

Israel at War:

A Historiographic Examination of External Threats and Collective Memory in the
Nationalization and Militarization of the Modern Jewish State

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Some of the most enigmatic and influential notions in military historiography are associated with the two concepts of external threat dynamics and collective memory. The former is an integral undercurrent of virtually every intellectual work penned since scholars began debating the historical implications of war, while the latter inspires inquiries into the very nature of history. Some might attempt to label such investigations as self-indulging flights of antiquarian or academic fancy, but current historiography suggests otherwise. Two Georgetown University professors recently remarked that world leaders “have engaged in debates and have initiated policies that reveal the profound influence of collective memory.”¹ Thus, the focus of this comparative review is the prevailing historiographic debate concerned with the effects that external threats and collective memory have on the militarization and nationalization of the modern nation-state within a wider context of several socio-political concerns. Israel is an ideal case study, given its consistent history of engaging in violent conflicts in response to unique demographic challenges. I open the present survey with a very brief narrative aimed at acquainting non-specialists with Israel’s turbulent past. Next, I move on to a comparison of some of the more recent works associated with the current topic by synthesizing major points from several scholarly surveys, focused academic articles, and three specialized monographs. Finally, I complete my examination with a summary of the aforementioned works and a modest supposition auspiciously intended to serve as a cogent historiographical conclusion to the present inquiry.

The history of Israel is colored by decades of constant conflict, with the nation facing a consistent barrage of external threats even prior to its nascent government declaring independent

¹ Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain, eds, *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 1, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=547777>.

statehood on 14 May 1948.² Widely regarded as one of the most turbulent periods in Israel's history, this era was marked by two major conflicts. The first struggle was primarily a civil war that pitted local Palestinians against approximately 600,000 Jewish emigrants, while the second conflict concerned the defense of Israel against a coalition of Arab forces that refused to recognize the fledgling Jewish state.³ Initially, Yishuv (proto-nationalists) Jewish leaders realized the peril and fragility of their situation, but faced little recourse; the growing threat of anti-Semitic fascists and Hitler's looming "Final Solution" compelled the founding fathers of Israel to leave a war-torn Europe.⁴ A 1947 United Nations General Assembly vote, which endorsed the partitioning of Palestine, and the termination of the British Mandate during the following year, motivated the budding Jewish government to defiantly declare their independence.⁵ The newly formed state of Israel, whose citizens were still recovering from a grueling Palestinian civil war, consequently faced a brutal war of liberation. Their hard-fought victory solidified the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state, while additionally setting a bloody precedent of ceaseless conflict that defined decades of Arab-Palestine-Israeli relations.⁶

Over the years, Israel faced a variety of regular and unconventional challenges. Subject matter experts sometimes debate over the specific categorical differences between these struggles, but most scholars generally agree that the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and Israeli Air Force (IAF) waged four conventional wars since the 1948 conflict: The Kadesh War (1957), the Six-Day War (1967), the War of Attrition (1967-70), and the First Lebanon War (1982).⁷

Interneccine and unconventional campaigns included two decades of reprisal operations carried

² Leslie Stein, *Israel Since the Six-Day War: Tears of Joy, Tears of Sorrow* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2014), 2, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1767753>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 170.

⁵ Ibid., 1-3.

⁶ Stein, *Israel Since the Six-Day War*, 2.

⁷ Ibid., 18-48.

out against the Palestinian Fedayeen (following the liberation of Israel), the Palestinian Insurgency in South Lebanon (throughout most of the 1970s and early 1980s), the persistent South Lebanon Conflict (running its course from the early 1980s to the turn of the century), the First and Second Intifadas (1987-1993 and 2000-2005, respectively), the Second Lebanon War (2006), and the Gaza War (2008-2009).⁸ More recent military activities consist of limited counterterrorism actions, such as Operation Pillar of Defense (2012) and Operation Protective Edge (2014).⁹ Suffice to say, Israel's history is stormy and filled with an unprecedented number of external threats, both from anti-Semitic interstate rivals and inter-communal non-state actors alike. Jewish historian Leslie Stein perhaps best summed up this foreboding legacy when she observed that, "Israel is unique among the nations of the world in that there has been no intergenerational let-up in girding for war... The weight of military obligations and their perils hangs so heavily in the air that the thought of grim tidings is constantly at the back of people's minds."¹⁰ Israel's volatile story is uniquely striking and thus presents historians with fertile ground upon which to conduct a sound survey of the effects that external threats and collective memory have on the nationalization and militarizing of a state forged in fire and so frequently besieged by an assortment of adversaries. To better frame their views in relative context, however, some scholars look to earlier periods, across a wide spectrum of Jewish military history.

In his broad survey, *Jews and the Military: A History* (2013), Professor of Israeli Studies at Oxford University, Derek Johnson Penslar, examines the roles of threats and collective

⁸ Ibid., 1-29.

⁹ Niv Elis, "Direct Damage Claims from Rockets Down 75% from Pillar of Defense," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 15, 2014, accessed 11 November 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Operation-Protective-Edge/Direct-damage-claims-from-rockets-down-75-percent-from-Pillar-of-Defense-362908>.

¹⁰ Stein, *Israel Since the Six-Day War*, 357.

memory in world Jewry, relative to the founding and development of Israel.¹¹ He continually imparts upon his audience that it is incredibly difficult, if not entirely impossible, to adequately appreciate the roots of the Israeli military establishment without first contemplating the dynamic past that links Jews to armed conflict.¹² The main thrust of Penslar's work is that, contrary to some popular misconceptions, Jewish bravery and martial pride traditionally played vital roles in the liberation of the transnational community of Diaspora Jewry.¹³ The means in achieving such ends were primarily motivated by external dangers and facilitated by collective memories that emphasized the honor and the sacrifice of serving in battle.¹⁴ Modern manifestations of these aforementioned factors included persistent threats in the form of anti-Semitic movements throughout history, epitomized by the Nazi Holocaust of World War Two.¹⁵ Collective memories conveyed through Rabbinic scholarship, Hebrew scripture, Jewish folk lore, and more recent pseudo-patriotic nationalistic movements, such as Israeli Zionism, also played parts in shaping this shared ethos.¹⁶

Penslar opens his argument by observing that the modern collective Jewish self-image is one rooted in the awe-inspiring vision of a young but haggard Diaspora soldier fighting on behalf of the Allied nations during World War Two, against Hitler's seemingly unstoppable Nazi war machine.¹⁷ While this aggrandized account may be compelling, however, Jews did not always hold military service in such high regard. Many Ashkenazic Jews, for instance, were recruited into the imperial Russian army as children and, if not outright killed in combat, doomed to a life

¹¹ Derek Jonathan Penslar, *Jews and the Military: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1275332>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵ Penslar, *Jews and the Military*, 13-5.

¹⁶ Ibid., 13-5.

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.

of dismal military service alongside bands of cutthroats and criminals.¹⁸ For hundreds of years, Jewish families tried to shield their sons from the iron grip of compulsory service, which ironically marginalized an entire generation of young men.¹⁹ In France, members of the Jewish Enlightenment, or *Haskalah*, frequently questioned the merits of conscription in Napoleon's army.²⁰ Long-held religious views additionally perpetuated a myth of Jewish effeminacy and an aversion to military service.²¹ Penslar recalls the book of *Genesis* in which the introverted begetter of all Jews, Jacob, timidly keeps to himself and is virtually emasculated by his overbearing brother, Esau, a rough and tumble hunter.²² Other pre-modern instances did little to rectify this situation. Bookish medieval rabbis, for example, took no interest or found little reason to participate in the great Christian and Islamic religious battles of the period.²³ Penslar points out that these "passive" Jews were not considered an integral element of Gentile society and thus had little compulsion to involve themselves in politico-social affairs of the state.²⁴ Putting aside the fact that peoples of every stripe attempted to dodge obligatory military service, such sentiments nevertheless preserved the belief that Jews were weak and incapable of serving on the front lines.²⁵

On the other hand, not all premodern Judaic account speaks to the supposed effeminate nature of Jewry and notable exceptions to the collective narrative occurred throughout history. The *Tanakh*, or Hebrew Scriptures, speak of inspiring Israelite victories over the Philistines.²⁶ Ancient Rabbinic traditions additionally relied upon militant forms of spiritual debate in which

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ Penslar, *Jews and the Military*, 18.

²⁰ Ibid., 11.

²¹ Ibid., 18.

²² Ibid., 18.

²³ Penslar, *Jews and the Military*, 18.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 19.

religious leaders frequently faced their opponents in a form of ritualized verbal combat.²⁷ Jews of the Middle Ages, while not necessarily vested in ‘glorious’ religious warfare, nevertheless fell victim to chance and circumstance. In the eleventh-century, for example, thousands of Jews were killed by angry mobs of crusading Christians.²⁸ Many groups, however, did not succumb without tremendous resistance and struggled to the death rather than abandon their faith.²⁹

The modern era brought with it an increase in targeted threats against world Jewry, from Eastern Europe to the Levant. Polish Jews were forced to defend their towns during the Tartar invasions of the late sixteenth-century and a protracted series of wars across Poland, Ukraine, and Russia.³⁰ These incursions, along with a general rise in military service associated with social responsibility, motivated many Jews to actively volunteer and fight in global conflicts.³¹ Penslar notes that Rabbinic scholars ironically equated certain aspects of conscription with liberation, which encouraged droves of Jews to figuratively unshackle themselves by taking up arms.³² Over the course of the last two centuries, Jews joined imperial campaigns in Africa and Asia, liberated rebels in Spain, fought on either side of the line during the Great War, and eventually opposed anti-Semitic fascism in World War Two.³³ The Zionist movement additionally gained considerable momentum during this period, which fueled the mass emigration of several hundred thousand Jews to Palestine. Shortly thereafter, a small but determined group of Yishuv and Haganah (an early Jewish paramilitary group) leaders established several fledgling settlements and proactively designed a collective proto-Israeli

²⁷ Penslar, *Jews and the Military*, 20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-5.

³¹ Penslar, *Jews and the Military*, 25-35.

³² *Ibid.*, 35.

³³ *Ibid.*, 37-196

identity.³⁴ Men, such as David Ben-Gurion, astutely pitted the persistent threat of Palestinian and Arab forces against the nationalistic sense of pride and militaristic resolve of the Jewish people in founding a new country.³⁵ This, coupled with a commonly forged collective identity, led to the manifestation and idolization of the Jewish citizen-soldier, an integral and key component of the new Israeli state.³⁶

Ahron Bregman picks-up his inquiry on the heels of Penslar's investigation and presents a very similar set of points, albeit from a slightly more engrossed perspective. In *Israel's Wars: A History Since 1947* (2016), the former IDF captain and political analyst argues that a de-escalation of conventional external threats and a decline in collective memory resulted in increasing civil disobedience and a relative demilitarization of the Jewish state.³⁷ Bregman specifically cites the first invasion and occupation of Lebanon as a significant departure from previous IDF defensive operations and attributes a growing antiwar movement among the Israeli citizenry to this shift in strategic policy and the subsequent policing of a recalcitrant Lebanese population.³⁸ He additionally points out that collective memories and ideals faded alongside a generation of Holocaust survivors, who epitomized duty and sacrifice in Israeli society.³⁹ Thus, while Penslar argues in the affirmative, that collective memories and external threats led to the creation of unified Israeli national identity, Bregman argues in the negative, or that a sharp decline in external threats and prevalent collective memories are dismantling the state.⁴⁰ In either case, each author contends that there is a significant causal relationship between external threats, collective memory, and the militarization of Israel.

³⁴ Ibid., 199.

³⁵ Penslar, *Jews and the Military*, 262.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bregman, Ahron, *Israel's Wars: A History Since 1947*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), xix.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Penslar, *Jews and the Military*, 13; Bregman, *Israel's Wars*, xix.

As noted earlier, Bregman pointed to civil protests over the 1982 Invasion of Beirut as a major turning point in Israeli society, although tensions technically started simmering twenty years earlier during the tasking War of Attrition.⁴¹ When taken into contextual hindsight, this development is hardly surprising. The end of the British Mandate and subsequent liberation of Israel stoked the fires of national militarism. Subsequent decades of violence, rife with conflict and no shortage of legitimate external threats, compounded these sentiments. Over the course of the next two decades, Israel continuously trained and mobilized its forces in response to a variety of dangers.⁴² This cyclical pattern of surprise conflicts, compounded by a national sense of uncertainty, fundamentally indoctrinated an entire generation of Israeli citizen-soldiers (commensurate with selected collective memories promulgated by a hawkish government).⁴³

Nevertheless, the Invasion of Lebanon was unlike other major offensive operation of the period and took place under significantly different circumstances. As opposed to 1967's Six Day War, which was a preemptive defensive strike aimed at defeating a coalition of Arab forces, or the Yom Kippur War, which was initially handled quite poorly but eventually rallied Israelis under a common banner, the Invasion of Lebanon was essentially a protracted street fight against a non-state actor.⁴⁴ Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), although materially and financially backed by several Arab states, was an independent paramilitary organization that frequently committed acts of terror throughout the latter half of the twentieth-century.⁴⁵ Israel responded to these incursions by invading Lebanon, which overtime became a PLO stronghold and staging area from where Arafat could launch numerous terror attacks.⁴⁶ The

⁴¹ Bregman, *Israel's Wars*, 148-9.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 50-3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 86, 124, & 162.

⁴⁵ Bregman, *Israel's Wars*, 153-171.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

IDF and IAF struck with deadly speed, but became sidetracked in a tertiary conflict with Syria and brutal house-to-house urban combat across Beirut.⁴⁷ The struggle eventually became insufferable for the Lebanese government, who grew tired of the collateral damage and civilian casualties that were inevitable byproducts of the fighting between Israel, Syria, and the PLO.⁴⁸ As Israeli casualties began to mount, public discord began to grow in Tel Aviv. Antiwar organizations and protest groups took to the streets, demanding an end to the war, and several Israeli officers resigned their commissions.⁴⁹ These acts of defiance, regardless of potential merit, were unprecedented in Israeli society. Subsequent unrest and peace movements increased over the remainder of the century as Israel became involved in two unconventional Intifadas.⁵⁰ Bregman uses this entire evolution to illustrate Israel's transition from fighting total wars of desperate survival to waging limited wars of dubious intent, which was fundamentally detrimental to the continued militarization of Israel and the national identity of the Jewish state.⁵¹

In his *Journal of Contemporary History* article, titled "Israel's 1948 War of Independence as a Total War" (2008), Moshe Naor offers a complimentary opinion that indirectly validates some of the more abstract aspects of Bregman's 'declining external threat and collective memory' theory. Naor professes that the underlying premise of his work is an examination of the 1948 War of Liberation as a total war, in spite of numerous academic disagreements over the fundamental definition of term.⁵² In his exposition, however, he makes an important distinction between wars of an earlier era—mid-twentieth-century conventional conflicts that fostered national interests and the militarization of nation-states—and later asymmetrical struggles, such

⁴⁷ Ibid., 180-4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Bregman, *Israel's Wars*, 184-5.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 185-220.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Moshe Naor, "Israel's 1948 War of Independence as a Total War," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43/2 (April, 2008), 241, accessed 11 November 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036505>.

as the unpopular 1982 Invasion of Lebanon. He surmises that the 1948 War categorically belongs to a more ominous “era of total wars,” which “derived from perceptions rooted among other things in the Jewish collective memory and historical consciousness—that failure in the military contest threatened the physical existence of the Jewish community.”⁵³ Indeed, it is difficult to dispute the rationality of his argument when one considers that the 1948 War consumed approximately 6,000 lives, or roughly one percent of the entire Israeli population.⁵⁴ Thus, while the threat of war may be constant, Naor reveals that it is the specific nature of external threats, or at least *perceived* threats, that propagate military and national ideals throughout Israeli society. He supports this claim by observing that the founding fathers of Israel literally viewed the War of Liberation as a true struggle for ultimate survival.⁵⁵ This revelation is enlightening in that it elucidates an Israeli perceived decline of external threats, from one conflict to the next, despite the fact that unceasing unconventional warfare has continued to claim the lives of many Jewish citizens. Beyond the scope of Bregman and Naor’s works, however, are the more socially and politically striated aspects of Israeli society and collective memory, topics that the following entries addresses in abundance.

In regards to Israeli collective memory, one of the more intriguing elements of the phenomenon concerns the widespread ceremonial commemoration of a group of ill-fated World War Two Yishuv parachutist that are firmly entrenched within the country’s collective consciousness.⁵⁶ In her *Perfect Heroes: The World War II Parachutists and the Making of Israeli Collective Memory* (2010), historian Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz presents the story as

⁵³ Ibid., 242-3

⁵⁴ Emmanuel Sivan, “To Remember Is to Forget: Israel’s 1948 War,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28/2 (April, 1993), 342, accessed 11 November 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260714>.

⁵⁵ Naor, “Israel’s 1948 War of Independence as a Total War,” 243.

⁵⁶ Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, *Perfect Heroes: The World War II Parachutists and the Making of Israeli Collective Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), xi, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3445000>.

both a personal and historiographical venture into the world of social idolatry and hero worship. She submits that, as a case study, the paratroopers' mission serves as an academic litmus test for "analyzing the heroic ethos within the Zionist 'meta-narrative' and for exploring the nature of those persons and organizations in Israel embodying this ethos, or basic belief, since the state's establishment."⁵⁷ Whereas Naor and Bregman respectively attribute the rise and decline of the Israeli state primarily to the influence (or perceived influence) of external threats, Baumel-Schwartz instead focuses on the power of collective memory. Prior to offering an analysis of her work, however, a brief summary of the applicable narrative is requisite in appreciating the full scope of Baumel-Schwartz's argument.

Most Israelis consider the parachutists national heroes, with the tale symbolically representing the apex of Jewish resistance during the Second World War.⁵⁸ At the peak of the movement, the group consisted of over two hundred volunteers from all walks of Diaspora and the Yishuv, including the Palmach (a homeland security unit, co-founded by the British, with the expressed intent of defending Zionist interests against Palestinian incursions).⁵⁹ Only half of the unit, however, received the requisite training in parachute operations.⁶⁰ Out of that advanced group, only about three-dozen took part in actual combat drops during the war (the specific number remains contested between the accounts of the parachutists and historians).⁶¹ Out of this select unit, an even smaller number of paratroopers actually made it to their drop destinations, with the final number of twenty-seven contested by various accounts.⁶² Much of the confusion over the operation stems from the fundamental nature of the parachutists' mission, which was

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Baumel-Schwartz, *Perfect Heroes*, 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Baumel-Schwartz, *Perfect Heroes*, 4.

guided by conflicting dual mandates.⁶³ The British aspect of their assignment involved jumping behind enemy lines to locate, recover, and guide downed Allied pilots to friendly territory.⁶⁴ The Yishuv, or Zionist, aspect of their mission was to locate, train, liberate, or otherwise assist any Jews who were fighting against the Nazis in Eastern Europe.⁶⁵ Between 1943 and 1945, the parachutists launched operations into several besieged European countries including Hungary, France, Austria, and Bulgaria.⁶⁶ Out of the approximate thirty-six parachutist that participated in these missions, a third were captured by the Nazis.⁶⁷ Many of the captives were imprisoned and relentlessly tortured.⁶⁸ Seven of the prisoners were executed in France or Slovakia.⁶⁹ What makes the parachutists' story remarkable is that the group consisted of average people that were compelled to serve the interests of the Yishuv, the Allies, and world Jewry. Arguably the most iconic of the group was Hannah Szenes, a Hungarian Jew who avoided a one-way trip to Auschwitz by enlisting with the parachutists.⁷⁰ Szenes jumped back into Hungary, but was detained by Nazi sympathizers, thrown in prison, mercilessly tortured, and finally executed.⁷¹ Throughout the entire ordeal, however, she never gave up her comrades and denied her Nazis captors any valuable information.⁷² Szenes's body, along with the remains of six compatriots, were interred at the Mount Herzl burial site where they are commemorated to this day.⁷³

Their story is obviously tragic and inspiring, but what role did the parachutists play in establishing Israeli collective memory and what part did that development take in the

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 4-9.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Baumel-Schwartz, *Perfect Heroes*, 4.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 10-8

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Baumel-Schwartz, *Perfect Heroes*, 15-6.

⁷¹ Ibid., 20-2.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 66.

militarization and nationalization of the Jewish state? Baumel-Schwartz contends that every society is in need of heroes, but that the story of the Jewish parachutist specifically fed into a larger Zionist “formative narrative” that Yishuv leaders used to facilitate the founding of Israel.⁷⁴ In particular, the sacrifice of the parachutist exemplified the national character that Ben-Gurion desperately wanted to instill in his emerging country of disjointed immigrants. By publicly mourning and commemorating the lost parachutists, Israeli nationalists established a collective tradition and memory that, according to Baumel-Schwartz, served a three-fold purpose. First, collective traditions and memories connected private citizens to the greater Israeli civic sphere, which underscored public commitments and sacrifice.⁷⁵ Second, they lent credibility to nascent organizations, such as the early IDF, and preexisting cultural structures, including the political elite.⁷⁶ Lastly, collective memories conveyed necessary standards and patterns of conduct.⁷⁷ In this final regard, Baumel-Schwartz points to her own past where, as a child, she spent several summers attending Jewish day camps that indoctrinated youth through the use of folk lore and iconic hero worship—the cabins in which she slept, for instance, were named after the fallen parachutists and military-style roll call was conducted at Hebrew worship services every morning.⁷⁸ Baumel-Schwartz concludes her work in the same vein of Bregman and Naor by noting that collective memory is a fluid and fallible concept.⁷⁹ She cautions that social discord, catalyzed by a fading “Holocaust consciousness” and social decentralization, is detrimental to commemoration efforts aimed at honoring fallen soldiers and preserving Israel’s national identity.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Baumel-Schwartz, *Perfect Heroes*, xi-xiv.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Baumel-Schwartz, *Perfect Heroes*, x.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 196-208.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Academic observations aside, real-life perceptions concerning the frailty and increasing scarcity of collective memories are entirely palpable in Israeli society. Professor Emmanuel Sivan made this the object of his 1993 historiographic study, while examining the Hebrew *sifrut ha-hantzaha*, or “literature of commemoration.”⁸¹ In his short piece, titled “To Remember Is to Forget: Israel’s 1948 War,” Sivan probes civic collective memories by delving into the private world of Israelis who have lost loved ones on the front lines. Many of these mourners produce *Sifrut ha-hantzaha*, which are primarily pamphlets and small biographies created and disseminated by the relatives of deceased service members.⁸² According to Sivan, “This form of spontaneous commemoration - that is, that produced by cells of civil society rather than by the state- is even more popular than monuments; approximately one dead soldier in three figures in a book of commemoration.”⁸³ The focal point of Sivan’s investigation is the aging generation of Israelis that actively took part in the 1948 War of Liberation, their place in modern society, and the role that commemoration and bereavement play in their everyday lives.⁸⁴

While his inquiry may lack the expansive breadth and depth of some of the preceding works, Sivan nevertheless touches upon a key concept that succinctly punctuates an examination of Israeli collective memory. Rather than approaching the matter from the ‘top down,’ where the state primarily acts as the architect behind constructing collective identities, Sivan investigates the issue from the ‘bottom up.’ Over the course of his research, he remarkably discovered that private citizens, in personally producing and publishing commemorative booklets, established an entire causal chain of social interactions that affected Israel on a national scale.⁸⁵ The time,

⁸¹ Sivan, “To Remember Is to Forget,” 341.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 343.

⁸⁵ Sivan, “To Remember Is to Forget,” 343.

money, and resources required to promulgate such works resulted in the establishment of social and political activist networks that continue to promote concepts perpetuating the militarization of the Israeli state, such as sacrifice, honor, and duty.⁸⁶

The present review briefly visited a narrative of Israel's turbulent past and comparatively analyzed several works concerned with the role of collective memories and external threats in the militarization and nationalization of the Israeli state. I illustrated that, while historians may disagree on several nuanced variables concerning the historiographic aspects of these phenomena, there nevertheless exists a general consensus concerning the correlation and causality of external threats, collective memories, and the national profile of the militarized state. But complex social interactions and history are not shaped in a vacuum; one must consider the variety of mitigating factors that inevitably shape, amplify, or even abate the effects of external threats and collective memory. The final two entries in this review speak to that point. The first monograph, by the aforementioned historian Leslie Stein, is a broad sociological and historiographical survey of Israel since the Six Day War, while the second work, by security analyst Gad Barzilai, is a historical and geopolitical inquiry into the effects of protracted conflict on the Israeli government.⁸⁷

In *Israel Since the Six-Day War: Tears of Joy, Tears of Sorrow* (2014), Stein draws upon a variety of numerous secondary sources, both in Hebrew and English, to integrate a more organic view of the role that external threats and collective memory play in some traditionally underrepresented or marginalized segments of Israeli culture.⁸⁸ For example, she cites the work

⁸⁶ Ibid., 343-5.

⁸⁷ Stein, *Israel Since the Six-Day War*, ix; Gad Barzilai, *Wars, Internal Conflicts, and Political Order: A Jewish Democracy in the Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), vii, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10588803>.

⁸⁸ Stein, *Israel Since the Six-Day War*, ix.

of researcher Oz Almog, who noted that over one hundred thousand Ethiopian Jews populated Israel at the beginning of the present decade.⁸⁹ Almog attributed this number to two massive migratory periods, which occurred near the end of the last century.⁹⁰ Interestingly, this particular demographic of non-Western Jews lived in isolation for the majority of their collective existence, within a commune they called “Beta Israel.”⁹¹ According to Almog, scholars generally agree that this specific group of Ethiopians, unlike their neighbors, refused to convert to Christianity during the Middle Ages, instead deferring solely to the Old Testament.⁹² Thus, this autonomous society of Ethiopian Jews coincidentally and independently developed a spiritual practice almost identical to more traditional forms of orthodox Judaism.⁹³ Western Jewry eventually initiated contact with this group in the late 1800s and, by the mid-twentieth-century, fully indoctrinated Ethiopian Jewry into the fold of contemporary Judaism.⁹⁴ Despite a mutual desire to integrate this group into Israeli society, a 1977 resolution to relocate the disenfranchised Jews from Africa to settlements around Tel Aviv was crushed by the then Ethiopian despot, Mengistu Haile Mariam, who succumbed to overwhelming Arab political and military pressure aimed at keeping any additional Jews out of Palestine.⁹⁵ Consequently, a multitude of Ethiopian Jews embarked on a hazardous pilgrimage to Jerusalem, during which many succumbed to disease and exhaustion.⁹⁶ Fortunately, Israel and the United States resolved to rescue the Ethiopian Jews, who were stranded in the Sudan, via a series of strategic airlifts.⁹⁷ The operation was not without complications, but nevertheless offered Diaspora Jews a ray of transnational hope in the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 323.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Stein, *Israel Since the Six-Day War*, 324.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 325.

⁹⁶ Stein, *Israel Since the Six-Day War*, 325.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

otherwise troubled decade of the 1980s. A second monumental airlift occurred in 1991, when over fourteen thousand Ethiopian Jews were rescued from the hands of anti-Semitic rebels and safely relocated to Israel.⁹⁸ This operation, perhaps even more so than the first, represented a distinct reaction to external threats of a significant magnitude—the mobilization of Israel’s military in this regard created an international sense of liberation, something not seen since battling the Nazis in World War Two. Nevertheless, the abrupt influx of refugees burdened Israel’s economic, housing, and labor markets for many years. The Beta Israel Jews consequently became victims of racial bigotry while attempting to settle in their new home, some of which unfortunately continues to this day.⁹⁹

The above story is one of several that Stein uses to highlight some of the more pressing issues associated with the developmental path of Israel’s collective memory, within the context of massive demographic changes that occurred across the country over the past several decades. She points out that the Ethiopian Jews, like other ethnic minorities in Israel, face a host of economic, educational, and cultural challenges.¹⁰⁰ In hindsight, many Israelis undoubtedly took pride in lending a humanitarian hand to their Jewish kin during the airlifts—an Israeli reporter famously remarked on the eve of the initial airlift that, “For the first time in history, thousands of black people are being brought into a country not in chains but in dignity, not as slaves but as citizens.”¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, many Israelis continue to resent the Ethiopian Jews, despite their strides forward in other facets of society.¹⁰² Some encouraging developments include social and

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹⁰⁰ Stein, *Israel Since the Six-Day War*, 390.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 330-1.

political advances, such as two Ethiopian Jews being appointed to the Knesset (Israeli parliament) in 2013.¹⁰³

The above analysis touches upon a final consideration integral to Israeli society. Closely tied to the country's nationalistic ideals and military establishment is Israel's bureaucratic landscape, upon which over half a decade of partisan politics dictated the nation's response to external threats, both in Palestine and abroad. The intriguing dynamic in this regard is that the actual or perceived presence of external threats correlated to internal political tensions, which reciprocally determined how Israel's military responded to external dangers, thus contributing to the nation's collective identity.¹⁰⁴ Such is the object of Gad Barzilai's *Internal Conflicts, and Political Order: A Jewish Democracy in the Middle East* (1996), that in the author's cogent summation, is aimed at explaining "national consensus and dissent in Israel by analyzing the effects of the protracted national security crisis and the Arab-Israeli wars since 1949."¹⁰⁵

Barzilai underscores his thesis by drawing a clear relationship between conflicts and political crises that occur in unison with the overall approval or condemnation of the general public—what he refers to as "Israel's consensus/dissent balance."¹⁰⁶ Take, for a formative example, his analysis of the evolution of early nationalism in Israel. In Barzilai's opinion, Israel's triumph during the 1948 War of Liberation, its multilateral victories during the Saini Campaign of 1956, and its smashing conquest of Egypt during the Six Day War of 1967 contributed to the misconception that conflict bred nationwide harmony.¹⁰⁷ This consequently led many political elites to believe that the public would perpetually and unquestionably support

¹⁰³ Ibid., 330.

¹⁰⁴ Barzilai, *Wars, Internal Conflicts, and Political Order*, viii.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 16-7.

unilateral military actions during any future instances of national crisis.¹⁰⁸ Public and political fallout from the initial mishandling of the Yom Kippur War and 1982 Invasion of Lebanon, however, proved otherwise. Barzilai additionally points out that ideological differences over how to handle external threats plagued several founding politicians well before Israelis claimed statehood in 1948. As early as 1929, Yishuv leaders debated on whether to handle Arab belligerents within their own limited means or by reaching out to the British protectorate.¹⁰⁹ In addition to raising fiscal and material concerns, the debate brought into question some factions' overall commitment to an independent Israel. This nascent political development established a partisan precedent in which perceived national consensus routinely overrode actual minority dissent.¹¹⁰

Perhaps even more representative of the effect that external threats played on politics were the increasingly sophisticated political divisions and ideological shifts that occurred in the Israeli government following major conflicts. Barzilai, for instance, recounts how two distinctly different parties, the conservative Herut and progressive Mapam, opposed several military operations during the mid-twentieth-century.¹¹¹ Despite nagging minority dissent against the 1957 war effort, political hawks approved a multilateral campaign, while appealing to the country's sense of national pride in self-sacrifice.¹¹² Although Israel celebrated a rousing military victory, partisan disagreements led to the organization of coalition parties that, in addition to suppressing several more progressive anti-Zionist movements, established the groundwork for the moderate parties of later decades.¹¹³ It took approximately another twenty

¹⁰⁸ Barzilai, *Wars, Internal Conflicts, and Political Order*, 16-7.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 20-1.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹² Barzilai, *Wars, Internal Conflicts, and Political Order*, 27.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

years until another external threat, in the form of 1973's mismanaged Yom Kippur War, generated enough political momentum to dethrone the Labor party in favor of the nationalist Likud, which consequently dominated Israel's political landscape during the late 1980s and is still in power today¹¹⁴ Barzilai concludes that this trend is indicative of Spartan societies that, like primitive chiefdoms, resist major changes during times of national strife.¹¹⁵ His thesis is applicable to the current analysis in two regards. On the one hand, this reflexive resistance led to the mobilization and continued militarization of the Israeli state in response to external threats most recently posed by militant non-state actors. On the other hand, Barzilai notes the unprecedented emergence of "extra-parliamentary" movements, such as special interest groups and student organizations that actively oppose many aspects of Israel's national security policy.¹¹⁶ In any event, Barzilai highlights the codependent nature of external threats, collective memory, the military establishment, and nationalist political agendas.

It is a vast understatement to conclude that Israelis are no strangers to war. Since achieving internationally recognized statehood some sixty-eight years ago, they engaged in countless interstate and intra-communal conflicts at home and abroad. Israel and her innumerable wars are frequently the focus of many historiographical studies. Many of these works are concerned with determining how external threats and collective memories shaped Israel's national structure and military environment. Among the seven scholars reviewed over the course of this analysis, two developed broad surveys of the subject matter, while the remaining five elected to focus upon more specialized aspects of the debate. In addition to clarifying the causal factors of collective memory and external threats, their works offer views

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 127-30.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 219.

¹¹⁶ Barzilai, *Wars, Internal Conflicts, and Political Order*, 95-9.

on the perceived decline in the militarization of the Israeli state, the differing effects of total and limited war, the role of the hero ethos within a larger Zionist meta-narrative, the impacts of folk literature and ‘bottom-up’ nationalism, the diverse differences that external threats and collective memory exert upon the marginalized segments of Israeli society, and the political implications associated with these dynamics. These opinions invariably point to the conclusion that, while there is a clearly a relationship between external threats, collective memory, and the militarization of the Israeli state, the specific manner and vectors in which these connections are forged vary. This unique affiliation did not develop in an insulated environment, but was instead influenced by a variety of reciprocating cultural factors associated with the socio-political development of the Israeli state.

Of final sobering note is the realization that Israel, while perhaps an isolated state, is not necessarily a unique case. Threats and collective memory shaped the fate of many modern nation-states and continue to influence economies, politics, and international relations to this day. In an era of tweets, instant messages, tactical unmanned aerial vehicles, and weapons of mass destruction, one is hard-pressed to recall a more volatile time in which memories and threats, perceived or otherwise, bared the potential to wreak unprecedented death and destruction at the literal push of a button. In my humble estimation, it is thus the well-equipped and disinterested historian who should be charged with the duty of protecting the present by preserving the past, which may ideally safeguard our future.

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