

## Palestine, Oh, Palestine!

Paul Buhle

**N**ews updates from the Middle East seem to widen the tragedies of Palestinians on the West Bank—and not only on the West Bank—almost daily. The crisis in Gaza has only dramatised the ongoing tragedy, and underlines how badly a leading faction in the Israeli government would like to deport or otherwise dispose of Palestinians, and perhaps how eager U.S. leaders would be to facilitate some mass deportation under the guise of “humanitarian relocation.”

Monthly Review readers least of all need reminders of

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how the current government of Israel is completing the historic vision of the “revisionists”: to annex the West Bank in one way or another. The otherwise impressive protests in the streets of Israel—hardly related to the occupation at all—seem unlikely to halt the momentum.

Still, scholarly history can tell much that is worthwhile. History, experienced personally and deeply, can tell still more. Linda Dittmar’s new book, *Tracing Homelands*, is a brilliantly written, tragic pondering of the Palestinian fate, page by page, but also looks hard at the assumptions that made even the best-intended Zionists avid, if sometimes unknowing, partners in the large scheme of dispossession.

Dittmar is herself unique. She is by no means the only erstwhile so-called pioneer of the Jewish state to reconsider the assumptions she had made since childhood, but she is surely among the most careful observers of the details. Born in 1938 during her parents’ brief pause from living in pre-statehood Israel as a part of a multigenerational Zionist project,



[Ceasefire-Free Palestine](#) protest in Foley Square, Wall Street, New York City, New York (December 9, 2023).

she spent her childhood surrounded by the events—as well as the consequences—of the “War for Independence” and the accompanying Nakba.

In a word, she was there. Using wonderfully descriptive prose, she offers us priceless glimpses of herself in a family of

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idealists (however flawed those ideals may seem to her in retrospect), socialists, and near-socialists seeking a new life for the long-persecuted European Jewish population above all. Just old enough to experience the sense of terror at the armed conflict, she was “sheltered” by Jewish consensus from any thought that the military campaign against the Palestinian resistance might also be a terror campaign against civilians. She

ponders, through the inner eye of memory, the civilian Palestinians—the elderly men, women, and children driven from homes and community with nowhere to go and no way to recover anything from the life that they had lost.

Why did her own ancestors, fleeing perilous conditions in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, choose a future in Israel rather than the United States, which was overwhelmingly the choice of hard-pressed Eastern European Jewish population? The Biblical promise of the deity counted for much, but even for atheists, “return” offered an answer to the sense of “non-belonging” that remained among emigrants to the United States (among other places) for generations. The relative ease of the process of colonisation, whatever the difficulties, certainly counted as well. I can recall my interview with an elderly former Yiddish newspaper editor in Miami Beach in 1982 against the background of his horror at the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. During the 1920s, when he served as editor of Labor-Zionist Undzher Tseit, Arab land was being purchased legally, with the sales carefully documented. No one seemed to think very much about what happened to the Arab tenant farmers when the land under them disappeared.

The individual generosity of many Palestinians toward hard-pressed Jews, then and later, seems to have been lost to history. What collective Israeli memory retains of the pre-state years is mostly hostility from those who may well have been personally dispossessed. Likewise, I can recall from a book-length travelogue by a Yiddish literary master known as Yehoash depictions of Arabs as part of the physical landscape, hardly real at all, as if the land was waiting to be “filled out” by the Jewish return. The role of the great powers in redividing the region after the First World War, competing French and English interests, the redrawing of existing borders, and the ongoing collapse of the Ottoman Empire—none of this seems to have any role in the narrative of Jewish persecution by the mostly impoverished existing population.

“Searching for traces of Nakba” in her travels in Israel at the end of the twentieth century, Dittmar “began to see my own history in new ways” (117). This sentence could sum up chapters so beautifully written that they do not deserve to be merely summed up. She travels with a U.S. American friend to villages where she grew up and describes the Zionist rituals, games, plays, music, and poetry that made the lives of herself and her parents, both ardent progressives, appear staggeringly heroic in their struggle against the inhabitant-enemies. She and fellow youngsters thus marched in the desert heat to re-imagine the great and often mythic battles of Jews two thousand years earlier: “In blood and fire Judea fell/In blood and fire Judea will rise!” (124).

Like others drawn into lively Israeli discussions of events around the Nakba decades later, Dittmar had served in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), the army of the occupation. She is part of a collective memory, even if she arrived late. The very site of Deir Yassin, where Palestinian civilians were slaughtered as a warning for others to flee, found her pondering what amounts to a nonexistent site. Even her kindly relatives could not accept the notion that the idealists of the

Palmach, a pre-statehood military organisation who despised the brutal nationalism of the revisionists, had themselves later shared in the wider brutality directed against anyone who actually resisted the expulsion orders. Heir to a brutal history, the IDF could not, and still cannot, escape its violent legacy stretching from the West Bank and the Golan to Gaza, now brought back vividly through the high-tech killings of Palestinian civilians and the active support of settler aggression in the West Bank.

Moreover, Arabs were not the only outsiders. Her childhood experiences become painfully vivid in the divisions among Jews her own age. Children of European heritage, like herself, could share schoolwork and games with Jewish youngsters from the Middle East—but not to the point of going on dates, and certainly not marriage to the (Jewish) Other. The darker skinned youth, who bore the signs of a deprived, badly educated background and the shame of parents with bad jobs and poor housing, would one day turn to their own avowed defenders: the most brutally racist politicians in Israel.

Over years of return visits with her photographer-companion to the Israel that she abandoned in the 1960s, Dittmar visited the sites of more than forty villages, seeking traces of the once-rich community lives of Palestinians left behind. Before then, a minority of Jews, especially but not only the socialistic-minded ones, had actually taken the opportunity to meet their neighbours, including with some who had somehow managed to hang on afterward. Often, the very scenes of these conversations, as she observed, have been eradicated by modern sprawl. This real past has been blotted out as the mythic past was steadily set into place. Even the state-directed afforestation of land in some former Palestinian villages had a definite purpose: to keep former inhabitants from the possibility, the dream, of ever returning.

Dittmar mourns especially that her own parents' aspiration for peaceful coexistence could only be doomed. A handful of prominent Jewish figures, including Rabbi Judah Leon Magnes and Martin Buber, warned in a 1947 pamphlet that the

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supporters of Zionism must not stand apart from their Arab neighbours. It took courage for her parents even to belong to Brit Shalom (Covenant for Peace), which argued for regional cooperation and a binational state. Alas for peace, more Jews arrived as Palestinians processed the weight of their own dispossession. Even Jewish leftists, holding up their red flags and faithfully singing "The Internationale," nevertheless affirmed an exclusive "Hebrew labor." Newly founded unions and cooperatives excluded Arabs from the job market in order to

achieve these aspirations. Dittmar does not say so explicitly, but Israeli Communists and the small Marxist party, Mapam, struggled unsuccessfully to forge a shared struggle of Arabs and Jews against their common class enemies.

Dittmar observes that "the Nakba that looks back to Kishinev [the site of an early twentieth-century pogrom in Bessarabia (now Moldova)] and Auschwitz and further back is also a harbinger of the ongoing destruction we see now in the Occupied Territories and Gaza, with a future yet to be determined" (233). That is, the settlers, along with future building contractors and institution builders, will seek to eradicate any physical memory of Palestinian life and culture that remains anywhere they conquer.

The destruction is often incomplete, however. Traces can still be found of an older life. Educators from many parts of the world lead tours—though only to permitted places as long as they are allowed by the Israeli government—of former Palestinian sites and seek to explain their significance to visitors.

All of this offers hope. In the evidence of a life that has been eradicated, signs “keep appearing, unbidden, all of them clues. Beyond what they say are the who, where and why of the telling. They are all runes, markings in languages we have yet to learn if we are ever to listen, hear, and come together” (233). History may yet hold hope when hope is otherwise lacking when we reject the stalemate that only leads to despair.

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❖ **About the author: Paul Buhle** has been a contributor to Monthly Review since 1970. His latest graphic novel is *The Bund: A Graphic History of Jewish Labour Resistance*.



❖ **About this paper:** This paper was originally published in English by Monthly Review in January 2024. This is a review of the book by Linda Dittmar, *Tracing Homelands: Israel, Palestine and the Claims of Belonging* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2023), 240 pages.

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