aid of the warring sides in Palestine. It shows how different messaging was tailored to different target audiences such as Holocaust survivors in Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Germany and Moroccan Jews on the one hand, and Syrians, Iraqis, and Lebanese on the other. In Syria, for instance, “firebrand nationalists, pan-Arabists, large landowners, regime supporters, and tribal leaders” (57) competed with one another over how many volunteers they could muster. As in many other historical cases, the enlistment of transnational volunteers in Syria was intimately tied to domestic politics.

The second chapter explores attempts by the IDF and ALA to indoctrinate their new recruits. Hazkani asserts that IDF propaganda saw the Zionist Left adopt messages from the Revisionist Zionist right, depicting the Palestinian Arabs as a modern incarnation of the enemies of the biblical Israelites. Such framing “offered soldiers a moral justification for fighting, killing, and expelling Arabs” (77). The indoctrination material of the ALA, by comparison, was less blood-thirsty and more subdued. Hazkani believes this is because ALA’s official patrons, most notably the Syrian President Shukri al-Quwwatli, “were fearful of the ‘monster’ they created” (120) and did not want to see groups of rebellious veterans returning from Palestine to overthrow their regimes. The author stops short of asserting that, much like in the realms of logistics, training, and doctrine, in terms of indoctrination, too, the ALA remained an inefficient force.

The third chapter analyzes how the volunteers and their families back home saw and understood their motivations and actions, based on letters that were either seized (for ALA soldiers) or censored (for soldiers serving in the IDF) by the Israelis. The fourth chapter relies on similar sources to assess “the reflections of ordinary men and women on violence” (140) they encountered during the war. It points out that the arrival of ALA volunteers from neighboring countries instilled in some Palestinians in the north of the country a sense of optimism, making them believe that there was no need for further recruits or for themselves to enlist. The sources that Hazkani brings to light also tell harrowing tales of violent massacres, the mutilation of corpses, and displacement on a massive scale.

The fifth chapter deals with the end of the war and the complex question of “return” which was viewed very differently by Ashkenazi Jews, Moroccan Jews, and displaced Palestinian Arabs.

Hazkani reveals, for instance, that seventy percent of Jewish-Moroccan soldiers wanted to return to Morocco because of Ashkenazi racism, foretelling a discrimination problem that continued to plague Israeli society for several decades.

By avoiding a blow-by-blow account of the war and focusing instead on select episodes and vignettes from the archives, Hazkani certainly challenges the narratives fostered by Israeli leaders on the one hand and ALA commander Fawzi al-Qawuqji on the other. For this reviewer, however, there are two issues that slightly detract from the book's many achievements.

One issue relates to the focus of *Dear Palestine*. Aside from a few pages in Chapter 1, the book makes little mention of the largest transnational cohort that served in the 1948 War: Holocaust survivors recruited in DP camps in Germany, in internment camps in Cyprus, and across Eastern Europe. Furthermore, while most of the book is dedicated to the IDF's and ALA's transnational recruits, some of the analysis in Chapters 2 and 4 deals with the discourse promoted by local commanders or the actions and thoughts of local Arabs and Jews. The ALA, which features prominently in the first four chapters, largely falls out of view in the fifth. It was not always clear whether the book is a transnational history of the 1948 War or a domestic social history of the conflict.

A second issue is that the analysis would have benefitted from more comparative glances at the literature on other wars and civil conflicts. Hazkani occasionally places events from the 1948 War in a comparative historiographic context, for instance when he points out that exaggerations in letters soldiers sent home were not unique to those serving in the ALA and that similar practices can be found in "war zones from around the world" (124). However, such comparisons are relatively rare. Insights from the broader literature on transnational volunteering would have helped *Dear Palestine* to shed more light on the motivations and self-perception of the foreign recruits discussed in the book.

To begin with, transnational recruitment in the 1948 War repeats exactly the pattern of more sympathy than action that can be observed in several other conflicts, most recently in the war between Russia and Ukraine: a huge pool of potential supporters abroad, numbering millions, produces a far smaller number of several thousands who register their willingness to volunteer. However, out of the latter, only a fraction – approximately 10 percent in the case of Lebanon and a mere 800 out of 15,000 (or 0.053 percent) in Iraq – physically made their way to fight in Palestine.

Another area where the book could have offered more reflections is on the mixture of personal and ideological motivations that prompted transnational recruits who fought in Palestine. 'Amir Hasik from Iraq felt that volunteering in Palestine would not only bolster his patriotic standing but also provide him with some income. Another Iraqi volunteer, Maki Mahmud, disclosed, "the most honorable duty I carry out is in saving the pride and dignity of Arabism" (128). Here once more the histories of foreign volunteers in other conflicts could be of use. Like foreign volunteers in the Spanish Civil War before them, these and other transnational recruits described in the book were driven by a combination of "push" and "pull" factors. Furthermore, volunteering seems to have given them, at least initially, a sense of meaning and purpose.

There is also more to be said about the way foreign volunteers positioned themselves in relation to their governments back home. The Lebanese director of the ALA propaganda department, ‘Ali Nasir al-Din, described traditional diplomacy as the art of lying and backstabbing. Hence, the volunteering he encouraged – action by committed individuals rather than meaningless words – is analogous to the “self-appointed ambassadors” whose participation in other conflicts was a critique of the inaction of their home states. Conversely, Syrian Ba’ath Party volunteers who saw the fight in Palestine as a prelude to a revolutionary overthrow of the regime in Syria are reminiscent of volunteers in other historical cases who saw service in one conflict as a precursor to an armed struggle to replace the regime in their home state.

These shortcomings aside, *Dear Palestine* remains a very important book for anyone interested in a wide-ranging social history of the 1948 War.

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