



October 20, 2005

by Ricki Hollander

BACKGROUND on Professor Ilan Pappé: When Ideology Trumps Scholarship

The inspiration and driving force behind the proposed academic boycott of Israeli institutions is a tenured professor at the University of Haifa who is anything but scholarly. Ilan Pappé is the Israeli-born political science professor and historian who has been at center stage in the attempt by Great Britain's 40,000–member Association of University Teachers' (AUT) to [blacklist Israeli universities](#). An activist in Israel's fringe Communist party, he is among the most extreme of a group of radical Israeli historians who have sought to rewrite Israel's history to suggest the country was born in original sin.

Pappé has long acknowledged that he is not objective and cares little about factual accuracy. He readily admits that ideology drives his historical writings and statements. And his ideology can be simply summed up: Israel is illegitimate and should be the target of international sanctions until it is dismantled as a Jewish state.

Pappé freely expresses his attitude toward historical investigation and academic objectivity:

There is no historian in the world who is objective. I am not as interested in what happened as in how people see what's happened. ("An Interview of Ilan Pappé," Baudouin Loos, *Le Soir [Bruxelles]*, Nov. 29, 1999)

I admit that my ideology influences my historical writings...(Ibid)

Indeed the struggle is about ideology, not about facts. Who knows what facts are? We try to convince as many people as we can that our interpretation of the facts is the correct one, and we do it because of ideological reasons, not because we are truthseekers. (Ibid)

The debate between us is on one level between historians who believe they are purely objective reconstructers of the past, like [Benny] Morris, and those who claim that they are subjective human beings striving to tell their own version of the past, like myself. ("Benny Morris's Lies About My Book," Ilan Pappé, Response to Morris' critique of Pappé's book, "A History of Palestine" published in the *New Republic*, March 22, 2004, *History News Network*, April 5, 2004)

[Historical] Narratives... when written by historians involved deeply in the subject matter they write about, such as in the case of Israeli historians who write about the Palestine conflict, is motivated also... by a deep involvement and a wish to make a point. This point is called ideology or politics. (Ibid)

Yes, I use Palestinian sources for the Intifada: they seem to me to be more reliable, I admit. (Ibid)

Pappé bases his accusations against Israel not on substantiated facts, but on Palestinian narrative. He freely distorts the truth to conform with his ideology. Thus he attests to Israeli army-perpetrated massacres that never occurred. He promotes the myth of a 1948 massacre of the villagers of [Tantura](#), claiming that the Israeli academic establishment is conspiring to repress the information, and he continues to propagate the lie that Israeli committed a massacre in [Jenin](#) in 2002 despite copious refutation (including United Nations reports) of the bogus claim. As in the Tantura case, he suggests there is a conspiracy to cover-up the Jenin "massacre":

Over a year has passed now, since the Israeli army invaded the refugee camp in Jenin, destroyed its houses, killed many of its inhabitants and committed one of the worst war crimes in this present Intifada, Intifada al-Aqsa. With a successful campaign of distortion and manipulation of evidence, the Israeli foreign ministry, with the help of the United States, succeeded in hiding from the world the horrors of Jenin, and even worse, in intimidating anyone daring to tell the truth about what had happened there . . . As comes out vividly from this book (of Palestinian testimony), Jenin was not just a massacre, it was an inhuman act of unimaginable barbarism. ("Searching Jenin: The Most Authoritative Report on the War Crimes We Will Ever Get," Book Review by Ilan Pappé, *Counterpunch*, May 3, 2003)

Pappé particularly seeks to spread his distorted message in the international community, producing books, articles, speeches, interviews and letters. So outrageous and unscholarly are his deceptions that even Benny Morris, himself a "new historian" who has been accused of twisting the truth to fit his own hypothesis of Israel's birth, has set himself apart from Pappé. Morris critiqued Pappé's 2004 book, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* in the *New Republic*. Entitled "Ilan Pappé's New Book is Appalling," Morris' review spells out the problem:

Pappe is a proud postmodernist. He believes that there is no such thing as historical truth, only a collection of narratives as numerous as the participants in any given event or process; and each narrative, each perspective, is as valid and legitimate, as true, as the next...

About the book, Morris writes:

...Unfortunately, much of what Pappé tries to sell his readers is complete fabrication...

...In Pappé's account, there is no faulting the Palestinians for regularly assaulting the Zionist enterprise...The Palestinians are forever victims, the Zionists are forever "brutal colonizers"...

...The multiplicity of mistakes on each page is a product of both Pappé's historical methodology and his political proclivities...

...For those enamored with subjectivity and in thrall to historical relativism, a fact is not a fact and accuracy is unattainable. Why grope for the truth? Narrativity is all. So no reader should be surprised to discover that, according to Pappé. . .[Here Morris provides a partial list of Pappé's numerous falsehoods]

Anyone interested in the real history of Palestine/Israel and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would do well to run vigorously in the opposite direction.

That some around the world eagerly embrace Pappé and his claims even as he himself admits that facts are irrelevant is evidence that truth will not deter the Jewish state's detractors.

More disturbing is that the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, favored by the Israeli cultural and political elite as well as the Western press corps, ran a lengthy puff-piece on Pappé, giving him a forum to present his distorted claims about the boycott. The May 6, 2005 article, entitled "Alone on the Barricades," by Meron Rapoport establishes Pappé as a victim:

On his answering machine, he found at least a dozen death threats...Pappé wasn't very popular among the Haifa University faculty before the AUT decision, and now that's all the more true. The university's president, Prof. Aharon Ben-Ze'ev, has called on him to leave the university and "to implement the boycott" that he supports himself. Members of the faculty are organizing to boycott him in the hallways and not to speak to him...Outside the university walls, some have even called Pappé a real traitor, a public enemy...

The story of the boycott, the controversy over the claims of a massacre at Tantura, and the consequences are presented primarily from Pappé's perspective. While his detractor's claims are mentioned, the article is based on a personal interview with Pappé, allowing him to articulate his position. The reporter asks softball questions, and Pappé is hardly challenged. (For example, he's asked: What is the essence [of the controversy] as you see it? Is the situation really that extreme? So you're deeply disappointed with Israeli academia?) The result is a legitimization of the man, his methods, and even his claims.

No wonder the article is reproduced on dozens of pro-Palestinian and pro-boycott Web sites, which like Pappé, advocate the end of the Jewish state.

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