

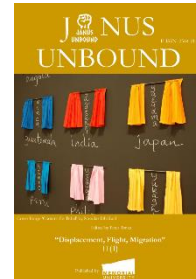
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Review of *Voices of the Nakba: A Living History of Palestine* Edited by Diana Allan

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Diana Allan, ed. *Voices of the Nakba: A Living History of Palestine*. (London: Pluto, 2021), 341 pages.

Published during a period of intensifying resistance in colonized Palestine, *Voices of the Nakba* presents an essential collection of stories told by a cross-section of first-generation refugees expelled during the “catastrophe,” or the 1948 Zionist conquest of their land. As well as having the potential to deepen scholarly understandings of orality, memory, and anti-colonial histories, contributions to this edited volume make clear their relevance to the present. The “rumbling present” of a continuing Nakba, as Mahmoud Zeidan (xx) describes in the foreword, shapes how narratives of ethnic cleansing project into the 21st century. Though most of the storytellers are elderly or deceased, theirs is a language of unflinching hope that the right of return will be a reality for new generations of dispossessed Palestinians. The arrival of this English-language collection marks 20 years of the Nakba Archive, now situated at American University of Beirut, based on the recorded (video and audio) collection of stories from Palestinians exiled in Lebanon. Edited segments from 32 refugee contributors, ranging from peasants to artists, resisters, and collaborators, are translated from original interview material and grouped thematically, with each of the 13 chapters introduced by an expert in the field. The latter include preeminent academic voices whose own work has contributed to preserving and furthering the narratives of the Palestinian people. Their contextual and ethnographic analyses are sympathetic, expressing shared commitments to solidarity and decolonization.

Woven through interview material are sketches of pre-Nakba Palestine, of cross-confessional, communal organization, celebration, and experiences that persisted into the period of British occupation (from 1917), despite its implementation of sectarian rule. The reader learns from Hamda Jum’a, interviewed near Sur (Tyre) in 2003, that pilgrims came annually from Beirut to the Ziyarat al-Nusf festival and the shrine of al-Nabi Yusha’ in the Palestinian village of the same name. 15 days of celebration, *dabke* dancing, song, and music were also days of exhibiting traditional garments, love, and flirtation: “What can I tell you, it was better than a wedding!” (70). Other occasions in the social calendar included the *mawasim* (festivals) of al-Nabi Rubin, Nabi Saleh, harvest,

Eids (feasts), and seasonal events, involving those from cities and rural areas (242). Though historic Palestine is the subject of understandable romanticization, many of these accounts do not paint over the struggles of the poor. As Umar Shihada testifies in his interview found in Chapter Five “Motivations and Tensions of Palestinian Police Service Under British Rule,” in years of low crop yields, “We were surviving” (113).

That this social fabric was torn asunder by colonization is evident in the frequently graphic recollections of both the British repression of the Palestinian revolutionary movement of 1936-39 and of the Zionist onslaught in 1948. Salman Abu Sitta writes in Chapter Eight “The Roots of the Nakba” that by 1939,

Palestinian society was dismembered, defenceless and leaderless. The year 1939 can be identified as the year of the British-inflicted Nakba. Ben Gurion found this to be a prime opportunity for pouncing on Palestine and prepared what he thought would be a long-term plan. (168)

There is appreciable focus in refugee narratives and analysis on the pernicious role of British imperialism and the crushing significance of its counter-insurgency campaign against the Palestinian revolution. This is especially evident in Chapter Six “Storying the Great Revolt.” Offering a premonition of the Nakba itself, according to the testimony of Abd al-Rahman Sa’ad al-Din, British terror inflicted on al-Zib served as the rule, not the exception:

[T]hey kicked everyone out: the man, the woman, the child. They spoiled kerosene, wheat, barley, bedding, full gallons of oil that they broke and spilled on the ground. I’m telling you the whole village was blackened like a charcoal factory, like coal that had burnt. I swear, it was completely charred. (136)

In what may be seen as the blueprint for later Israeli crimes, the British colonial regime carried out assassinations, torture, collective punishment, the burning of villages, internment, deportation, checkpoints, attacking of food supplies, the denial of medical attention, and many other methods which drew on British imperialist campaigns terrorizing native populations from India to Ireland.

But this book also serves to add weighted testimony to the spirited resistance of the Palestinian liberation movement that Britain sought to exterminate. There are reminders, too, that the 1936-39 movement was a broad Arab struggle, drawing fighters from Morocco, Syria, and other colonized regions to Palestine. In fact, via English reference to the “triangle of terror” in the Palestinian north, we get a sense that the British feared the unity of this resistance (143). Speaking to historic traditions of Palestinian music, poetry, and storytelling, the vivacity of the colonized is brought to life in lyric stanzas learned during this period. Husayn Lubani in Chapter Seven “Songs of Resistance” remembers the words of revolutionary poet Nuh Ibrahim:

You Zionist, you do not scare us
Our flag floats above the clouds

Commissioner, go tell your country
London is our horse stall. (152)

Informing us that “this song was sung against the British,” Fatima Abdallah recites:

[W]e bid you inform your government that we have taken over
its forts.
Oh our country, we wish you prosperity, and their forts will never deter
us. (158)

What is perhaps missing in the analysis of these sections is a sense of how such lines were transmitted and popularized across Palestine as the confrontation with imperialism gathered steam. Lubani, for one, sang the lines to al-Thalathat al-Hamra’ (“The Bloody Three”), dedicated to three men executed by the British at Akka prison in 1930, yet references to this musical transmission existing in Mahmoud Zeidan’s interview in Lubani do not come across in the book format. That such poetry was sung to melodies found in heritage song forms like *‘ala dal’una*, for example, is revealing of the new connections made through grassroots political culture in the first half of the 20th century to rural traditions existing centuries prior.¹

In light of Orientalist 21st century analyses that seek to problematize or relegate armed struggle in ways that lecture or dismiss the fightback of the oppressed, contributors to *Voices of the Nakba* proudly restate the validity of resistance as a category of analysis. The latter includes Laila Parsons’ Chapter Seven “Remembering the Fight” (213-7), with spirited resistance taking place in Sha’b, Lydd, and Tarshiha, which served as a base for Jaysh al-Inqadh (Arab Liberation Army) fighters. Yet, with Palestinian forces fatally crushed by British-led repression in the 1930s, the mold for the Nakba was already set. Numbering the villages destroyed by the Zionists at 531, Jawad writes that “the well-planned, carefully orchestrated practice of massacres and terror was central to the systematic ethnic cleansing of Palestine they perpetuated” (193). Of 68 confirmed massacres, several are presented graphically in the refugee accounts. Reflecting at Burj al-Barajneh refugee camp on the loss of al-Birwa village after a heroic battle, 79-year-old Mahmud Abu al-Hayja says simply, “This is history, and history is merciless!” (232).

Narratives of struggle in the text are interweaved with discussion of social memory, class, gender, and all of the contradictions felt by a nation under colonial domination. Stories of the Nakba, writes Silmi in Chapter 3 “The Margin and the Centre in Narrating Pre-1948 Palestine,” provide evidence that:

what we remember is not what really happened in the past, but rather how we lived it, our experience of it, the changes it imposed and its enduring effects (both tangible and intangible) on our lives. In this way, multiple events from multiple time periods become confused and intertwined in our memory; the stories of different wars and battles ... become tied together with the loss, destruction and displacement that they continue to entail. (64)

Silmi finds in the narrative of “colonized bourgeois” Muhammad Jamil ‘ilmi, for example, an “ideological blindness” towards Zionist violence, as he attributes all such acts to the British (67). For Allan, resistance to the ongoing erasure of Palestine is still a “struggle of remembering” (18).

If there is to be any criticism of this important text, improvements may be suggested in enabling the smoother reference between the English interview translations and their pinpointing as videos in the Nakba Archive; this may be a sticking point for Arabic speakers, but could enhance the archive’s accessibility more broadly. Politically speaking, *Voices of the Nakba* enters an English-speaking world where anti-Zionism is routinely smeared by pro-Israel forces as being antisemitic. A major weapon in the hands of this ruling class campaign has been the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) set of definitions, which blacklist opposition to the Zionist state. In this context, the questions of Jayyusi on how traumatic memories of the Holocaust resolve in such a radically exclusionary way in Palestine reads like a concession (241). As Rosemary Sayigh (2007 200) once wrote, “The Holocaust is irrelevant to Palestine.”

Herself credited as being the “North Star of Palestinian oral history” (xii), Sayigh summarizes in the Afterword the significance of the voices presented in the book:

Excised from most Western studies of the Middle East, including university curricula and textbooks, Nakba stories not only restore a vital human perspective to our understanding of the region, but also subvert imperialist hegemony over knowledge and teaching of Middle Eastern history. (300)

Drawing back on the *farab*, or joy, of pre-Nakba sociality, this human perspective also carries optimism for the future. Against all odds, an enduring message of the volume is that those forced out of their country in the Nakba refuse to give up hope that Palestine will be liberated. Born in Mi’ar, Palestine in 1921 and interviewed in Sayda (Sidon), Lebanon in 2003, Husayn Mustafa Taha expresses the undying sentiments of his generation:

If God Almighty wishes, Insha’ Allah these arrogant oppressors who kicked us out by force, Allah will send them someone who will take revenge on them, and return us home. We will return by force, Insha’ Allah, we shall return to Palestine, and to Mi’ar, and to Safsaf, and to ‘Akkbara, and to al-Damun, and to all Palestinian villages—and to Shafa’ Amr, and to all villages, Insha’ Allah. We have hope. I am not losing hope. Even if it’s the last day of my life I’m not losing hope, Insha’ Allah. (178)

Voices of the Nakba brings a rich depth of material for those wanting to understand the situation first hand and, crucially, bolsters the array of references available to Palestinians and their supporters. Giving human voice to those on

Louis Brehony

the receiving end of the long-suffering oppression on which the post-1948 regime was built offers, above all, material for decolonization.

Biography

Louis Brehony is an activist, musician, researcher, and educator from Manchester, UK. He is the author of an upcoming monograph on Palestinian musicianship in exile and is director of the award-winning documentary film *Kofia: A Revolution Through Music* (2021).

Notes

1. See the video interview at <https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha/Record/4313> (1:28).

References

Rosemary Sayigh. 2007. *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries*. London: Zed Books.