



March 13, 2007

by Ricki Hollander, Tamar Sternthal

The Washington Post Ignores the Facts on Pappe

On Sunday, March 11, the *Washington Post* published profiles written by Scott Wilson of two Israeli professors: Ilan Pappe and Benny Morris. The profile of Pappe, "[A Shared History. A Different Conclusion](#)," did not provide key context about why he is so reviled in Israel.

Ilan Pappe, a history lecturer at the University of Haifa, freely admits that, in his view, facts are irrelevant when it comes to the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. "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," Pappe said in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Soir*, Nov. 29, 1999.

Elsewhere, Pappe elaborated on his attitude toward historical investigation and academic objectivity: "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 wish to make a point" ([History News Network](#), April 5, 2004.) A more complete collection of Pappe's statements repudiating the value of historical facts is available [here](#).

In light of Pappe's openness about his contemptuous view of scholarship, and his rejection of historical facts in favor of ideology, it is negligent that Scott Wilson's profile of him omits this key context. The piece portrayed the Haifa historian as a "revisionist scholar" who languishes in "nearly complete isolation" in Israel supposedly due to his alleged myth-busting research and political views, in which he opposes the existence of a Jewish state, even within its 1948 boundaries. For example, Wilson quotes without challenge Pappe's absurd allegation that "My research debunked all of the lessons about Israel's creation that I had been raised on."

A Fictitious Agreement on the Facts

The profile of Pappe was paired with a feature on Benny Morris, another so-called Israeli "new historian," whose political views underwent an about-face during the second intifada. Given Pappe's stated rejection of facts, it is particularly startling to

read, that according to Wilson, Pappé and Benny Morris "disagree not on the facts about Israel's founding that they helped uncover but on what lessons they hold nearly six decades later." How can Pappé "agree" "on the facts" when he rejects the very notion of facts? Moreover, **Morris has vigorously disputed Pappé's "facts" about Israel's founding.** Critiquing Pappé's 2004 book, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, Morris wrote in the *New Republic*:

Unfortunately much of what Pappé tries to sell his readers is complete fabrication. . . . This book is **awash with errors of a quantity and a quality that are not found in serious historiography.** . . . 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. (*New Republic*, March 22, 2004)

Morris exposes Pappé's disdain for facts, quoting from his book: "My pro-Palestinian bias is apparent despite the desire of my peers that I stick to facts and the 'truth' when reconstructing past realities. I view any such construction as vain and presumptuous. . . . Mine is a subjective approach. . . ."

Morris then goes on to delineate some of the **factual errors** in Pappé's "reconstruct[ed] past reality":

according to Pappé, the Stern Gang and the Palmach existed 'before the revolt' of 1936 (they were established in 1940-1941); that the Palmach 'between 1946 and 1948' fought against the British (in 1947-1948 it did not); that Ben-Gurion in 1929 was chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive (he was chairman from 1935 to 1948); that the Arab Higher Committee was established 'by 1934' (it was set up in 1936); that the Arab Legion did not withdraw from Palestine, along with the British, in May, 1948 (most of its units did); that the United Nations' partition proposal of November 29, 1947 had 'an equal number of supporters and detractors' (the vote was thirty-three for, thirteen against, and ten abstentions); **that the 'Jewish forces [were] better equipped' than the invading Arab armies in May, 1948 (they were not, by any stretch of the imagination)**; that the first truce was 'signed' on June 10, 1948 (it was never 'signed,' and it began on June 11); that in August, 1948 'the successful Israeli campaigns continued, leading to their complete control of Palestine, apart from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip' (the Second Truce prevailed during August and September, and warfare was resumed only in mid-October); that the Grand Mufti fled Palestine in 1938 (he left in October, 1937); that the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was 'built . . . in 1920' (it was founded in 1925 and constructed during the following decades); that Tel Aviv was 'founded . . . on a Saturday morning in July 1907' (it was 1909); that the late nineteenth-century Zionist pioneers known as the Biluim established 'the first Zionist settlements in Palestine' (they did not), and that they 'were led' by Moshe Lilienblum and Leon Pinsker (they were not). . . ." [the list goes on]

So much for Morris and Pappé agreeing on the facts.

More Debunking of Pappé's 'Debunking'

Other critics have also exposed factual errors and fabrications in Pappé's work. In a

review of Pappé's *A History of Modern Palestine* for [Middle East Quarterly](#), Israeli scholar Efraim Karsh, a leading critic of the "new historians," listed many of these falsehoods:

Yasir Arafat's birthplace is Cairo and not Jerusalem. The U.N. Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP) presented its report on August 31, 1947, not on November 29. Deir Yasin is a village near Jerusalem, and not in Haifa. Lawrence of Arabia had nothing to do with the Anglo-Hashemite correspondence that led to the "Great Arab Revolt" of World War I. Further, this correspondence was initiated by the Hashemites not by the British. Pappé even misspells the official English transliteration of President Weizmann's first name (Chaim, not Haim).

More serious is the book's consistent resort to factual misrepresentation, distortion, and outright falsehood. Readers are told of events that never happened, such as the nonexistent May 1948 Tantura "massacre" or the expulsion of Arabs within twelve days of the partition resolution. They learn of political decisions that were never made, such as the Anglo-French 1912 plan for the occupation of Palestine or the contriving of "a master plan to rid the future Jewish state of as many Palestinians as possible." And they are misinformed about military and political developments, such as the rationale for the Balfour declaration . . .

Karsh's list goes on. In light of these and other errors, Pappé's boast about having supposedly debunked the history of Israel's founding is nothing more than hot air.

History of Hoaxes

Pappé's rejection of facts for political-ideological expediency has played out to its natural conclusion: through the course of his "academic" career - (and that term is a stretch given the circumstances) - Pappé has repeatedly backed bogus claims against Israel. Wilson never mentions these, leaving readers wrongly to conclude that Pappé's ostracization is due to his courageous "debunk[ing] all of the lesson's about Israel's creation," or perhaps also to his strident criticism of "Israel's occupation of Palestinian land" (including Tel Aviv and Haifa). These false claims include the myth of a 1948 massacre of the villagers of [Tantura](#) and the claim that the Israeli academic establishment is conspiring to repress the information; as well as the bogus assertion that Israel committed a massacre in [Jenin](#) in 2002.

Supported Academic Blacklisting of Israel

Scott Wilson also failed to note that Pappé's poor standing in Israel was not helped by the central role that he played in the British Association of University Teachers (AUT) 2005 efforts to boycott Israeli universities. As earlier [documented by CAMERA](#), the AUT motion was based on Pappé's own calls to the international community to blacklist Israeli institutions in general and Haifa University in particular. His boycott calls centered around what he mischaracterized as his persecution due to his support of Tantura myth, which he pedaled to the AUT as fact (or rather, a "reconstruct[ed] past reality").

Conclusion

In neglecting to report Pappé's disdain for facts and his subsequent propensity for factual errors, as well as false accusations about Israeli massacres, Wilson provides a distorted understanding as to why Pappé is isolated. Worse, his critical omissions give the misimpression that Pappé's writings on Israel's founding are actually credible, and that Pappé is a brave historian whose groundbreaking work is damaging to the monolithic establishment's (wrong) version of events.

Had Wilson mentioned, for instance, that Pappé mocks the notion of historic "truthseekers," readers would have gained quite a different understanding.

Profile of Benny Morris

The profile of Benny Morris in the *Post*, "[Israel Revisited](#)," was fair and informative. However, in the Morris profile, Pappé is allowed space to denigrate Morris' integrity. Their current antagonism for each other is described as "different interpretations of Israel's history," making it seem like they agree on the facts (which they don't), but not the conclusions to be drawn from them:

"Pappé, a senior lecturer at the University of Haifa, shared countless lecture hall stages with Morris after their first books appeared, and the men became friends. Now they no longer speak, their relationship poisoned by a series of angry public exchanges rooted in their vastly different interpretations of Israel's history. 'Morris bothers me for what he represents, not as a person,' Pappé says during a visit to his cluttered university office. 'The extremes he is willing to go to justify Zionism and the prejudice he shows against the Palestinians is shared by so many Jews.' "

The Morris profile ended on an important note - Morris' view of the key cause of the ongoing conflict:

"The problem that existed here in 1947 remains today -- the Arabs don't accept Israel's presence," Morris says. "A major switch in mind-set must occur for peace to come. That is the sine qua non of any peace agreement. All the rest -- the road map, the peace process -- is just footwork."