

DEIR YASSIN

History of a Lie



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Introduction

For fifty years, critics of Israel have used the battle of Deir Yassin to blacken the image of the Jewish State, alleging that Jewish fighters massacred hundreds of Arab civilians during a battle in that Arab village near Jerusalem in 1948.

This analysis brings to light, for the first time, a number of important documents that have never previously appeared in English, which help clarify what really happened in Deir Yassin on that fateful day.

One is a research study conducted by a team of researchers from Bir Zeit University, an Arab university now situated in Palestinian Authority territory, concerning the history of Deir Yassin and the details of the battle. The researchers interviewed numerous former residents of the town and reached startling conclusions concerning the actual number of people killed in the battle.

The second important work on this subject that has never previously appeared in English, and which was consulted for this study, is a history of the 1948 war by Professor Uri Milstein, one of Israel's most distinguished military historians. His 13-volume study of the 1948 war includes a section on Deir Yassin based on detailed interviews with the participants in the battle and previously-unknown archival documents. Professor Milstein's meticulous research has been praised by academics from across the political spectrum.¹

Another document used in this study is the protocols of a 1952 hearing, in which, for the first and only time, Israeli judges heard eyewitness testimony from participants in the events at Deir Yassin and issued a ruling that has important implications for understanding what happened in that battle.

This study is also based upon a unique collection of testimonies concerning the battle of Deir Yassin, by participants and eyewitnesses, which

are on file in Israel's Metzudat Ze'ev Archives and have never before appeared in English.

The documents cited in this study were located in Israeli archives by a team of researchers and legal scholars, with additional research in the United States by Chaviva Rosenbluth.

Deir Yassin's Strategic Value

The Arab village of Deir Yassin was strategically situated on a hill overlooking the main highway entering Jerusalem as well as a number of Jerusalem's western neighborhoods. Estimates of the town's population in 1948 vary. The last official British census, in 1945, counted 610 residents, and Arab sources believe the number had grown to 750 by April 1948.² The town was also host to several hundred temporary residents who had relocated from other parts of Jerusalem which were close to the battlefields where Arab and Jewish forces were clashing.³ But because of Deir Yassin's strategic location, it was almost inevitable that it, too, would become a battle site.

The British Mandate authorities were scheduled to depart from Palestine on May 15, 1948, and the surrounding Arab states had vowed to invade, in order to prevent the establishment of a Jewish State. But long before that date, Arab and Jewish armies were already battling. An "Arab Liberation Army," sponsored by the Arab League and manned by volunteers from various Arab countries, attacked Jewish communities in Palestine throughout the winter and spring of 1948. Their attacks on Jewish traffic along major routes succeeded in cutting off western Jerusalem from other areas.

The Jewish fighting forces consisted of three factions. The largest, the Haganah, was affiliated with the Labor Zionists. The second largest, the Irgun Zvai Leumi (IZL), was the underground group led by Menachem Begin that had spearheaded the Jewish revolt against the British during 1944-1947. The smallest was the Lehi (acronym for Fighters for the Freedom of Israel; commonly called the Stern Group), a splinter of the IZL. Relations between the Haganah, on the one hand, and the IZL and Lehi, on the other, were tense at best. Although there had been times when the two sides cooperated in the fight against the British, there were also several periods when the Haganah had collaborated with the British against the IZL and Lehi. The political rivalry between the two camps

was passionate and, indeed, the rivalry between their heirs, the Labor and Likud parties, continues to this day.

In recognition of the growing danger from Arab military operations, the two sides began negotiating, in early 1948, to formally merge into a single Zionist army. At the same time, there was increasing cooperation between the two on various levels. Yehoshua Arieli, Jerusalem commander of the Gadna, which was the Haganah's paramilitary youth wing, recalled: "Before Deir Yassin, there was cooperation between the Haganah and the IZL in Jerusalem...The cooperation was not total, there were points of friction, but it held up."⁴ A draft merger agreement between the Haganah and the IZL was reached in March. The draft agreement, and the ongoing cooperation on the ground between the two camps, ignited a fierce debate on the Zionist left. Mapam, the influential left wing of the Labor Zionist camp, strongly opposed any cooperation with the IZL, with whom they had strong ideological differences. Mapam members and sympathizers within the Haganah lobbied vigorously against the agreement during the weeks prior to, and immediately after, the battle at Deir Yassin.⁵

At the same time, in early April 1948, the Haganah launched a major military offensive against Arab strongholds in the western Jerusalem area, in order to break the siege of western Jerusalem. IZL and Lehi representatives met with the Haganah's commander for Jerusalem, David Shaltiel, to discuss what action the IZL and Lehi could take to assist the Haganah's offensive. It was in this context that the idea of capturing Deir Yassin first arose. Exactly who first raised the idea of targeting Deir Yassin is unclear. The chief of Lehi intelligence in Jerusalem, Moshe Barzili, later said that Shaltiel was the first to speak of Deir Yassin, in a discussion with Lehi commanders in early April. According to Barzili, Shaltiel said, "If you want to help and to initiate an action, take Deir Yassin." Shaltiel said that the Haganah intended to build an airfield between Deir Yassin and the adjacent Jewish neighborhood of Givat Shaul. Mordechai Ra'anani, the IZL commander for Jerusalem, likewise recalled discussing with Shaltiel the idea of attacking Deir Yassin, with the two of them agreeing on the strategic value of its capture.⁶ On April 7, Shaltiel sent Ra'anani a note:

I have learned that you intend to act against Deir Yassin. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the capture and holding of Deir Yassin are one stage in our general plan. I have no opposition to you car-

rying out the action, provided that you have the forces to hold it. If you cannot I would hereby warn you against blowing up the village which will lead to its abandonment by the residents and the seizure of the ruins and the abandoned houses by foreign forces. Such an eventuality will hinder rather than help the general effort, and a reconquest of the place will entail great losses of our men. Another reason I would like to present to you is that if foreign forces are drawn to the place, it will disrupt our plan to construct an airfield.”⁷

When Shimon Monita, a Haganah spy who was infiltrating the Lehi, caught wind of the IZL-Lehi plan to attack Deir Yassin, he rushed to report the news to his contact man in Haganah intelligence, evidently unaware of the high-level coordination between Haganah, IZL and Lehi regarding the planned attack. Monita’s contact reassured him, “That’s okay.”⁸

On the afternoon of Thursday, April 8, according to Lehi officer Moshe Idelstein, he met at the Allenby cafe in Jerusalem with a representative of the 4th Brigade of the Palmach, the Haganah’s mobile strike division. The Palmach man conveyed Shaltiel’s request that the attack on Deir Yassin be coordinated with the Haganah’s imminent assault on the nearby Arab town of Kastel and a plan to send a convoy along the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv road. That night, Idelstein recalled, “I went with one of the Palmach’s convoy escorts, Avri Elad, along the convoy parked on the road in Beit Hakerem, and we discussed final coordination.”⁹ Lehi’s Patchia Zalivensky and Mordechai Ben-Uziah later recalled that the group’s Jerusalem commander, Yehoshua Zettler, sent them to inform Zalman Meret, chief of the Haganah’s Moriah brigade, that Lehi agreed to coordinate the attack on Deir Yassin with the action against Kastel and the convoy. They then discussed battle tactics and communications protocols. They also agreed, at Shaltiel’s request, to exchange a quantity of explosives, which Lehi possessed in abundance, for a case of Bren machine-gun bullets. According to Zalivensky, Meret’s parting words were: “Do it and succeed.”¹⁰

Later that evening (April 8), according to Lehi members, Meret met with several Lehi representatives at his home, in the Beit Hakerem neighborhood of Jerusalem. Lehi’s Moshe Barzili, who took part in the meeting, later recalled:

Meret asked, in the name of Shaltiel, that we attack [Deir Yassin] on

Friday April 9, at dawn, in order to help the re-conquest of Kastel. We requested from him a vehicle, ammunition and food, and he immediately agreed to our request. We brought the request to attack at dawn to [Lehi Jerusalem commander Yehoshua] Zettler and [IZL Jerusalem commander Mordechai] Ra'anana for their decision.”¹¹

Zettler later recalled: “In Lehi, there were many who were strictly Orthodox, and I tried not to have actions on the Sabbath. An attack on Friday morning would be liable to bring us to operational activities on the Sabbath, but after I received Shaltiel’s urgent request via Dror [Mordechai Ben-Uziah] I agreed to attack on Friday at dawn.”¹²

Additional evidence of the coordination between Haganah and the IZL-Lehi forces regarding Deir Yassin is to be found in a report sent by Haganah district intelligence officer Mordechai Gihon to Meret on April 10, the day after the battle: “Assistance to the dissidents by us. The dissidents’ liaison officer informed us of H-hour. We gave our positions appropriate instructions regarding assistance during retreat and medical aid.”¹³ Gihon later recalled that his commanders in the Haganah told him there was an agreement between the Haganah and the IZL and Lehi regarding the attack on Deir Yassin, with the Haganah responsible for blocking the way between Deir Yassin and Ein Kerem in case enemy forces sought to reach the town. His commanders instructed Gihon to set up a Spandau machine gun on the nearby Sharafa ridge [which today is known as Mount Herzl] in order to control the pass by gunfire. Gihon and a comrade slept in Givat Shaul on the night of Thursday, April 8, in order to reach their assigned position by dawn on April 9.¹⁴ Likewise, a post-battle internal Haganah intelligence report about Deir Yassin stated: “Before the battle, IZL men shared the details of their plan in a meeting with Haganah representatives, including H-hour. At that same meeting, it was decided that if the IZL would be forced to retreat, Haganah forces would cover the retreating force.”¹⁵

At midnight on Thursday, April 8, an IZL force of 72 men, commanded by Benzion Cohen with deputy commanders Yehuda Lapidot and Michael Sharif, reached Beit Hakerem. An hour later, they set out on foot toward Deir Yassin, where they would rendezvous with a Lehi force of 60 men. On the way, according to Lapidot, they encountered a Haganah patrol. “We told them that we were going to attack Deir Yassin,” Lapidot recalled, “and they blessed us ‘Good luck, good luck’.”¹⁶

Deir Yassin's record of anti-Jewish violence

Some historians later expressed surprise at the choice of Deir Yassin as a target, in view of what they regarded as the village's peaceful history. In fact, Deir Yassin served as a center of weapons trafficking during the violent Palestinian Arab outbreaks in 1920; Deir Yassin residents had carried out violent attacks on the Jews of Givat Shaul in October 1928; and during the August 1929 Arab riots throughout Palestine, the villagers of Deir Yassin had again assaulted their Jewish neighbors in Givat Shaul as well as Jews in the Beit Hakerem neighborhood and the Montefiore Quarter.¹⁷ A Jewish fighter who was stationed in Givat Shaul to help defend the village against Arab attacks during the violence 1936 later recalled how we continually faced attempted forays into our homes from Deir Yassin. We dug out our 'illegal' weapons every night and waited, while the Jewish supplementary police [part of the British Mandate police force] repulsed the infiltrators again and again. Months later, we had a defense position in nearby Motza [and the commander] often asked my help to transport men to their night duties in Motza. Driving back and forth to Motza from Jerusalem, I spent many hours lying in roadside ditches after ambushes out of Deir Yassin.¹⁸

In late 1947, as Arab-Jewish hostilities intensified, the Deir Yassin village leadership agreed to an informal truce with their Jewish neighbors, with both sides promising to refrain from attacking each other. Some historians have claimed that Deir Yassin's leaders initially rebuffed a proposal to station Syrian or Iraqi units of the Arab Liberation Army in their village. But by March 1948, there were numerous reports of Arab soldiers taking up positions in Deir Yassin. Haganah driver Arnold Shper testified in a 1952 judicial proceeding that during his posting in Givat Shaul in February and March 1948, he spoke with Haganah intelligence agents who mentioned "that foreign Arabs had been detected in Deir Yassin, [including] Iraqis." Jerusalem Haganah intelligence officer Mordechai Gihon led two reconnaissance sorties into Ein Kerem, adjacent to Deir Yassin, and returned with documents revealing regular contacts between Deir Yassin and the bases of Syrian and Iraqi volunteer soldiers in Ein Kerem. On March 30, Gihon reported to his superiors that "150 men, mostly Iraqis, entered Deir Yassin."¹⁹ Some of the Haganah's information about developments in Deir Yassin was coming directly from inside the village itself. A Haganah agent code-named "Ovadia," working in the Jerusalem area for the Haganah's Arabic Department, met regularly with Deir Yassin residents as well as their mukhtar, or village chief, who was a

paid Haganah informant.²⁰

During the week prior to the IZL-Lehi action against Deir Yassin, there were a spate of shooting attacks from the village aimed at Jewish targets in the area. On Friday night, April 2, gunfire from the Deir Yassin area raked the adjacent Jewish neighborhoods of Beit Hakerem and Bayit Vegan.²¹ On Sunday, April 4, commander Shaltiel received an urgent message from the intelligence officer of the Haganah's Etzioni division: "There's a gathering in Deir Yassin. Armed men left [from Deir Yassin] in the direction of [the nearby town of] lower Motza, northwest of Givat Shaul. They are shooting at passing cars."²² That same day, the deputy commander of the Haganah's Beit Horon brigade, Michael Hapt reported to Shaltiel: "A [Jewish] passenger car from Motza was attacked near the flour mill, below Deir Yassin, and is stopped there. There is rifle fire upon it. You too send an armoured vehicle with weapons. There is concern that the road is cut off."²³ An armoured vehicle carrying Lehi fighters was also attacked at the same spot that day. A Haganah intelligence officer who described the incident to his superiors reported that according to Lehi officer David Gottlieb, those of his men who disembarked from their vehicle to return fire said that the attackers appeared to be Arab soldiers rather than local villagers.²⁴ A telegram from Michael Hapt, of the Haganah's Beit Horon brigade, to the Haganah command, at 5:00 p.m. that day, urged: "In order to prevent [an attack] on lower Motza, cutting off of road to Jerusalem, and capture of position south of Tzova, Deir Yassin must be captured."²⁵

Shortly before the battle of Deir Yassin, there was additional troubling news: Mordechai Gihon's lookouts reported that numerous armed men were moving between Ein Kerem and Deir Yassin. Some of the soldiers were wearing Iraqi uniforms, and while many of them had entered Deir Yassin, only a few had returned to Ein Kerem.²⁶ And just hours before the IZL-Lehi action against Deir Yassin began, Shaltiel cabled his colleague Shimon Avidan: "The Arabs in Deir Yassin have trained a mortar on the highway in order to shell the convoy [bringing supplies to besieged Jewish portions of Jerusalem]."²⁷

Begin vetoed mistreatment of civilians

Until the spring of 1948, the IZL and Lehi had been underground guerrilla movements engaged in hit-and-run attacks on British targets. Deir Yassin would mark the first time that they would undertake an actual

battle with Arab forces. During the pre-battle briefings, the question of dealing with civilians and prisoners was discussed. According to Benzion Cohen and Yehuda Lapidot, the commander and deputy commander of the IZL force that took part in the battle, some of the Lehi representatives favored “killing anyone that opposed us” during the battle, regardless of age or gender. The issue was put before IZL commander-in-chief Menachem Begin, who vetoed any mistreatment of civilians or prisoners, and insisted that the attackers use a loudspeaker to urge Deir Yassin’s residents to flee prior to the battle, even though that meant surrendering the advantage of surprise.²⁸ Zettler gave his men explicit orders to avoid harming women and children.²⁹ Even Meir Pa’il, a militant opponent of the IZL and Lehi, later acknowledged: “I learned that during their planning someone tried to suggest a massacre-- ‘if we, the IZL and Lehi are finally going to do a joint operation, the Arabs should know it’. There were some hooligans who suggested it. The commanders were opposed. There was an explicit decision against it.”³⁰

The attackers did their best to implement Begin’s directive. The first of the Jewish fighting units to reach Deir Yassin was led by a truck armed with a loudspeaker. An Iraqi-born Jew, who spoke fluent Arabic, called out to the residents to leave via the western exit from Deir Yassin, which the attackers had left clear for that purpose. Soon after entering the town, however, the truck was hit by Arab gunfire and careened into a ditch. Repeated efforts by Lehi men to extract the truck, while under fire, proved unsuccessful. Whether or not the truck’s message was heard by the villagers is unclear. Several hundred Deir Yassin residents did flee, although it is not clear if they were responding to the announcements, the sound of gunfire, or word-of-mouth warnings from fellow-villagers close to the battle sites.

Every house was turned into an armed military post

The IZL and Lehi commanders had expected that large numbers of the residents would flee, and the remaining would surrender, perhaps after token resistance. Instead, both groups of Jewish soldiers, entering the town from different sides, immediately encountered fierce volleys of Arab rifle fire, some of it from the foreign troops who had been reported in the area. IZL deputy commander Michael Harif, who was one of the first to enter Deir Yassin, later recalled how, early in the battle, “I saw a man in khaki run ahead. I thought he was one of us, I ran after him and told him, ‘Move ahead to that house!’ Suddenly he turned, pointed his weapon at me and fired. He was an Iraqi soldier. I was wounded in the

leg.”³¹ Lehi’s Patchiah Zalivensky later recalled that among the Arab soldiers killed by his unit was a Yugoslavian Muslim officer, whose identification papers indicated he had been with the all-Muslim units of the Nazi SS that had been organized in Yugoslavia during World War II by Haj Amin el-Husseini, the Palestinian Arab leader and Nazi collaborator.³² In an alleyway, Lehi soldier Ezra Yachin came face to face with an Arab armed with a rifle. Instantly he started to release the bolt. The measure of those fearful seconds! Who would shoot first? Who would survive? It was I who pulled the trigger first--but it didn’t work. My foe turned to leap over an old wall, and as he did so he shot at me. I felt a pain in my right thigh...Dror [Mordechai Ben-Uziah] had clambered up onto a rooftop from where he was able to spot my assailant who was dressed in the uniform of an Iraqi officer, and shot him.³³

The substantial quantities of weapons and ammunition that the IZL and Lehi men found in Deir Yassin provided additional confirmation of earlier suspicions that the village had been turning into a heavily-armed Arab military post. Yehuda Lapidot, deputy commander of the IZL force in Deir Yassin, later recalled: “A cache of ammunition for English rifles which we found in the village saved the day. We filled the clips for the Bren [machine-gun], distributed weapons to the boys and fought on.” In another house, IZL fighter Yehoshua Gorodenchik discovered an additional 20 clips of ammunition for the Bren gun.³⁴ Lehi soldiers David Gottlieb, Moshe Barzili, and Moshe Idelstein found a huge quantity of Czech rifle bullets which did not fit their rifles; they offered to trade 6,000 of them to the Haganah for 3,000 British bullets.³⁵

The Jewish fighters’ advance into Deir Yassin was painstakingly slow because of the intense Arab firepower. The IZL’s Reuven Greenberg reported later that “the Arabs fought like lions and excelled at accurate sniping.” He also noted that “[Arab] women ran from the houses under fire, collected the weapons which had fallen from the hands of Arab fighters who had been wounded, and brought them back into the houses.”³⁶ There were also instances in which, after storming a house, dead Arab women were found with guns in their hands, indicating that they had taken part in the battle.³⁷ “To take a house,” Ezra Yachin recalled, “you had either to throw a grenade or shoot your way into it. If you were foolish enough to open doors, you got shot down--sometimes by men dressed up as women, shooting out at you in a second of surprise.”³⁸

When they tried to storm some of the individual stone houses, the

Lehi fighters were surprised to discover that most of the homes had doors made of iron, not wood as their pre-battle briefings had led them to believe. The attackers had no choice but to attach powerful explosives to the doors to blow them open, and a number of the inhabitants were inadvertently killed or wounded in the explosions.³⁹ Slowly, house by house, the Lehi forces advanced.

On the other side of the village, meanwhile, the IZL soldiers were having less success. By 7:00 a.m., the IZL commanders, stymied by the Arab resistance and their own mounting casualties, sent a messenger to the Lehi camp that they were seriously considering retreating from the town altogether. The Lehi commanders told the messenger to inform the IZL that Lehi had already penetrated the village and expected victory soon. The IZL quickly arranged to receive a supply of explosives from their base in Givat Shaul, and proceeded to blast their way into house after house. In some cases, entire sections of the houses collapsed from the force of the explosion, burying the Arab soldiers as well as civilians who were still inside. It is unclear if the civilians had chosen to stay of their own free, or were held hostage by Arab soldiers who thought that their presence would deter the Jewish forces--a tactic frequently employed by Arab terrorists in southern Lebanon in our own era.⁴⁰ At the same time, there were numerous instances of Arabs emerging from the houses and surrendering; more than 100 were taken prison by the end of the day. At least two Haganah members who were on the scene later recalled hearing the Lehi repeatedly using a loudspeaker to implore the residents to surrender.⁴¹ There were also instances in which Arabs feigned surrender, then produced hidden weapons and shot at their would-be Jewish captors.⁴²

The Haganah played a crucial role in the battle

Meanwhile, on the nearby Sharafa ridge, the Haganah's Mordechai Gihon watched as a stream of Arab fighters and civilians fled from Deir Yassin, and as Arab reinforcements from Ein Kerem and Malcha began advancing toward the town from the south. "We fired bursts from the Spandau machine-gun onto the road," Gihon reported to his superiors. "We hit Arabs fleeing from Deir Yassin and we blocked their way. We prevented the advance of the reinforcements, and we also might have hit some IZL men who entered our line of fire. At about 8:30 a.m. we returned to Givat Shaul." Haganah men in adjoining areas also sprayed gunfire in the same direction, to prevent the reinforcements from advancing.

The Haganah also played a crucial role in the battle itself. After conquering most of the village, the IZL and Lehi forces were stalled at the house of the mukhtar, or village leader, which was situated on a hill from which incessant rifle fire was directed at the Jewish forces. In response to the attackers' appeal, a Haganah unit arrived with two-inch mortars and proceeded to pummel the mukhtar's stronghold, which soon fell.⁴⁴ While the mortar unit was at work, IZL Jerusalem commander Mordechai Ra'anana was meeting with David Shaltiel in nearby Givat Shaul, at Shaltiel's request, according to testimony Ra'anana gave in a 1952 legal case:

This was in the midst of the operation, at 1:00 or 2:00 in the afternoon.

To the best of my recollection, it was on a street in Givat Shaul. In his opinion, we had taken on a job far beyond our capabilities, and he spoke with a certain ridicule, but in earnest. I asked him if that [ridicule] was the only reason he had called me to meet with him, and he asked me if we needed any help, and I replied that we required no further assistance. Because at that time, a unit of Haganah men which had returned from the battles of Motza had offered --or the commander of that unit had offered-- assistance, and the operation itself was at the mopping-up stage.⁴⁵

The Haganah unit returning from Motza was sent into Deir Yassin to aid the dozens of wounded IZL and Lehi fighters. "In order to extricate the wounded, we had to eliminate the sources of gunfire," recalled Haganah unit leader Moshe Eren. Kalman Rosenblatt, a member of one of the two Haganah units that entered the village to assist the wounded, said: "We threw hand grenades into the houses before we entered them." The Haganah soldiers were more effective than the IZL and Lehi forces, Lehi's David Gottlieb recalled. "They achieved in one hour what we could not accomplish in several hours. They had good weapons, and they had battle experience."⁴⁶

No evidence that Arab prisoners were mistreated

When the battle ended, in the late morning, the IZL and Lehi found themselves with about 40 Arab prisoners, mostly women and children, as well as some elderly people. They were loaded on two trucks and driven

to a Lehi camp in Jerusalem's Sheikh Bader neighborhood. According to the camp guards, the Arabs were given food and water, held there until the late afternoon, and then transported to a nearby Arab section of the city and released. Meanwhile, during the course of the afternoon, a small number of additional Arab survivors of the battle were found in some of the houses in Deir Yassin. They were put on a truck and driven towards Jerusalem's Arab sector, passing through downtown Jerusalem and the Orthodox neighborhood of Meah Shearim on the way. According to Lehi's Moshe Barzili, the purpose of the prisoner transport was "strictly humanitarian," to bring the survivors to an Arab area. Shimon Monita, the Haganah spy in Lehi, contended that the IZL and Lehi commanders deliberately chose a travel route that would take the truck through central Jerusalem, hoping that the sight of enemy prisoners "would lift the morale of the Jewish public," which had been depressed by the grueling Arab siege that had cut them off from much of the rest of the country. Some later accounts claimed that Jewish passersby in the streets cursed or even spat at the Arab prisoners. But according to Natan Yellin-Mor, one of Lehi's three commanders-in-chief, the hostile reception was from Orthodox Jews who were angry at the driver, not the prisoners, for bringing the vehicle in to their neighborhood after the onset of the Sabbath.⁴⁷

A young Haganah officer named Meir Pa'il later gave a very different account of what happened to the prisoners, as well as what happened in Deir Yassin in general. Pa'il played an active role in the Haganah's operations against the IZL and Lehi during the 1940s, earning a promotion, in late 1947, to the post of commander of a Haganah Intelligence Service unit devoted to combating the "dissidents" in the Jerusalem region. There were ten men under Pa'il's command, including intelligence officers, infantry men, and members of the Palmach, the Haganah's mobile strike force. On March 18, 1948, much to Pa'il's dismay, Haganah official Yisrael Galili ordered that the unit be disbanded and its members reassigned to the military police. Pa'il appealed to David Cohen, overall coordinator of actions against the IZL and Lehi, for a budget "in order to continue the unit." His request was denied, and the unit disbanded. At the time of the battle of Deir Yassin, on April 9, Pa'il was out of work--and possibly looking for ways to convince his superiors that the behavior of the IZL and Lehi still merited a special squad under his command.⁴⁸ Pa'il would later become active on the fringe-left of Israeli politics, serving as a Member of Knesset for the Moked Party, a faction of Israel's Communist Party.

According to Pa'il, "a day or two before the Deir Yassin episode, I met a friend, a Lehi man, Moshe Idelstein, who was once in the Palmach--though I do not think that he knew what my assignment was in Jerusalem--and he told me that the IZL and Lehi were going out to attack Deir Yassin and that I ought to come and see them in action." Idelstein, by contrast, told historian Uri Milstein: "I knew exactly what Pa'il's assignment had been; I never told him about our plans to attack Deir Yassin or anywhere else, and therefore I never invited him to come along."⁴⁹

There are other statements in the accounts that Pa'il has given over the years which raise questions about his credibility as a witness concerning Deir Yassin. For example, in a 1981 interview, Pa'il said of Deir Yassin: "It was not situated on any important route. Its strategic value was zero."⁵⁰ Pa'il said he went to Deir Yassin on the morning of the battle, accompanied by a young photographer. "I suddenly started to hear shots from all over the village. I ran with [the photographer], and I saw group of IZL and Lehi men running from house to house, entering, and with gunfire slaughtering the people sleeping there, spontaneously [i.e. not on orders from above]." Needless to say, the notion that the Arab residents would have been sleeping in the midst of a huge battle hardly seems plausible. It is also difficult to understand how Pa'il could have seen the "slaughtering" without actually being present inside the houses. According to Pa'il, "I ran after them and started to shout, 'What are you doing?' They looked at me like I was crazy, and the photographer took pictures."⁵¹

In contrast to Pa'il's claim of a dramatic confrontation between himself the IZL and Lehi men, the veterans of the battle interviewed by Milstein, including Yehoshua Zettler, Mordechai Ra'anani, Moshe Barzili, Yehuda Lapidot, Patchia Zalvensky, and Moshe Idelstein, all said that Pa'il was not at Deir Yassin and that it was inconceivable he could have been there without their knowledge. Nor is there any evidence from Haganah sources indicating that Pa'il was present; the statements given by David Shaltiel, Zalman Meret, Zion Eldad, and Yeshurun Schiff do not mention Pa'il by name or by either of his code names, "Avraham" and "Ram." The Haganah's Moshe Eren and Mordechai Gihon, who were at Deir Yassin and who knew Pa'il personally at the time, said they did not see him there. Yehoshua Arieli, who supervised the burials, stated that he did not see Pa'il there. Shlomo Havilov, the Haganah's commander for western Jerusalem, who spent the night of April 9 in Givat Shaul, stated: "I did not see Meir Pa'il there. I knew him well. If he had been

there I would remember him.”⁵²

As for the identity of the photographer, Pa'il has consistently refused to name him, saying he “is fearful.”⁵³ Pa'il claimed that the photographer took “36 pictures, some during the battle, some after.”⁵⁴ According to Pa'il, he submitted the photos, together with a report he compiled about the event, to his Haganah superior, Yisrael Galili, and they are presently stored as classified material in the Israel Defense Forces Archives. Galili later confirmed that he received a report and photographs from Pa'il, but could not recall precisely what was in the report or what the photos showed.⁵⁵ Pa'il's claim that some of the photos revealed an actual massacre in progress has been disputed by the IDF Archives, which, while not releasing the report or the photographs, has said that the photographs show dead bodies, without any way of knowing how or when they were killed.⁵⁶

Regarding the prisoners, Pa'il is the source of the only claim that the Jewish fighters massacred a number of Arab prisoners after the battle. He alleged that a group of about 20 prisoners were “paraded” through Jerusalem, then brought back to a quarry near Deir Yassin and massacred.⁵⁷ Pa'il's allegation has been denied by the the Haganah commander in Givat Shaul, Yona Ben-Sasson, who testified that several hotheads considered the idea of taking prisoners to the quarry and killing them, but that he personally talked them out of it.⁵⁸

Exaggerations by the Red Cross

On April 10, the day after the battle, Jacques de Reynier, the chief Red Cross representative in Jerusalem, “received a call from the Arabs asking me to go immediately to the village of Deir Yassin, where the civilian population of the whole village had just been massacred.” De Reynier's memoirs give no indication that he harbored any doubts as to the veracity of the allegation. When he set out for Deir Yassin on April 11, he already seems to have been expecting to encounter the aftermath of a massacre.⁵⁹

De Reynier's account brimmed with hostility towards the Jewish side. As he told it, it was a dramatic tale of a brave humanitarian who again and again narrowly --and miraculously-- escaped from life-threatening situations to bring the world the truth about the Jewish mass-murderers. The first IZL commander he met on the scene supposedly “had a peculiar

glitter in his eyes, cold and cruel.” A female Jewish fighter he encountered was “a beautiful young girl with criminal eyes.” The IZL-Lehi fighters were “these criminals.”⁶⁰

De Reynier’s recollections were colorful, but often strained the bounds of believability. Reaching the outskirts of Deir Yassin, his car was stopped by “two soldier-like individuals, whose look were far from reassuring, with machine-guns in their hands, and large cutlasses in their belts.” It seemed that “everything was lost,” de Reynier recalled-- “when, suddenly, a huge fellow, at least two meters tall and as large as a cupboard, appeared, pushed his comrades aside, and seized my hand and squeezed it in his enormous paws, shouting incomprehensibly.” According to de Reynier, his anonymous rescuer was a Jew who had been aided by the Red Cross when he was a prisoner of the Nazis, so now he would help de Reynier. “With such a bodyguard I felt I could go to the end of the world,” de Reynier wrote.⁶¹ Elsewhere in his account, de Reynier affectionately referred to the man as “my ‘wardrobe’” and “my good friend the glass cupboard.”⁶²

In fact, the man to whom de Reynier referred was not, as Reynier suggested, a secret savior whose gratitude to the Red Cross had moved him to switch sides and help de Reynier reveal the truth about Jewish savagery.

He was Lehi intelligence officer Moshe Barzili, chosen by his superiors to escort de Reynier because he and the Red Cross official both spoke German. He was not sneaking de Reynier into Deir Yassin; he was sent by Lehi to give Reynier a detailed tour of the battle site.⁶³ The Jewish fighters gave de Reynier permission to enter because they had committed no atrocities and had nothing to hide. The significance of this point was apparently lost on de Reynier, however. His account makes it seem as if he somehow managed to enter the village against the Jewish fighters’ will--a feat that hardly seems possible. At another point in his memoir of the visit, de Reynier claims that when he wanted to enter one of the Arab houses, “a dozen soldiers surrounded me, their machine-guns aimed at my body,” yet he “pushed them aside and went in to the house.” When he tried to carry a wounded Arab from the house, “the officer tried to stop me” but “I pushed him aside.” Is it plausible that an unarmed Red Cross representative repeatedly “pushed aside” machine-gun toting Jewish soldiers? Barzili later recalled that the Lehi leadership agreed to permit de Reynier to visit precisely because of the rumors of a massacre. A

Jewish policeman in the British Mandatory government with whom Lehi had contact, Shlomo Sofer, informed them that “there were rumors a massacre had taken place in the village, and that a Red Cross representative wanted to visit it. We hoped that with de Reynier’s help, the rumors would be dispelled.”⁶⁴

As he inspected the village, de Reynier recalled, he was accompanied by “a Jewish doctor” who had been summoned by the Red Cross office. The doctor “followed me courageously” from house to house. That was Dr. Alfred Engel of Magen David Adom, Palestine Jewry’s equivalent of a Red Cross. Engel’s later descriptions of what he saw, however, differed from de Reynier’s in significant respects.

According to de Reynier, the Arab residents of Deir Yassin numbered “approximately 400, never armed.” He did not explain the discrepancy between his claim that they were “never armed” and the fact that they shot to death 4 of the Jewish fighters and wounded several dozen more. In the houses he examined, de Reynier saw a number of bodies of Arabs whom, he claimed, had been killed by “machine-guns, then hand grenades. It had been finished off with knives, anyone could see that.” He found three survivors, a child and two elderly women. “There had been 400 people in this village,” de Reynier’s account continued. “About 50 of them had escaped, and were still alive. All the rest had been deliberately massacred in cold blood...” According to de Reynier, he then visited local Arab leaders to ask what should be done with the corpses and, upon their request, he returned to Deir Yassin to ask that they be buried on the site.⁶⁵

The “Jewish doctor” was Dr. Alfred Engel of Magen David Adom, Palestine Jewry’s equivalent of a Red Cross. In contrast to de Reynier’s hair-raising tales about trying to get into Deir Yassin, Engel recalled that “We entered the village easily. The only ones there were the dissidents [IZL and Lehi],” and they were busy “loading bodies onto trucks.” Engel accompanied de Reynier into the houses. “In the houses there were casualties, a total of about 100 men, women, and children,” he recalled. “It was terrible. I did not see any signs of defilement, mutilation, or rape.” It is noteworthy that in contrast to de Reynier, who claimed that many of the dead Arabs had been “finished off with knives, anyone could see that,” Dr. Engel, who saw the corpses along with de Reynier, made no reference to seeing anyone who had been “finished off with knives.” Engel’s estimate of 100 dead also contrasted sharply with de Reynier’s of

The Haganah's accusation

The reason so many corpses were still visible when de Reynier arrived was that David Shaltiel was locked in a fierce dispute with the IZL and Lehi over how to dispose of the bodies. The IZL and Lehi units, exhausted from the battle and nursing dozens of their wounded, were not up to the task of burying the unexpectedly large number of dead bodies. Nor did they intend to do garrison duty. Their commanders informed Shaltiel that they were anxious to return to their bases, and requested that he provided soldiers to occupy the village. Shaltiel was furious; he neither wanted to divert soldier from other areas to take over Deir Yassin, nor had he expected to be saddled with the burden of dealing with burial problems. After heated arguments with the IZL and Lehi leaders, Shaltiel finally sent a small Haganah force to the village, followed by a group of members of Gadna, the Haganah's paramilitary youth group, to handle the burials.⁶⁷

Among the young buriers was Yair Tsaban, later a Knesset Member and longtime leader of the leftwing Mapam Party. Tsaban, arriving after the battle was over, and could not have witnessed how the Arabs were killed. In an interview with author Eric Silver, Tsaban gave no indication that he had any idea whether the deceased had been massacred, or killed inadvertently amidst the firefights and explosions. All he could do was speculate: since he came across "two or three cases of old men dressed in women's clothes" among the deceased, "My conclusion was that what happened in the village so terrorized these old men that they knew being old men would not save them. They hoped that if they were seen as old women that would save them."⁶⁸ Tsaban's retrospective assumption may be interesting, but there is no evidence to support it. An equally plausible theory is that while the old men feared the Jews might massacre the men --just as the Arabs often massacred their Jewish prisoners-- and therefore dressed as women, in fact had they been captured alive, they would have been spared. Instead, they lost their lives because they were caught in the crossfire or in the dynamited houses, not because of any massacre. In contrast to de Reynier's claims, Tsaban told author Eric Silver that he --who reached Deir Yassin two days before de Reynier-- saw no blood on the clothing of the Jewish fighters and "I saw no evidence of killing by knives."⁶⁹

Another leftwing activist, Uri Avnery, claimed to have elicited semi-confessions from some of the participants after the battle. Avnery's objectivity must be carefully weighed, in view of his long record of extremist political activity, including serving as editor of the extreme-left magazine *Haolam Hazeh* from 1950 to 1990, and serving as a Knesset Member for two far-left parties, *Haolam Hazeh* and *Sheli*, from 1965-1981. Concerning Deir Yassin, Avnery wrote in his 1968 book *Israel Without Zionists* that "all the inhabitants of the village who had not fled were massacred"--going considerably further than even many of the others who have charged there was a massacre. Avnery added: "Later, I tried to interrogate the soldiers who took part in the action. They maintained that the massacre was not premeditated, that their local commander lost his head after some of his men were killed by Arab snipers." Avnery provided no dates for the alleged "interrogations"; none of the names of the individuals whom he supposedly interrogated; and no actual quotations from them, whether confessional or otherwise.⁷⁰

Shaltiel's disputes with the IZL and Lehi over who would occupy the town after the battle, and over the burial problem, appear to have kindled his wrath. There was no love lost between Shaltiel and the "dissidents"; indeed, in 1946-1947, as head of Haganah intelligence, he had played an active role in the Haganah's operations against the IZL and Lehi.⁷¹ Now he would take one last shot at his old enemies. Shaltiel, in consultation with his superiors in the Jewish Agency, and perhaps motivated by a desire to undermine the pending IZL-Haganah merger agreement, Shaltiel decided to go on the offensive. He told reporters that he had no advance knowledge of the plan to attack Deir Yassin, and that the Haganah had taken no part in the battle. Simultaneously, the Jewish Agency issued a statement expressing its "horror and disgust" at the "barbaric" behavior of the IZL and Lehi in Deir Yassin, and sent a cable to Transjordanian ruler King Abdullah, expressing regrets and condolences for what had happened.⁷² Surprised by Shaltiel's turnaround, the IZL promptly released the text of his April 7 note approving the attack. Years later, the Israeli Defense Ministry published a history of the 1948 war in which Shaltiel was quoted as admitting that he knew in advance of the Deir Yassin attack. Although he did not concede the full extent of his cooperation in the planning of the attack, Shaltiel said: "I cannot claim that I did not know about the action. A day before the action [Thursday, April 8], Yeshurun Schiff informed me of it"--completely contradicting his claim, immediately after the battle, that he had no advance knowledge of it.⁷³

After the 1948 war, four wounded Deir Yassin veterans applied to the Israeli Defense Ministry for the standard benefits provided to injured Israeli soldiers by Israel's Disabled Persons Act (Benefits and Rehabilitation) of 1949. The Ministry rejected the request on the grounds that the battle at Deir Yassin did not qualify as "military service," since the government defined "military service" as "organized activity against the Arab gangs and the invading armies." The veterans sued, hoping that the principles of judicial fairness would overcome political partisanship, especially once the passions of the war had subsided. They took their case to the Defense Ministry's Board of Appeals, a judicial body panel consisting of three judges. The Board, after hearing testimony from participants in the battle, ruled that it did indeed fit the Ministry's definition of "military service."⁷⁴

The British "coaxed" the witnesses

Arab propagandists routinely claim that the Jewish fighters raped Arab women during the Deir Yassin battle, but evidence to support the allegation is lacking. To begin with, the charge of sexual assault is completely at variance with the behavior of Jewish soldiers throughout both the 1948 war and subsequent Arab-Israeli wars. (By contrast, Arabs frequently raped Jewish women during Arab attacks on Jewish communities, such as the 1929 riots in Hebron.)

As noted earlier, Dr. Engel, who accompanied Jacques de Reynier of the Red Cross, reported that he "did not see any signs of defilement, mutilation, or rape."⁷⁵ Daniel Spicehandler, a member of a Haganah unit sent to assist the IZL, said later: "So far as I saw, there was no rape or looting."⁷⁶ An Arab survivor of the Deir Yassin battle, Muhammad Arif Sammour, told author Eric Silver emphatically that there were no sexual attacks. Silver wrote: "Sammour, who has no reason to minimize the atrocities, is convinced that there were no sexual assault: 'I didn't hear or see anything of rape or attacks on pregnant women. None of the other survivors ever talked to me about that kind of thing. If anybody told you that, I don't believe it.'"⁷⁷ Sammour's statement is corroborated by the testimony of two Jewish doctors physicians, Drs. Z. Avigdori and A. Droyan. At the request of the Jewish Agency, Avigdori and Droyan were sent by the Histadrut Medical Committee [the Labor Zionist-affiliated trade union], in Jerusalem, to Deir Yassin on Monday, April 12. They examined the bodies and reported that "all the bodies were clothed, the limbs were intact, and no sign of mutilation was visible on them."⁷⁸

The original source of the Deir Yassin rape accusation was a senior British police official. Since the British Mandatory authorities were still in power at the time of the Deir Yassin battle--they were not due to leave Palestine until May 15, more than a month later--the British police carried out their own investigation of the events, led by Richard C. Catling, Assistant Inspector General of the Mandatory regime's Criminal Investigation Division and a specialist in Jewish matters.

Catling was not, however, the most objective person to be investigating whether or not the IZL and Lehi had carried out atrocities against Arab civilians.

For much of the previous decade, Catling had played a prominent role in the Mandate regime's violent struggles with the Jewish fighting forces and with the IZL and Lehi in particular, who had assassinated numerous leading British police officers and military officials, and had publicly humiliated the English forces with retaliatory hangings, public whippings, assaults on supposedly-invulnerable police stations and army bases, and spectacular prison breaks. Catling himself narrowly escaped death at the IZL's hands on more than one occasion. He was at British police headquarters in Jerusalem during an IZL raid in 1944, in which a colleague of his was killed, and one of the suspects captured. While Catling was brutally beating the suspect, an IZL bomb shook the station. "John Scott was a good friend of mine," Catling later recalled. "We had this unfortunate suspect in [Inspector-General Arthur] Giles's office and I was knocking him about like hell. I freely admit it. Then the bomb went off. We were thrown across the room, and covered in plaster." Two years later, Catling happened to be standing near the reception desk in the main lobby of the King David Hotel --military headquarters of the British Mandate regime--when the IZL bombed it in 1946. At the sound of the massive explosion, Catling dove under the reception desk and was saved.⁷⁹

Catling visited the Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan five days after the battle of Deir Yassin, and interviewed a number of Arab women who said they had been at Deir Yassin the previous week. "The majority of those women are very shy and reluctant to relate their experiences especially in matters concerning sexual assault and they need great coaxing before they will divulge any information," Catling wrote. When he was finished "coaxing" them, Catling was able to conclude that "many sexual atrocities were committed by the attacking Jews." According to Catling,

“many young school girls were raped and later slaughtered,” “old women were also molested,” “many infants were also butchered,” and “one story is current concerning a case in which a young girl was literally torn in two.”⁸⁰ Catling may have been understandably eager to believe any allegation made against the hated IZL and Lehi, but the lack of corroboration from other sources, combined with Catling’s likely bias and his own admission that he engaged in “great coaxing” of the Arab women he interviewed, raises serious doubts as to the veracity of their allegations.

How many Arabs died at Deir Yassin?

Estimates of the number of Arabs who died at Deir Yassin varied wildly. Haganah soldier Daniel Spicehandler said he saw “maybe some fifty dead.”⁸¹ Shimon Monita, the Haganah spy in Lehi, estimated 60 Arabs dead; the Lehi’s Moshe Idelstein recalled the number 61 being used at the time. Haganah intelligence officer Yona Feitelson, who arrived in Deir Yassin the morning after the battle, estimated 80 dead. The Haganah’s Mordechai Gihon, who was there on the afternoon of the battle itself, thought the number was in the vicinity of 150.⁸² IZL commander Menachem Begin, who was briefed on the battle by his officers, wrote that the number was approximately 130.⁸³

It was Mordechai Ra’anah, the IZL commander in Deir Yassin, who first used the figure 254. In an interview years later, Ra’anah was asked how he arrived at that number, which he gave to the media a few hours after the battle. He replied:

On that day I did not know, could not have known, how many Arabs had been killed. No one counted the bodies. People estimated that 100 or 150 people were killed. I told the reporters that 254 were killed so that a big figure would be published, and so that the Arabs would panic not only in Jerusalem but across the country, and this goal was accomplished. Reporters, journalists, researchers and historians treat it as if it were an established fact requiring no investigation, and nobody bothered to check what the true figure was.⁸⁴

Meir Pa’il appears to have been one of the first to be fooled by Ra’anah’s figure. In one of his accounts of the battle, Pa’il said that his report to Galili described “the massacre of 250 people.”⁸⁵ David Cohen, Pa’il’s commander in Haganah intelligence, later recalled that Pa’il had used the number 254 in his report on the battle. “This number seemed

to us exaggerated, and we asked him how he arrived at it,” Cohen said. “Pa’il replied, ‘I didn’t count them all, but there is a report straight from the horse’s mouth’,” referring to Ra’anan. Writing in *Yediot Ahronot* in 1972, Pa’il repeated the claim that 254 were killed.⁸⁶ The fact that Pa’il used the false Ra’anan figure, and that he apparently admitted to Cohen that he himself did not count the bodies, raises further questions as to how close Pa’il was to the scene, and the reliability of his claims about what occurred.

According to Eric Silver, “They buried so quickly that no one stopped to count the corpses.” Silver quoted Muhammad Arif Sammour as saying that three days after the battle, “representatives of each of the five clans in Deir Yassin met in Jerusalem in the Moslem offices near the Al Aqsa mosque and made a list of the people who had not been found. We went through the names. It came to 116. Nothing has happened since 1948 to make me think this figure was wrong.” Silver added: “Again, Sammour has every reason for exaggerating rather than playing down the casualties. His case is reinforced by Yehoshua Arieli [commander of the Haganah group that buried the bodies], now a professor of history and Israeli peace campaigner. ‘The 116 figure’, he says, ‘makes sense. I don’t think we could have buried more than 120-40.’”⁸⁷

Arab researchers’ surprising discovery

In 1987, the Research and Documentation Center of Bir Zeit University, a prominent Arab university in the territory now controlled by the Palestinian Authority, published a comprehensive study of the history of Deir Yassin, as part of its “Destroyed Palestinian Villages Documentation Project.” The Center’s findings concerning Deir Yassin were published, in Arabic only, as the fourth booklet in its “Destroyed Arab Villages Series.”

The purpose of the project, according to its directors, is “to gather information from persons who lived in these villages and were directly familiar with them, and then to compare these reports and publish them in order to preserve for future generations the special identity and particular characteristics of each village.”⁸⁸

The Bir Zeit study’s description of the 1948 battle of Deir Yassin began with the hyperbole typical of many accounts of the event, calling it “a massacre the likes of which history has rarely known.”⁸⁹ But un-

like the authors of any other previous study of Deir Yassin, the Bir Zeit researchers tracked down the surviving Arab eyewitness to the attack and personally interviewed each of them. "For the most part, we have gathered the information in this monograph during the months of February-May 1985 from Deir Yassin natives living in the Ramallah region, who were extremely cooperative," the Bir Zeit authors explained, listing by name twelve former Deir Yassin residents whom they had interviewed concerning the battle. The study continued: "The [historical] sources which discuss the Deir Yassin massacre unanimously agree that number of victims ranges between 250-254; however, when we examined the names which appear in the various sources, we became absolutely convinced that the number of those killed does not exceed 120, and that the groups which carried out the massacre exaggerated the numbers in order to frighten Palestinian residents into leaving their villages and cities without resistance."⁹⁰ The authors concluded: "Below is a list of the names and ages of those killed at Deir Yassin in the massacre which took place on April 9, 1948, which was compiled by us on the basis of the testimony of Deir Yassin natives. We have invested great effort in checking it and in making certain of each name on it, such that we can say, with no hesitation, that it is the most accurate list of its type until today." A list of 107 people killed and twelve wounded followed.⁹¹

How the "massacre" lie grew

When IZL commander Mordechai Ra'an an deliberately exaggerated the Deir Yassin death toll for propaganda purposes, he inadvertently provided fodder to anti-Israel propagandists for decades to follow.

Ra'an an's figure of 254 was broadcast in a BBC Radio report the evening after the battle.⁹² Two days later, Dr. Hussein Khalidi, spokesman for the Arab Higher Committee --the principal Palestinian Arab agency--adopted the number 254 as his own, and repeated it to journalists, claiming that his information was based on a visit to the village by Red Cross representative Jacques De Reynier of the Red Cross.⁹³ Khalidi tried to use the role of the Red Cross to give the massacre claim credibility, by attributing it to a humanitarian agency that presumably did not take sides in the Arab-Jewish conflict. In fact, however, Khalidi's information could not have come from Jacques de Reynier. Khalidi told reporters that de Reynier had "seen 40 or 50 bodies," and had been "told that another 50 were scattered elsewhere and 150 thrown in to a cistern"--that is, a total of between 240 and 250. But de Reynier's report of his visit to Deir

Yassin claimed a death toll of 350.⁹⁴ Only Ra'anana had used the number 254, which Khalidi was now using.

On the evening after the battle, the Jerusalem bureau chief of the New York Times, Dana Adams Schmidt, together with a group of other journalists, was given a briefing on the battle by an IZL spokesman in a house in Givat Shaul, adjacent to Deir Yassin.⁹⁵ Schmidt's report in the Times, based on that briefing, stated that "more than 200 Arabs" were killed in the battle, and made no reference to the notion that there had been a massacre.⁹⁶ "Not until the next morning," Schmidt later recalled in his memoirs, "when I went to the Arab side to see Dr. Khalid [sic], the spokesman of the Arab Higher Committee, did I discover the horror of Deir Yassin."⁹⁷ Schmidt did not explain, either in his news reports at the time or in his memoirs, why he chose to believe Khalidi's version rather than that of the IZL spokesmen. Nor did his reports cite any independent evidence that a massacre had taken place. In his report on the front page of the next day's New York Times (April 12), Schmidt treated Khalidi's accusations as valid and quoted them at length--five full paragraphs. The April 12 dispatch by Schmidt concerning Deir Yassin used the casualty figure of 250.⁹⁸ By the next day, the Times' figure had grown again, this time to the number used by Ra'anana and Khalidi: 254.⁹⁹

The appearance of the massacre allegation in the New York Times gave the atrocity claim a significant veneer of credibility. Without the imprimatur of the Times, the claim of massacre would have been little more than the latest in a long series of disputes between the Jews and the Arabs. It is true that the Arab version had the endorsement of a Red Cross official and the Labor Zionist leadership, but both endorsements were tainted: de Reynier had not personally witnessed the events, and the Jewish Agency-Haganah statements were made by a party with a strong political interest in discrediting the IZL and Lehi. Once it appeared in the Times the "newspaper of the record," it took on the appearance of fact, not allegation. Now future historians and journalists could refer to the Times as their source, as if the Times had investigated and confirmed the massacre allegation, when it had not. Indeed, some historians --for example, Ben Halpern, in his *The Idea of the Jewish State*, which is mandatory reading in many college courses about the Middle East-- use the Times' 1948 coverage as their only source for the massacre claim.¹⁰⁰

The earliest reports of the battle by foreign correspondents also embellished the massacre story with additional undocumented accusations. The

New York Times , for example, in its April 13 report quoted a Haganah statement claiming that the attackers engaged in “looting.” It did not publish any response from the accused.¹⁰¹ Time magazine reported that the IZL and Lehi “swept into the village of Deir Yassin and blew up its huts with demolition charges.” Readers were left with a false image of Deir Yassin as a collection of defenseless thatched huts, rather than the reality of heavy stone houses, some with iron doors, filled with heavily-armed Arab fighters.¹⁰² Richard Graves, the senior British Mandatory official for Jerusalem, added an anti-Jewish stereotype: his memoirs of the period, published in 1949, declared that “women [in Deir Yassin] were stripped naked and searched for money” by the Jews. As for actual evidence of a massacre, Graves wrote that “it certainly was a massacre, as the killing was not provoked by any resistance” --an extraordinary claim, in view of the Arab fighters’ massive, and nearly overwhelming, firepower.¹⁰³

Despite the fact that Graves presented no original evidence, his book has been cited in a number of history texts as the source of the information that Arabs were massacred at Deir Yassin. *Backdrop to Tragedy: The Struggle for Palestine*, by William Polk, David Stamler, and Edmund Asfour (1957) cited Graves, as did Christopher Sykes in his *Crossroads to Israel* (1965).¹⁰⁴ The Polk-Stamler-Asfour book has since been cited as a massacre “source” by the anti-Zionist polemicist Alfred Lilienthal, while Sykes’ book has been cited as the source for the “massacre” by other historians, including David McDowall (*Palestine and Israel*) and Desmond Stewart (*The Middle East*), as well as the Marxist anti-Zionist author, Nathan Weinstock (*Zionism: False Messiah*).¹⁰⁵ Hence the remarkable and disturbing phenomenon of historians irresponsibly relying on secondary sources, which in some cases are actually third-hand sources, since they themselves rely on other secondary sources.

Another of the earliest published accounts of Deir Yassin that became a source for many subsequent historians was *Promise and Fulfilment*, by the journalist Arthur Koestler (1949). Citing no sources except the original Jewish Agency denunciation, Koestler called the Jewish fighters’ action a “blood-bath” and an “atrocitiy.” Interestingly, Koestler also implied that some Arab descriptions of the event were exaggerated, remarking that Arab accounts at the time were “adorned with the lurid detail of oriental imagination.”¹⁰⁶ A number of subsequent history texts (as well as anti-Zionist polemicists such as Lilienthal and Weinstock) cited Koestler as their source for the massacre claim, although they did not include

Koestler's statement about the Arabs "imagining" some of the allegations, including Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (1992) and Nicholas Bethell, *The Palestine Triangle* (1979).¹⁰⁷ Bethell, in turn, was cited as one of the "massacre" sources by David McDowall (*Palestine and Israel*), who also cited as a source an 1986 article by David Gilmour in *Middle East International*.¹⁰⁸ A determined reader who chases down the Gilmour article will find that one of Gilmour's chief sources for the "massacre" claim is--Arthur Koestler. Thus the chain of irresponsibility comes full circle, beginning with Koestler's undocumented allegation; Koestler's account propped up Bethell's; Bethell's propped up McDowall's; McDowall's was also propped up by Gilmour's; and Gilmour's was propped up by Koestler.

Many other books that refer to Deir Yassin likewise cite as their source other books which cite no sources for the massacre claim. Jon Kimche's *Seven Fallen Pillars* cited no sources for its massacre charge, yet is cited in many other history books as the source for the charge.¹⁰⁹

A total of 170 English-language history books which refer to the battle of Deir Yassin were analyzed for this study. Only 8 of the 170 raised serious doubts as to whether or not there had been a massacre. Of the 162 books which stated definitively that a massacre had occurred, 94 of them --58%-- gave no source whatsoever for their accusation, and an additional 38 -- 23.4%-- cited only secondary sources for the massacre claim. In other words, a total of 81.4% of the authors claiming a massacre did so without undertaking any original research to substantiate their claim.

In the heat of the battle and its immediate aftermath, the Labor Zionist-controlled Jewish Agency and Haganah had taken advantage of a difficult situation to score some political points. But years passed, tempers cooled, and by 1960 a new Labor-led Israeli government was beginning to re-examine what had happened at Deir Yassin. That year, the Israel Office of Information --a division of the Foreign Ministry, then under a Labor government with Golda Meir as Foreign Minister-- issued a pamphlet about the Arab-Israeli conflict which included a description of the Deir Yassin action far different from the version circulated by Labor Zionist spokesmen in 1948:

Jewish dissident groups, led by the Irgun Zvai Leumi, undertook operations against the village of Dir Yassin, without the cooperation or consent of the main body of the Jewish population organized in Haganah.

This village had been for long a nest of Arab snipers and armed bands. The action took place before the establishment of the State of Israel and before effective control by its Government of all armed forces previously engaged in resisting Arab attacks. The incident was unreservedly condemned by all responsible Jewish elements.

Menachem Beigin, Irgun leader, subsequently stated that Haganah had expressly warned the Irgun command against the attack. He points out, however, that repeated loud-speaker warnings in Arabic advised non-combatants who were killed in the fighting to evacuate the village from which a murderous fire was being directed against the Irgun irregulars.

The pamphlet then quoted a Deir Yassin survivor, Yunes Ahmed Assad, as having told the Jordanian newspaper *Al Urdun* on April 9, 1953: "The Jews never intended to harm the population of the village, but were forced to do so after they encountered fire from the population, which killed the Irgun commander."

While the pamphlet's version mistakenly claimed that the Haganah opposed the attack, and incorrectly stated that Begin himself had said so (Begin, in fact, said exactly the opposite), it also directly challenged and undermined several of the long-standing claims that the Labor Zionists had themselves initially helped propagate: that Deir Yassin was not a legitimate target, since it had been peaceful; that the villagers were unarmed and defenseless; and that the residents had not been given any prior warning of the attack. Furthermore, the pamphlet, while noting the condemnations of the "operation," made no reference to any massacre having been committed.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, these startling reversals of long-held positions were almost universally ignored by subsequent histories of the battle.

In 1969, Israel's Labor government issued an even more extensive rebuttal of the 1948 accusations. The Information Division of the Foreign Ministry --at that time under Foreign Minister Abba Eban-- issued a new 9-page pamphlet on the battle of Deir Yassin. The pamphlet began by denouncing the massacre accusation as a "fairy-tale" and as "the 'big lie' of Deir Yassin."¹¹¹ The battle for Deir Yassin, the pamphlet continued, was an integral, inseparable episode in the battle for Jerusalem... [Arab forces] were attempting to cut the only highway linking Jerusalem with Tel Aviv and the outside world. It had cut the pipeline upon which the defenders depended for water. Palestinian Arab contingents, stiffened by

men of the regular Iraqi army, had seized vantage points overlooking the Jerusalem road and from them were firing on trucks that tried to reach the beleaguered city with vital food-stuffs and supplies. Dir Yassin, like the strategic hill and village of Kastel, was one of these vantage points. In fact, the two villages were interconnected militarily, reinforcements passing from Dir Yassin to Kastel during the fierce engagement for that hill.¹¹²

The pamphlet did not comment on the question of the Haganah's advance knowledge. It described how the IZL fighters (for some reason the pamphlet did not mention the Lehi contingents) issued Arabic-language announcements, prior to the attack, urging the residents to flee. "Some two hundred villagers did come out and took shelter on the lower slopes of the hill on which Dir Yassin was perched," the pamphlet reported. "None of them, during or after the fighting, was hurt or molested in the slightest, and all were afterwards transported to the fringe of the Arab-held fifth of East Jerusalem and there released."¹¹³

The battle was dominated by "fierce house-to-house fighting," the pamphlet noted. "Most of the stone buildings were defended hotly and were captured only after grenades were lobbed through their windows." Some Arabs "attempted to escape in women's dress. When approached, they opened fire. They were discovered to be wearing Iraqi military uniforms under the disguise." Inside the house, the Jewish fighters were horror-stricken to find that, side by side with those of combatant Palestinians and Iraqis, were the bodies of women and children. Either these luckless villagers had trusted in the Arab soldiers to beat off the attack or had been prevented from leaving the village with the others when the opportunity was given before the fighting began or perhaps had been afraid to go. Whatever the reason, they were the innocent victims of a cruel war and the responsibility for their deaths rests squarely upon the Arab soldiers whose duty it was--under any rule of war--to evacuate them the moment that they turned Dir Yassin into a fortress...This was no massacre of an unarmed, peaceful village population by a military unit as Arab propaganda pretends; the Irgun fought and won a battle, there was no aftermath of outrage or brutal excess.¹¹⁴

In a direct rebuke to what Labor Zionist leaders had claimed 21 years earlier, the 1969 Foreign Ministry pamphlet emphasized that while Arab propagandists had made much use of the statements issued by the Jewish Agency and the Haganah in 1948, in fact "the Agency and the Haganah

were in no position to ‘admit’ or ‘contradict’ anything [concerning the massacre allegation], as their defence units did not take part in the battle nor could they have known at first-hand of the circumstances in which civilian casualties had been caused.”¹¹⁵ Yet this extraordinary pamphlet, with its complete reversal of earlier Labor Zionist charges of a massacre, was almost universally ignored by historians.

Additional baseless allegations

One of the most troubling aspects of how historians have handled the Deir Yassin episode has been the tendency of many of them to embellish the standard massacre allegation with lurid details that have no reliable evidence to support them. That Arab sources have engaged in such exaggerations is perhaps not entirely surprising, in view of the intensity of emotion surrounding the controversy. One of the leaflets of the Palestinian Arab intifada, for example, claimed that at Deir Yassin, the Jews “ripped open the bellies of pregnant women in order to destroy the seed of our people.”¹¹⁶ Arab writers have also claimed that, among other things, some of the Deir Yassin victims were “buried alive;”¹¹⁷ that all of the 250 “massacre” victims were “women and children;”¹¹⁸ that the female Arab survivors were paraded through Jerusalem while “stripped naked;”¹¹⁹ and that Jerusalem residents unleashed “a hail of stones” upon the hapless prisoners and the trucks drove by.¹²⁰

What is surprising, however, is the frequency with which these and similar “details” have appeared in what are considered mainstream history texts. Almost none of these accusations are accompanied by sources, and the rare cases in which sources are given invariably turn out to offer no evidence in support of the charges made.

One text claimed that the massacre in Deir Yassin took place “while its inhabitants slept.”¹²¹ Many books asserted that the Jews killed the “entire population” of the village, which would mean anywhere from 400 to 1,000 victims.¹²² Others have alleged --without any sources-- that the victims were “stripped and robbed”¹²³ and “raped and disemboweled,”¹²⁴ with the survivors paraded “naked in trucks” through Jerusalem.¹²⁵ Even as widely regarded a historian as Howard Sachar has made the charge --without any documentation -- that the bodies of the “more than 200” victims were all “mutilated.”¹²⁶

One text that claimed the Jews “looted and raped,” Dilip Hiro’s *Inside*

the Middle East 127 did have a footnote: Noah Lucas's *The Modern History of Israel*.¹²⁸ Yet the Lucas book made no such charge. Another accusation bearing a worthless footnote was the unique claim by Terence Prittie that the villagers raised white flags of surrender, which the Irgun ignored. "Irgun apologists claimed afterwards that although the villagers had put out white flags, they [the Arabs] defended every house," Prittie asserted.¹²⁹ His footnote for the claim was page 215 of *Days of Fire*, by Irgun alumnus Shmuel Katz. The average reader would no doubt assume that Katz acknowledged the waving of white flags. In fact, Katz did not even mention white flags; he stated only that "Almost every house in the village was defended."¹³⁰

The "Begin confession" that never was

Several historians have gone so far as to use a fabricated "confessional" statement attributed to IZL leader Menachem Begin. In his autobiography, *The Revolt*, which was first published in Hebrew in 1950 and in English in 1951, Begin strongly denied the massacre allegation. Basing himself on reports from the IZL officers who took part in the battle (Begin himself was not on the scene), Begin argued that the Arab civilians were killed inadvertently during the house to house fighting. He also noted that the panic which the Deir Yassin massacre story ignited around the country unintentionally benefited the Jewish forces, because it led to voluntary Arab emigration from strategically important areas.

The most creative fraudulent paraphrasing of Begin's memoir appeared in Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine* (1979). Without using any actual quotation marks, Said reported: "In this book, Begin describes his terrorism--including the wholesale massacre of innocent women and children--in righteous (and chilling) profusion. He admits to being responsible for the April 1948 massacre of 250 women and children in the Arab village of Deir Yassin." Of course, Begin "admits" no such thing, but since Said had no footnote, readers could not check the veracity of his sources.¹³¹ Gerald Kaufman (*To Build the Promised Land*) makes a similar claim of a Begin "confession," writing that the Irgun committed "an unspeakable massacre" which is "still justified by Begin more than 23 years later." Kaufman's implication is that Begin acknowledges and justifies a massacre; in fact, Begin denies the massacre and justifies merely the idea of targeting Deir Yassin for capture.¹³² A variation on this theme is the claim--for example, by Lois Aroian and Richard Mitchell--that in his book, "Begin justified the massacre on military grounds

and claimed that without it, the Jewish state would have been still-born.” Needless to say, they did not quote Begin’s actual words, which would have contradicted their misleading paraphrase.¹³³ Another text even had Ben-Gurion, rather than Begin, supposedly declaring --without a source note, of course-- “Without Deir Yassin, there would have been no Israel.”¹³⁴

An alleged Begin quotation was offered by Lawrence Joffe, who, in his contribution to the 1989 volume *Israel and the Palestinians*, asserted that “Menachem Begin is on record as saying: ‘The massacre was not only justified, but there would not have been a state of Israel without the victory of Deir Yassin.’” Like Said, Joffe provided no source for the claim.¹³⁵ Jamal Nassar’s 1991 study of the Palestine Liberation Organization utilized the same Begin quote, claiming it can be found on page 164 of the 1951 edition of *The Revolt*. In fact, there is no such statement on that or any other page.¹³⁶ Punyapriya Dasgupta’s 1988 study of the Palestinian Arabs came a step closer to resolving the mystery, by providing a footnote which read: “This sentence existed in the Hebrew original published in Israel but was omitted in the English edition.” But instead of citing the alleged Hebrew-language original, Dasgupta continues: “See Sami Hadawi, *Bitter Harvest*.”¹³⁷ A footnote in Hadawi’s book attributed the alleged Begin statement to an obscure (now defunct) anti-Israel publication called the *Jewish Newsletter*, which claimed the statement appeared in *The Revolt*. Hadawi contacted the publication’s editor, “who stated that he had taken it from a Hebrew version of *The Revolt* published in Israel for ‘home consumption.’”¹³⁸ In fact, the Deir Yassin section in the Hebrew edition of *The Revolt* is identical to the English editions; there is no quote by Begin admitting or praising any massacre.¹³⁹

Portraying the Jews as Nazis

For some historians, the Deir Yassin story is an irresistible opportunity to invert history, by portraying the Jews as the equivalent of Nazis and the Arabs as the equivalent of the Nazis’ Jewish victims. Maxime Rodinson and Erskine Childers called it “the Israeli Oradour” (referring to the site of a Nazi massacre of Frenchmen), while Stewart Perowne compared Palestinian Arabs emigrating after Deir Yassin to “Frenchmen in their thousands [who] fled before the advancing Nazis.”¹⁴⁰ Desmond Stewart compared Deir Yassin to Auschwitz in one of his books, and to “Lidice or Hiroshima in little” in another.¹⁴¹ Kenneth Cragg dubbed it “the Arab Lidice.”¹⁴² An editorial in the U.S. weekly *Christian Century* declared

Deir Yassin “a horror worse than Lidice, for in Lidice only the men and boys were slaughtered.”¹⁴³ The most preposterous example in this vein was that of Andrew Sinclair, in *Jerusalem: The Endless Crusade* (1995), who characterized Deir Yassin as “a ghastly re-enactment of what the Nazis had done to the Jews at Lidice.” Evidently Sinclair was unaware that Czechs, not Jews, were the victims of the Nazi atrocity at Lidice, which was undertaken as a reprisal for the assassination of Nazi official Heinrich Heydrich by Czech partisans. So anxious was Sinclair to portray the Jews as modern-day Nazis that he literally falsified history, injecting the Jews into an historical episode to which they had no connection, so that in the minds of readers, the Zionists’ behavior would seem to resemble that of a well-known Nazi atrocity.¹⁴⁴

Blurring fact and fiction

The two most detailed accounts of the battle of Deir Yassin are so detailed primarily because the authors have creatively “reconstructed” the event based on an amalgam of interviews, news reports, and imagination.

Dan Kurzman, in *Genesis 1948*, turned the battle into an entertaining 11-page drama. Although Kurzman presents his account as if it were indisputable historical fact, not fiction, he supplies detailed dialogue among the combatants and even claims to have known what individuals were thinking at particular moments. In his preface, he describes style as “using the techniques of the novelist and biographer to bring history alive.” Instead of specific footnotes, Kurzman states merely that he “reconstructed” the story of Deir Yassin “mainly from interviews with Arab survivors” --whom he does not name-- and ten Israelis, some of whom were not even at Deir Yassin. His most controversial claim is that “some of [the attackers] admit that,” in the heat of the battle, they “lost all restraint and cold-bloodedly shot every Arab they found--man, woman, or child.” Significantly, however, Kurzman does not say which of the attackers “admitted” to him that they carried out atrocities. Nor was there any evidence of any other claim, prior to the publication of his book in 1970, that any attackers had “admitted” massacring Arabs at Deir Yassin.

In short, there is no way of knowing whether Kurzman’s claim is authentic or a creative combination of speculation and assumption.¹⁴⁵ Despite the ambiguity surrounding the source of Kurzman’s claim, it was subsequently repeated as fact in other history books. For example, J. Bowyer Bell, in his *Terror Out of Zion: Irgun Zvai Leumi, LEHI, and*

the Palestine Underground, 1929-1949 --still the only comprehensive English-language history of the Jewish revolt against the British-- stated: "Some [of the attackers in Deir Yassin] privately admitted that men, women, and children had been shot on sight." Bell offered no footnote nor any other clue as to who exactly had made this private "admission," but Bell's other footnotes for indicated that he relied heavily on Kurzman and on *O Jerusalem*, by best-selling journalists Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, which appeared in 1972.¹⁴⁶ Bell's account, in turn, became the "massacre" source for a number of other books, including Melvin Urofsky's 1978 study of relations between Israel and American Jewry. Indeed, Urofsky embellished the accusations, stating that "stories of other atrocities, some confirmed and some not, of rapes and mutilations and butcherings, have circulated to this day"--even though the only source Urofsky cited, Bell, did not confirm any rapes, mutilations, or butcherings.¹⁴⁷

Like Kurzman, Collins and Lapierre authored a fast-paced, entertaining saga which emphasized readability over historical accuracy, putting into the combatant's mouths (and minds) the words that the authors imagine were spoken, whether or not they were actually spoken. Unlike Kurzman, Collins and Lapierre did specify their sources for their allegations--Arabs who claimed to have witnessed atrocities, and the British police official Richard Catling. Apparently accepting the veracity of Arab allegations without questioning, Collins and Lapierre repeated a claim by a 12 year-old Arab boy that Jewish fighters lined up a large group of adults and children against a wall and shot them down, "but most of us children were saved because we hid behind parents." Collins and Lapierre did not seem to have wondered why, if the Jews were intent on massacring them, would they have refrained from shooting the children who supposedly survived the first volley of bullets? Collins and Lapierre also recited wild allegations by Arabs of Jewish fighters raping Arab women, cutting open the stomach of a woman who was nine months pregnant, and slashing Arabs "from head to toe" with a sword. The Jews "killed, they looted, and finally they raped," Collins and Lapierre concluded definitively.¹⁴⁸ (David Hirst, author of a 1977 study of the Arab-Israeli conflict, was so fond of that phrase that he plagiarized it, writing "The attackers killed, looted, and finally they raped," without attributing it to Collins and Lapierre. To make matters worse, numerous subsequent books which have claimed a massacre took place have listed Hirst's book as their source.¹⁴⁹)

The rape allegations were based exclusively on the report of British investigator Richard Catling. Collins and Lapierre reported that although they “interviewed, with some difficulty, a number of survivors of the massacre in 1969,” they used quotations from only one of them, “because of the fear that perhaps over the years the survivors’ accounts of what happened might have been altered to conform with some of the propaganda excesses associated with it.” In other words, even Collins and Lapierre found the survivors’ accounts to be less than reliable. In their notes at the back of the book --but, strangely, not in the text itself-- Collins and Lapierre acknowledged that Haganah men Yeshurun Schiff and Yehoshua Arieli, who were part of the unit sent to help bury bodies, “saw no evidence of rape.”¹⁵⁰

The latest and the worst

Two of the most significant recent studies of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Arabs feature most of the errors of their predecessors concerning Deir Yassin. Instead of utilizing recent research to rectify past mistakes, as serious scholars would be expected to do, they have compounded and multiplied past errors. Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal authored *Palestinians: The Making of a People*, nearly 400 pages long, was published by the prestigious Free Press in 1993. Mark Tessler’s *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, over 900 pages in length, was published by the Indiana University Press in 1994. Both books have become required reading in numerous college courses dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Kimmerling and Migdal began their description of Deir Yassin with the remarkable comment: “The sequence of events in Dayr Yasin is now scarcely disputed,” and proceed with the standard allegations of a massacre. Presumably the intention of the remark was to suggest that since virtually no historians dispute the massacre claim, therefore it must be true. That itself is irresponsible, since the historian’s obligation is to independently investigate the events about which he is writing, not merely to count the number of historians on each side of a dispute, and then conclude that the side with the larger number must be telling the truth. What makes the Kimmerling-Migdal account even more preposterous, however, is the fact that they did not even mention that the IZL and Lehi denied there was a massacre. Instead, they state definitively --but without citing any sources-- that after the battle, “the Jewish fighters killed many of the remaining men, women and children and” --again, without sourc-

es-- "raped and mutilated others."151

To their credit, Kimmerling and Migdal acknowledge the Bir Zeit study, although they misrepresent its conclusion, when they write: "A recent study by a team of researchers at Bir Zeit University found that the figure probably did not exceed at 120." In fact, as noted earlier, the Bir Zeit researchers concluded: "we became absolutely convinced that the number of those killed does not exceed 120."152 "Absolutely convinced" --not "probably." Kimmerling and Migdal then add: "But that does not diminish the depth of the atrocity or its short- and long-run effects." Certainly a massacre of 120 people is no less horrifying than a massacre of 254 people. But Kimmerling and Migdal have missed the most significant point about the Bir Zeit study. If those who claimed there was a massacre --Arab spokesmen, Labor Zionist officials, the Red Cross representative-- have been proven to be so completely unreliable concerning the crucial question of the casualty total, what does that say about the reliability of their other claims? If the accusers were willing to knowingly assert that the number of victims was nearly 150% larger than it really was, how can we trust their other claims--of rape, mutilation, and of the massacre itself? Some of those who used death toll figures ranging from 254 to 350 knew that the number was a vast exaggeration; others among the accusers were no doubt simply carelessly parroting as fact figures that they had no way of confirming. Whether through mendacity or carelessness, they mangled the truth, and such behavior would have discredited all of their testimony in a court of law.

Tessler, like Kimmerling and Migdal, nowhere acknowledged that the alleged perpetrators of the massacre deny there was a massacre. Tessler's version of the IZL's position was a variation on the "Begin confessed" theme: "Menachem Begin subsequently boasted about the contribution of the massacre to other military operations," according to Tessler. Begin did not, of course, boast about a "massacre" making such a contribution, but rather about how the false claims of a massacre had the unexpected effect of scaring Arabs to leave some areas that would otherwise have been the sites of difficult battles. Furthermore, Tessler also included some of the usual falsehoods, such as characterizing the village residents as "defenseless" and asserting that the IZL and Lehi "mutilated many of the bodies" --without citing any evidence.153

"The major significance of Deir Yassin," according to Tessler, "lies not in a dispute about what really happened or about whether there could

be any justification for the massacre, it lies in bitter disagreement about whether or not there was a systematic and calculated Zionist campaign of terror designed to drive Palestinians from the area that became the State of Israel.” One side of the debate, according to Tessler, consists of “opponents of Israel as well as some Israeli scholars and pro-Zionist authors,” who say Deir Yassin was part of a broader Zionist plot. The other side consists of those who say there may have been some justification for targeting Deir Yassin, but who “deplore the fact that unarmed Arab civilians were murdered” and “agree with critics who insist that it makes no difference whether or not a legitimate military operation preceded the massacre.” From Tessler’s skewed perspective, there is no room for even considering the possibility that there was no massacre.¹⁵⁴

Tessler is one of a large number of historians whose books were published after the Bir Zeit study was revealed in Ha’aretz in 1991, yet who continued to claim that over 200 Arabs were killed and made no reference to what the Bir Zeit researchers discovered. Of the 29 texts published after 1991 that were reviewed for this study, only one --Kimmerling and Migdal, as noted earlier-- mentioned the Bir Zeit findings.

A number of encyclopedias dealing with Middle East topics likewise parrot the 254 figure. For example, the Political Dictionary of the Middle East in the 20th Century, Congressional Quarterly’s The Middle East, the Historical Atlas of the Jewish People, the Timetables of Jewish History and the Historical Encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli Conflict all claim there was a massacre of 250-254, or “hundreds” of, Deir Yassin civilians. The Historical Encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, which had a particularly lengthy entry on Deir Yassin, managed to repeat almost every major error made by its predecessors. Although published in 1996, it ignored the Bir Zeit study and claimed 254 civilians were “slaughtered.” (Curiously, another entry in the same encyclopedia, which mentioned Deir Yassin in passing, stated that 240 were killed.) The entry made it appear as if David [it erroneously called him “Daniel”] Shaltiel did not favor the attack, ignoring Shaltiel’s pre-battle letter to the IZL, as well as his admissions in 1960 and subsequent revelations by Milstein and others about the Haganah’s cooperation in the attack. The encyclopedia entry questioned whether there were really Iraqi or other Arab soldiers in the village, and quoted Meir Pa’il and Jacques de Reynier as sources, without reference to the contradictions in their allegations.¹⁵⁵ Don Peretz, who is both a professor and an extreme-leftwing political activist, is the author of at least two major encyclopedia entries on Deir Yas-

sin, the Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and the “Arab-Israel Dispute” installment in the Library in a Book series published by Facts on File. Both entries, although published five years after the Bir Zeit study was revealed in Ha’aretz, accused the IZL and Lehi of the mass murder of “200 to 250” civilians. One of the entries claimed “There was little armed resistance to the attack”; the other did not acknowledge any resistance whatsoever. One mentioned the attackers’ statement that Arab soldiers were based in the village, but hastened to add --incorrectly-- that their claim was “not substantiated by the Haganah;” Peretz’s other entry made no reference to the Arab soldiers. Neither of the entries mentioned the house-to-house fighting.¹⁵⁶

Conclusion

It has been said that a lie can travel halfway across the world before the truth can catch up with it. The lie that Jewish fighters massacred Arab civilians in Deir Yassin has gone halfway across the world and further over the past fifty years. The original “massacre lie” has been embellished upon with additional false accusations, and then recirculated by an array of harsh critics of Israel and careless historians, the Deir Yassin lie has taken on a life of its own, making its way into authoritative texts such as encyclopedias, where it is being passed on to the next generation as established fact. The truth has struggled to catch up, but, step by step, it has gained ground. First there was the Israeli judicial ruling in 1952, an official recognition, by the very parties that had charged massacre, that the battle was, in fact, a legitimate military operation against enemy armed forces. Then came the Israeli Labor government’s 1960 pamphlet describing Deir Yassin without any reference to the supposed massacre. Next, the Labor government’s 1969 reversal, acknowledging the errors that Labor officials had made in 1948 and officially clearing the Jewish fighters of the charge that they committed atrocities. Finally, in 1987, the Bir Zeit University study--Arab researchers confirming that one of the central claims of the accusers, the death toll of 254, was a wild and reckless exaggeration. Taken together, these developments and revelations have exposed, once and for all, the lie of the Deir Yassin “massacre.” It has taken fifty years, but the truth has finally caught up.

Footnotes

1 For example, Benny Morris, dean of Israel’s leftwing “new historians,” has written that Milstein’s study “will most likely turn out to be the

- definitive military history of the 1948 war...No one is likely to surpass the sheer breadth, depth, and scope of this work...Israeli military history has now been pulled up to a new, higher and refreshing plane.” (Morris, “‘Pre-History’ vs. ‘History’”, Jerusalem Post, 9 May 1989, p.40).
- 2 Sharif Kanani and Nihad Zitawi, Deir Yassin, Monograph No.4, Destroyed Palestinian Villages Documentation Project (Bir Zeit: Documentation Center of Bir Zeit University, 1987), p.6.
- 3 Uri Milstein, The War of Independence: Out of Crisis Came Decision - Volume IV [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan Publishers, 1991), p. 256.
- 4 Milstein, p.253 (interview with Yehoshua Arieli, 11 December 1987).
- 5 Milstein, pp.277-278.
- 6 Milstein, p.255 (interview with Moshe Barzili, 9 May 1982).
- 7 Israel Ministry of Defense, David Shaltiel: Jerusalem 1948 (Tel Aviv: Israel Ministry of Defense, 1981), p. 139.
- 8 Milstein, p.260 (interview with Shimon Monita).
- 9 Milstein, p.260 (interview with Moshe Idelstein).
- 10 Testimony of Patchiah Zalivensky, Metzudat Ze’ev [Jabotinsky Archives, Tel Aviv] (hereafter cited as MZ); Milstein, p.260 (interview with Yehoshua Zettler).
- 11 Milstein, p.260 (interview with Moshe Barzili).
- 12 Milstein, p.260 (interview with Yehoshua Zettler).
- 13 Milstein, p.260, quoting “Report by ‘Elazar’ [Gihon’s Haganah code name],” 10 April 1948.
- 14 Milstein, p.260 (interview with Mordechai Gihon).
- 15 Milstein, p.260, quoting “Report of the Haganah’s [Anti-Dissident] Unit on the Deir Yassin Action.”
- 16 Testimony of Mordechai Ra’anan, MZ; Testimony of Yehuda Lapidot, MZ; Testimony of Yehoshua Gorodenchik, MZ; Milstein, p.262 (interviews with Mordechai Ra’anan and Yehuda Lapidot).
- 17 Milstein, pp.255-256; Bernard Wasserstein, The British in Palestine: The Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish Conflict 1917-1929 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978), p.69.
- 18 Yitshaq Ben-Ami, Years of Wrath, Days of Glory (New York: Shengold, 1983), p.439.
- 19 Milstein, p.257 (interview with Mordechai Gihon). Milstein found the report in the Israel Defense Forces Archives, War of Independence Collection 83/17, Reports of “Teneh,” 9 April 1948.
- 20 Milstein interview with Haganah agent Yona Ben-Sasson, 12 November 1980; also, Milstein, citing the Ben-Nur Report in the David Shaltiel Archives.
- 21 “Shots in Jerusalem,”Davar, 4 April 1948, p.2.

- 22 Milstein, p. 257, citing the Israel Defense Forces Archives, War of Independence Collection 88/17, "From Hashmonai," 4 April 1948, 10:00 A.M.
- 23 Milstein, p. 257, citing the Israel Defense Forces Archives, War of Independence Collection 88/17, "From Sa'ar," 4 April 1948, 10:00 A.M.
- 24 Testimony of David Gottlieb, MZ; Milstein, pp.257-258, citing the Israel Defense Forces Archives, War of Independence Collection 21/17, "From Hashmonai," 4 April 1948.
- 25 Milstein, p. 258, citing "Operations Log - Arza," 4 April 1948, 17:00 hours, Broadcast #562, Israel Defense Forces Archive, War of Independence Collection, 88/17.
- 26 Milstein, p.258 (interview with Mordechai Gihon).
- 27 Milstein, p.258, citing Israel Defense Forces Archive, War of Independence Collection, 228/3, Operation Log, 9 April 1948, 2:40 a.m.
- 28 Testimony of Benzion Cohen, MZ; Testimony of Yehuda Lapidot, MZ.
- 29 Ilan Kafir, "Three Accounts of Deir Yassin" (Hebrew), Yediot Ahrotot, 4 April 1972, p.3.
- 30 Ron Miberg, "They Showed Us the Photographs!" (Hebrew), *Monitin*, April 1981, p.37.
- 31 Milstein interview with Harif, p.262.
- 32 Milstein, p.263 (interview with Zalivensky).
- 33 Yachin's testimony is quoted at length in Lynne Reid Banks, *A Torn Country: An Oral History of the Israeli War of Independence* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1982), pp. 58-65.
- 34 Milstein, p.265 (interviews with Yehuda Lapidot and Yehoshua Gorodenchik).
- 35 Milstein, p.265, citing Israel Defense Forces Archive, Yitzhak Levy collection, "Report of Yaakov Weg."
- 36 Testimony of Reuven Greenberg.
- 37 Testimony of Yehoshua Gorodenchik, MZ.
- 38 Banks, *op.cit.*, p.62.
- 39 Testimony of Yehoshua Gorodenchik, MZ.
- 40 Milstein, pp.264-265, interviews with Ezra Yachin, Mordechai Ra'anani, Benzion Cohen and Yehuda Lapidot; Testimonies of Mordechai Ra'anani, Benzion Cohen, and Yehuda Lapidot.
- 41 Milstein, p.263, interview with Uri Brenner; Daniel Spicehandler's testimony, quoted in Ralph G. Martin, *Golda: Golda Meir - The Romantic Years* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), p.329.
- 42 Testimony of Yehoshua Gorodenchik, MZ. Benny Morris, a harsh critic of the IZL and Lehi, has characterized Gorodenchik's testimony as

- “confused.” (Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.323, n.175.
- 43 Milstein, p.264, (interview with Mordechai Gihon and “Report of Etzioni intelligence officer”).
- 44 Milstein, p.266.
- 45 Testimony of Mordechai (Kaufman) Ra’anan, 30 June 1952, Procotol of the Board of Appeals in Appeal 89-90-92-96/51, p.7, File kaf-10/9, MZ.
- 46 Milstein, p. 266 (interviews with Moshe Eren, Kalman Rosenblatt, and David Gottlieb).
- 47 Natan Yellin-Mor, *Fighters for the Freedom of Israel* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Shikmona Publishers, 1974), p.472; Milstein, p.267 (interviews with Moshe Barzili and Shimon Monita, and Testimony of Yaffa Bedian).
- 48 Milstein, p.255 (interviews with Meir Pa’il; interviews with Yitzhak Levy; interview with David Cohen, 18 July 1987; interview with David Shaltiel; interview with Yehoshua Arieli; Testimony of Meir Pa’il, 10 May 1971).
- 49 Milstein, p.259 (Testimony of Meir Pa’il; interviews with Moshe Idelstein).
- 50 Miberg, op.cit., p.36.
- 51 Pa’il quoted in Yerach Tal, “There Was No Massacre There” [Hebrew], *Ha’aretz*, 8 September 1991, pp.2-3.
- 52 Milstein, p.274 (interviews with Yehoshua Zettler, Mordechai Ra’anan, Moshe Barzili, Yehuda Lapidot, Patchia Zalivensky, Moshe Idelstein, Moshe Eren, Shlomo Havilov, Yehoshua Arieli); Testimonies of David Shaltiel, Zalman Meret, Zion Eldad, and Yeshurun Schiff, MZ.
- 53 Tal, op.cit.
- 54 Miberg, p.39.
- 55 *Ha’aretz*, 8 September 1991; Miberg, op.cit.
- 56 Milstein, p.275.
- 57 Pa’il, quoted in Kafir, op.cit.
- 58 Milstein, p.275 (interview with Yona Ben-Sasson).
- 59 The relevant sections of Reynier’s report are translated in Walid Khalidi, ed. *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem Until 1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987), pp.761-766.
- 60 Reynier, 762, 763.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p.762.
- 62 *Ibid.*, pp.763, 764.
- 63 Milstein, p.269.
- 64 Milstein, p.269 (interview with Moshe Barzili).

65 Ibid., 764-765.

66 Milstein, pp.269-270 (interview with Alfred Engel, 7 December 1987).

67 Milstein, p.260.

68 Eric Silver, *Begin: The Haunted Prophet* (New York: Random House, 1984), p.93.

69 Ibid., p.95.

70 Uri Avnery, *Israel Without Zionists: A Plea for Peace in the Middle East* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p.196. Avnery also got the date of the battle wrong, as well as the time of day it took place. He stated that the IZL and Lehi captured Deir Yassin in a “night battle”; the battle actually began at dawn and continued until mid-day. He asserted that the “massacre” took place on April 10, when in fact the Arabs who died were killed --however they were killed-- on April 9.

71 Yellin-Mor, op.cit.

72 “Agency Berates Massacre,” *Palestine Post*, 12 April 1948, p.1.

73 Israel Ministry of Defense, David Shaltiel, Jerusalem 1948 (Tel Aviv: Israel Ministry of Defense, 1981), p.139. In what may be another instance of post-battle recriminations, but this time coming from the IZL-Lehi side, Lehi member Reuven Greenberg later claimed that after the battle, a Palmach member killed an Arab civilian with a small explosive charge. (Testimony of Reuven Greenberg, MZ.) Lehi veteran Baruch Nadel described a similar incident in *Kati Marton’s A Death in Jerusalem* (New York: Pantheon, 1994, p.29), although Marton translated Nadel’s reference to the perpetrator as “an Israeli” (rather than “a Palmach member”) which seems inaccurate, since the State of Israel did not yet exist at the time of the incident. Yisrael Segal, correspondent for the leftwing Israeli magazine *Koteret Raishit*, examined Greenberg’s testimony and concluded that it “is almost certainly drawn mainly from the imagination.” Segal notes that Greenberg’s account of the killing of the Arab “has no corroboration from other testimonies.” Questioning Greenberg’s credibility as a witness, Segal characterizes him as “a man with a checkered past who was involved in many political and criminal capers in the first years of the state...Greenberg knew how to tell tales.” (Segal, “The Deir Yassin File” [Hebrew], *Koteret Raishit*, 19 January 1983, p.8.)

74 Decision of the Board of Appeals in Appeal 89/51 (*Aryeh Halperin v. Benefits Officer*), File: kaf 4-10/2, MZ.

75 Milstein, pp.269-270 (interview with Alfred Engel, 7 December 1987).

76 Spicehandler testimony in Martin, op.cit.

77 Silver, p.95

- 78 David Shaltiel, Jerusalem 1948, p.140; Aryeh Yitzhaki, "Deir Yassin-- Not Through a Warped Mirror," Yediot Ahronot, 14 April 1972, p.17.
- 79 Thurston Clarke, *By Blood and Fire: July 22, 1946 - The Attack on Jerusalem's King David Hotel* (New York: G.P.Putnam's Sons, 1981), p.224; Nicholas Bethell, *The Palestine Triangle: The Struggle for the Holy Land, 1935-48* (New York: G.P.Putnam's Sons, 1979) p.156.
- 80 A long excerpt from Catling's report may be found in Collins and Lapierre, p.276.
- 81 Spicehandler testimony in Martin, op.cit.
- 82 Milstein, p.274 (interviews with Shimon Monita, Moshe Idelstein, Yona Feitelson, and Mordechai Gihon).
- 83 Menachem Begin, *The Revolt* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1972), p.163.
- 84 Milstein, pp.268-269 (interview with Mordechai Ra'anan).
- 85 Milstein, p.269 (Testimony of Meir Pa'il).
- 86 Milstein, p.273 (interview with David Cohen, 18 July 1987). Pa'il used the figure in Yediot Ahronot, 20 April 1972. But in 1989, he wrote that in his report to Galili, "the number of those murdered was not mentioned at all, since we did not then know the number." (Uri Milstein, "The Speech Which Was Not Given" [Hebrew], Ha'aretz, 10 March 1989, p. 15.)
- 87 Silver, op.cit., pp.95-96.
- 88 Kanani and Zitawi, *Deir Yassin (Bir Zeit study)*, p.5.
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- 93 "Arabs Charge Cruelty," *Palestine Post*, 12 April 1948, p.1; Schmidt, "Arabs Say Kastel...", op.cit.
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156 Peretz has served as an official of a number of extreme-left organizations, including the Jewish Committee on the Middle East (as a member of its Advisory Committee), which calls for halting all U.S. aid to Israel; the Jewish Peace Lobby (as a member of its Policy Council), which lobbies in Washington for PLO statehood; Breira (as a member of its board of directors), the first American Jewish group to call for an Israeli retreat to the pre-1967 borders; and the Committee for New Alternatives in the Middle East (as a member of its Steering Committee), which lobbied against U.S. arms shipments to Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Peretz's two Deir Yassin entries appeared in Reeva S. Simon, Philip Mattar, and Richard W. Bulliet, eds. Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East (New York: Simon & Schuster - Macmillan, 1996), pp.546-547, and Don Peretz, Library in a Book: The Arab-Israel Dispute (New York: Facts on File, 1996), pp.39, 121.