

1948 The First Arab-Israeli War by Benny Morris.
Yale University Press 2008.

The word 'revisionist' when levelled at an historian is usually used in a pejorative way, and it has certainly been used by Benny Morris's enemies to describe his previous work, in my view grossly unfairly; as one of Israel's leading 'new historians', using material accumulated through the most diligent research, Professor Morris has helped to reshape our understanding of the origins of the State of Israel, as well as presenting the tumultuous events that made the State into what it is today in a realistic and de-mythologised way.

In 1948, Benny Morris describes in detail, from both the Israeli and Arab perspective, the particulars of the first Arab-Israeli War, the events that led up to it, and its immediate aftermath. The volume of detail is extraordinary yet this is by no means a dry book of history, indeed Morris tells the story in a vibrant manner that maintains the reader's interest throughout as well as informing.

For those who think they know what happened in the Middle East in 1947, 1948 and 1949, there is much that will surprise, and for those who think they have a broad, general grasp of that piece of modern history there is much fascinating material that fills in gaps.

1948 is divided into 10 main chapters followed by an excellent chapter of conclusions. Following an overview of the historical background, the various actions of the United Nations that lead up to the resolution of 1947 to partition Palestine, and the two stage Civil War between November 1947 and May 1948, Morris then considers the Pan-Arab invasion and especially the three major actions by the Israel Defence Force following the truce of June/July '48 which greatly enlarged the new state's territory. The tenth chapter describes the Armistice process of 1949.

In his conclusions, Benny Morris is immensely even-handed in his assessments of the two sides' strengths and weaknesses, as well as the type of operations they mounted and the atrocities perpetrated by them both.

1948 is a memorable piece of work, and the acute reader will note many instances when events of 60 years ago prefigured those happening today; for me the most chilling and disturbing quote is by David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, speaking to the Zionist leader Nahum Goldman, to whom he remarked that the Arabs would never accept the presence of a Jewish State within their midst, no matter what that state achieved for the region as a whole. 60 years later his words have a prescience and resignation to them that still serve to sadden all those who watch the affairs of the region with concern and interest.

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