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**ISRAEL’S PUBLICATIONS AGENCY AND THE 1948 PALESTINIAN REFUGEES**

**Rafi Nets-Zehngut**

**Abstract**

This chapter chronicles the way in which Israel’s main institution for the dissemination of information (the national Publications Agency) described, between the early 1950s and 2004, the causes of 1948 Palestinian exodus which led to the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. This is done by analyzing all the Agency’s publications that address these causes and were produced during this 50-year period. Generally, it was found that throughout the years, the publications presented the Zionist narrative of the causes of the exodus (willing flight of the refugees). Only three publications presented a narrative that slightly deviated from the Zionist narrative (Zionist-critical), addressing insignificant expulsions, while using euphemism and Softening References. In addition, the chapter describes (based on interviews with key figures in the Agency) the modus operandi of the Agency, and the reasons why self-censorship was practiced in addressing the exodus causes. Four main reasons for not addressing the 1948 expulsions of Palestinians were observed: 1) The wish to present Israel in a positive manner for domestic and international reasons; 2) Identification with the Zionist ideology; 3) Abiding by institutional norms; 4) Concern of sanctions.

**INTRODUCTION**

Nations involved in an intractable conflict usually present a biased *official memory* of the conflict. To fit their interests, such memory portrays these nations positively and their rivals negatively. As such, it plays an important role in the conflict by affecting the psychological and behavioral reactions of the parties towards their rivals. Therefore, such memory is of importance for scholarly research as attested by the blooming research literature in recent years on memory, especially in the context of conflict, war, and peace.¹

Israel’s intractable conflict with the Palestinians and the Arab states is by no means exceptional in Israel’s quest for legitimacy and self-righteousness, among others, by producing and disseminating its own memory about the causes and development of the conflict. One of Israel’s major official institutions endowed with the production of such a
memory for the Israelis is the Information Center (merkaz ha-hasbara), specifically the Publications Agency (sherut ha-pirsumim), one of the Center’s units. The displacement and exodus of more than half of the Arab population from their homes during the 1948 Palestine War has remained the core issue shaping the conflict and the identities and policies of the parties concerned with far-reaching implications on its possible resolution. No other issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has so strongly shaped the parties’ collective image of “self” and “other” and become identified with Palestinian claims of victimhood, injustice, and historical wrongdoing on Israel’s part.

In view of the perpetuation of the Palestinian refugee problem, the growing international recognition of the Palestinian claims for statehood after 1967, and, as of the late 1980s, the broadening awareness of Israel’s active role in the 1948 Palestinian disaster and its ominous significance for the self-righteousness of the Israeli society, and no less, Israel’s moral standing and international legitimacy, the question arises: how did Israel shape its own official memory about this issue? More specifically, how did the state cope with new claims – both political and academic – challenging its own Zionist memory concerning the 1948 exodus? These questions are addressed here by scrutinizing the publications produced and disseminated by the Agency, Israel’s official instrument for producing public knowledge about the state’s political and social history and identity. This chapter explores the Agency’s narrative of the 1948 Palestinian exodus from its advent to the early 2000s, as well as the institutional and political factors that shaped the dynamics of its construction.

Methodologically, the research period encompasses approximately 50 years – from the early 1950s to 2003 – when the Agency was transformed into the Information Headquarters (matte ha-hasbara – hereafter “the Headquarters”) and its activities were significantly reduced. The findings are based on the Agency’s publications as well as
interviews with its senior officials. The interviews were conducted mostly as in-depth, semi-structured interviews, in order to explore the modus operandi of the Agency and the production of the official version. All surviving directors as well as two former employees of the Center/Agency and the authors of two of the Agency’s publications were interviewed.

Twenty publications were examined for this study, all in Hebrew; they were traced in the Headquarters’ offices and in various archives, as well as in private and public libraries. Their content analysis mainly focused on narrative about the causes and process of the exodus. The historical narratives on the 1948 Palestinian exodus are largely represented by a continuum with the Zionist and Palestinian contradictory master-narratives on each end, and others, comprised more or less of elements of each of those in between. For the purposes of analysis in this article, we discern two such mixed types of narrative namely, a Zionist-critical narrative, close to the Zionist one, and a critical/balanced narrative somewhere in the middle. According to the Zionist narrative – the Palestinians fled voluntarily, mainly because of public appeals of their leadership and of Arab states to leave their localities to facilitate the invasion by the Arab armies. According to the Zionist-critical narrative, the vast majority of the Palestinians left voluntarily, with only an insignificant number of them expelled. According to the critical narrative (often titled, since the late 1980s, “post-Zionist”), some of the Palestinians left voluntarily (e.g., due to societal collapse, fear and helplessness, and calls of leadership for temporary departure), while many others were expelled by the Jewish militias and later by the Israeli military forces. According to the Palestinian narrative, the Palestinians were forced by the Zionist/Israeli forces to leave their homes as part of a pre-meditated ethnic cleansing.

Other aspects of the Agency’s narrative addressed in the content analysis are, for example, the type of localities discussed (e.g., large or small), the extent of discussion of the
exodus (e.g., length), how the expulsions were addressed (e.g., using euphemism or diminishing their importance), and the sources that were mentioned in support of the narratives presented.

The article begins with a discussion of relevant theoretical aspects of collective memory and conflict, followed by an overview of the inclusive Israeli collective memory of the exodus. It then describes the modus operandi of the Agency followed by the main part of the article, namely representations of the causes and process of the exodus. The conclusions discuss some insights about the dynamics of this memory.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND CONFLICT
Collective memory is generally defined as representations of the past of a group that are collectively adopted. These representations relate to major events, which are of special importance to the collective, and they take the form of narratives.

Collective memory consists of two main types. First, the popular memory, defined as representations of the past held by the society members including tribes and ethno-national communities without their own state, which is often expressed via public opinion surveys. It significantly influences the psychological (e.g., emotions, attitudes, motivations, and national identity) and behavioral reactions of the people holding it, and therefore accorded great importance. The second type of memory is the official one – defined as representations of the past adopted by the formal institutions of the state. This memory is manifested via formal outputs such as state publications, national celebrations, national anthems, sites and monuments, curriculum and textbooks in the educational system, and museums. Political leaders and state officials are aware of these products’ potential impact on the popular memory and, regardless of the regime they serve – authoritarian or democratic – they employ the vast resources of the state to attain this purpose. To this aim, they also encourage
the societal institutions to produce publications and other outputs, which may impact the popular memory of the citizens.\textsuperscript{16}

Collective memory relates, inter alia, to political conflicts with which scholarly research is most interested. Collective memory of a conflict consists of the narratives that describe the events that led to the conflict and its course. Typically, its dominant narrative is selective, simplistic, and biased, and portrays in a dichotomous manner righteous “self” vs. evil “other”.\textsuperscript{17} This typical narrative is functional during the climax of intractable conflict, since it provides each party with the socio-psychological basis needed to meet the enormous challenges that such a conflict poses. It explains to the people why they are asked to sacrifice during the conflict, justifies the conduct of their country, delegitimizes the rival, and motivates the people to be patriotic and support the state during the conflict. Such narrative, however, also inhibits de-escalation of the conflict, its peaceful resolution, and reconciliation between the parties.\textsuperscript{18} The discussion regarding collective memory in general, and of conflicts in particular, is by and large true also regarding official memory of conflicts.\textsuperscript{19}

The research literature about official memory of a conflict is broadly interested in official institutions and authorities, rarely conducting a systematic study of the products of official agencies in charge of disseminating information to the wide public. Moreover, the explanatory aspect of studies regarding such memory is often based on narrow circumstantial and external evidence without first-hand information from the figures determining the modus operandi of the given official institution. This leaves the findings somewhat invalidated, questioning the extent to which the examined publications, or the staff behind them, represent the institution’s entire product of official memory.\textsuperscript{20}

This section aims to address these lacunas and contribute to the research by analyzing the narrative fostered by Israel’s main official institution assigned to produce
knowledge for the public about the 1948 exodus. The study examines *all* the Agency's publications produced throughout its period of operation and, in addition, uses interviews with the Agency's senior staff whose contribution to our understanding of the findings was irreplaceable.

**ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINE CONFLICT**

The Israeli-Arab/Palestinian conflict has lasted for about a century while causing severe human and material losses to the parties involved. Following the 1936-39 Arab Revolt it became the uppermost factor shaping the Jewish (and later Israeli) existence, ideology, and identity. From the outset, Israel's leaders were aware of the important role of their people’s popular memory of the conflict, hence the state undertook to disseminate the Zionist narrative about the conflict among its citizens. Generally, this was a typical self-serving narrative of conflict, selective and biased, presenting a simplistic manner of events in a black-and-white way. It blamed the Arabs/Palestinians for the outbreak of hostilities in the wake of the UN Partition Resolution on 29 November 1947 and its escalation to an all-out war while portraying Israelis positively as peace-loving, morally superior, and victims of the conflict.

A central element in Israel’s historical narrative of the conflict refers to the causes of the 1948 exodus and the Palestinian refugee problem. This issue is, especially due to its deliberate preservation by the Arab world, of great political, psychological, and social importance for both parties. Since 1948, the Zionist narrative not only took no responsibility for the exodus, but also attributed it solely to the Palestinians themselves and the Arab states. This narrative was widely disseminated by all available means including the educational system, the mass media – most of which represented political parties until the early 1990s, the academic institutions, newspapers, publishing houses, and the IDF.
Early Israeli testimonies about expulsion of Palestinians were published in limitedly circulated forums already during the war, and non-Israeli Jewish scholars published critical studies of the 1948 War as early as the late 1950s. Some Israeli-Jews published memoirs of 1948 along similar lines in the late 1960s but it was notably as of the late-1970s that challenges to the dominant Zionist narrative became increasingly apparent in Israel, ascribed, inter alia, to the shocking impact of the 1973 War on Israeli consensus on national security. The critical discourse on 1948 in Israel came in the form of memoirs, some of which appeared in the printed media, including revelations made by small ultra-leftist groups. The growing exposure of Israelis to the critical narrative was also nurtured by the public controversies triggered by the publication of fictional literature. A notable case is the debate on S. Yizhar’s story “Khirbet Khiz’ah”, describing a deliberate expulsion of Palestinians from their village in 1948, following its publication in 1949, and again over the screening of a cinematic version of the story in late 1978 by Israel’s single state-owned television channel. By the late 1970s, the Zionist narrative of “no-expulsion” had been increasingly challenged by a rather complex version of the Palestinian exodus – the critical narrative.

The late 1980s witnessed the commencement of a revisionist history of the birth of Israel commonly identified with the “New Historians”. Employing the newly released Israeli official archives on 1948 and adopting a critical approach to the Zionist narrative of the 1948 War, the new historiography targeted central elements of this narrative defined as “myths”, a primary one of which was the causes for the 1948 exodus, adopting the critical narrative. Hence, a 1987 comprehensive study by historian Benny Morris presented a critical narrative regarding the exodus. While refuting the Arab claims that the exodus was the result of a Zionist master plan to expel the Palestinians, Morris provided ample evidence that the exodus of Arab-Palestinians was at least partly the result of expulsion. Furthermore, as of
June 1948 Israel adopted a policy, which was only partly implemented, of preventing the return of the refugees to their homes in the territories under its control. The new historiography, especially Morris’s study, triggered an intensive debate in Israeli academia, media, and the public in general touching on foundational issues of the morality and legitimacy of the state, succinctly phrased by Morris’s piercing question “Was Israel born in sin?” The juxtaposition of the new historiography with the Intifada, which broke out in late 1987, rendered this debate all the more critical implying a direct line of Israeli unjust policies towards the Palestinians between 1948 and the present.

The critical societal publications – mostly those of the New Historians – strongly challenged the official Zionist narrative of the exodus, challenging the state apparatus under discussion to cope with it.

THE PUBLICATIONS AGENCY – OBJECTIVES, ROLE, AND PERFORMANCE

The Information Center, with the Agency as part of it, was founded in the early 1950s as part of the Prime Minister’s Office. Between 1967 and 1977, the Agency was affiliated with various ministries, and from 1978 a part of the Ministry of Education. Since the early 1990s, the Center’s budget was reduced due to budgetary restrictions determined by the Ministry of Finance. In 2004, its title was changed to the Information Headquarters. Its staff was drastically reduced (from 80 people to only 6), as well as its responsibilities. In addition, the number of its editors was reduced from 11 in the 1970s to 2 in 2003.

The Center’s main aims throughout its operation were to provide the Israeli public with information about the activities of the various ministries, to nourish the Jewish and democratic character of the state, to enhance the connection between the Jewish citizens and the Diaspora, and to strengthen the attachment and the contribution of the citizens to the state (mainly in the context of the conflict). To achieve these aims, it dealt mainly with the
topics related to the Israeli society, science development, the history of the Jewish nation, the Zionist movement, Israel’s foundation, and the conflict. A paragraph from one of the Agency’s 1971 publications typifies the official attitude to the conflict:

Parallel to the hot war the Arabs are conducting against us, along the borders and in terror activities against civilians, an Arab propaganda war is taking place around the world. This Arab propaganda … is aimed against the State of Israel and the Jewish nation … [T]he purpose of this booklet is to strengthen the recognition of the Israeli youth in the justness of our basic standpoint, also so that he can cope with the “propaganda war” when he will be required to do so.

To achieve its tasks the Center used various units, which dealt with organizing tours, producing films, holding exhibitions and events, and producing publications. The publications – books, booklets, and flyers – were produced by the Agency, written by its staff or by external authors (e.g., scholars, war veterans, or journalists), who were chosen, among other criteria, on the assumption that they will write in an “appropriate manner” (from the standpoint of the state). They were distributed among students and teachers in the educational system, tour guides, journalists, institutions of higher education, lecturers, the IDF, Israelis travelling or living abroad, the Jewish Agency, and the public in general (different types of publications were distributed to different audiences at different periods of time). There is no data on numbers of copies of these publications or on their scope of distribution to specific sectors.

THE RIGIDITY OF OFFICIAL MEMORY

From its foundation to 2004, the mode of operation of the Agency/Center remained unchanged. In the first decades after the Center’s foundation, including a long period when Ya’acov Shatz served as the Director of the Agency and later the Center (1961-96), the Agency strictly adhered to the Zionist line. As Shatz attested: “Usually we were very very loyal … to the official line of publicity … so it is true that we got a reputation of ‘writing on behalf of’ [the state …]. Everybody that works in the Information Center works for the state.
There is nothing to do about this." In 1996, Doron Shohet became the Center's director. During his tenure the Center's policy partly changed due to his approach. He disapproved biased official publications and maintained that in a democratic state like Israel the public should be informed as much as possible by objective sources, preferably academic, with no political or ideological identification. The interpretation of information should be made by every citizen on his/her own. Despite the “change of mind” represented by Shohet, the line of publications, especially regarding the exodus, remained unchanged.

In the years 1968-88 20 publications were produced, dealing, directly or indirectly, with the 1948 exodus, representing Israel’s growing need to cope with the increasing military and international diplomatic activities of the PLO in the wake of the 1967 War, which culminated in the eruption of the Palestinian uprising in the Occupied Territories in late 1987. Two of the publications addressed Israel’s War of Independence, three on foreign affairs, and another three were part of the “Know What to Reply” Series. This series began at the end of the 1960s as a response to the growing awareness of the need to address the Palestinian and Arab international diplomatic campaign against Israel, demanding, inter alia, the return of the 1948 Palestinians into Israel. It was meant to provide Israelis abroad with proper ready-made responses to criticism of Israel, as well as to strengthen their internal belief in Israel’s just and moral conduct. Three additional publications dealt with the Palestinians, four more reviewed operations of IDF brigades in the 1948 War, and one was about the famous debate between the British scholar Arnold Toynbee and Israel’s ambassador to Canada Yaacov Herzog. The other four publications deal with various aspects of the conflict.

The publications about 1948 often focused on the military and political conduct of the Jewish side with relatively brief discussion of the Arab-Palestinian community in the War,
its political objectives, and military conduct, emphasizing its collapse and mass exodus.\textsuperscript{46} As of the early 1970s other publications specifically addressed the Arab refugee problem, its origins and significance in the broader context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, indicating the growing international attention to this problem and support for the Palestinian resistance movement.\textsuperscript{47} Typically, earlier publications, from the late 1960s, dealt with the exodus briefly, while some of the later ones dealt with it at greater length. Most were written by the staff of the Agency or senior figures of the 1948 War, veterans and less so by scholars (and one by an employee of the Prime Minister’s Office). Publications written by other than the Agency's staff underwent considerable editing.

Except for minor differences, the vast majority of the surveyed publications (17 out of 20) presented the typical Zionist narrative regarding the 1948 exodus. Explaining the causes for the Arab exodus, the Zionist line of argumentation by and large emphasized the Palestinians’ responsibility for initiating the 1948 War, hence their full responsibility for its outcomes: “The refugee problem is an outcome of the war that was initiated against us by the Arab countries”.\textsuperscript{48}

The surveyed publications reiterate that “The vast majority of them [the Palestinians] left on their own free will.”\textsuperscript{49} Other publications, especially those dedicated to the Palestinian refugee problem further elaborated on the causes and circumstances of the Arab flight, emphasizing that the Palestinians left despite repeated Jewish efforts to convince them to stay. In fact, “The Jews observed with astonishment the scene of the Arab mass and panicked exodus. Arab clerics attested … about the uncontrolled flight of their people saying that had those fleeing wished to stay in their villages they could have done so but ‘they listened to the Mufti’.”\textsuperscript{50}
That the exodus was ordered by the Arab leadership was clearly manifest in the cases of the mixed cities, especially Tiberias and Haifa. In the former case, once the Arab majority (6,000) faced defeat at the hands of the Jewish minority (2,000), they fled the city with British transportation. In the case of Haifa, the Arab leaders decided to leave despite Jewish efforts to convince them to stay in town and resume their normal life as equal citizens. The British military authorities perceived the Haganah conditions to the Arabs “reasonable” but the Arab leaders, who initially agreed to accept the Jewish offer changed their mind on the same day due to radio broadcasts from the Arab Higher Committee, the political leadership of the Arab-Palestinians, ordering all of them to leave. A publication from 1970 provided an excerpt from a pamphlet produced in 1948 by the union of Jewish workers of Haifa asking the Arabs not to leave.

The role of the Arab Higher Committee in instructing the latter to leave is repeatedly presented in specific cases, most significantly of Haifa, resulting in the exile of 70,000 Arab residents. Similarly, the Arabs of the coastal plain were instructed to leave their villages shortly after the citrus harvest, which preceded the Deir Yasin massacre, and thus refute the Arab argument about the impact of this event on the Arab exodus.

The Arab exodus from Haifa was the rule rather than the exception. The city of Jaffa and many villages were abandoned before being threatened by war. Oftentimes, thousands of Arabs ran away when confronting a handful of Jewish soldiers. The Jewish military impact on the Arab population, however, is rarely mentioned. Hence, in Safed, “In one night, 14,000 Arabs run away from 1,500 ultra-orthodox Jews,” even though the Arabs had held the dominating strongholds in town.

One publication referred to the existing explanations for the exodus: “The Arab leaders organized it; the British initiated it; the Mufti’s horrific propaganda acted as a
boomerang; the Deir Yasin massacre conducted by the Etzel and Lehi frightened the Arabs.”

Succinctly put, the mass Arab exodus was the result of the Arab military strategy of encouraging the exodus combined with panic. It was precisely the success of the Arab leadership’s propaganda, which aimed to create an artificial problem of “refugees” to prepare the ground for, and justify the Arab states’ military invasion, that the exodus turned into an unreasonable, uncontrollable flight which that leadership attempted to stem but to no avail.\(^55\)

While this argument remained dominant in the Agency’s publications, other explanations were offered, such as the negative impact of the Arab Army of Deliverance: “Improper behavior towards the local Arab population as a cause of the flight can be found in the attitude towards the local residents of the Arab volunteers that invaded the Land of Israel in order to ‘free’ it […] the local population was afraid from its defenders more than from the Jews … hundreds preferred to run away.”\(^56\) Another explanation for the voluntary flight was the Arabs’ unwillingness to live as a minority in a Jewish state: “No doubt that many Arabs that left the territory of Israel in 1948 … did it because they did not want to live under Jewish regime. It is a natural reaction of people who do not want to live as a national minority.”\(^57\)

Other publications offered a sophisticated structural explanation of the collapse of the Arab-Palestinians as a political and military factor and consequent mass flight, reiterating the complex and diverse nature of these events. Although the authors were apparently informed by recent historical studies, they entirely ignored the impact of the Jewish-Israeli policy and military operations on the exodus while highlighting built-in social and political weaknesses of the Arab-Palestinian society as opposed to the Jewish community’s strengths.\(^58\)

1. The absence of a central and authoritative political leadership and organized military force. The Arab-Palestinian leaders were divided; most of them ran away once the
military course of events turned against the Arab side and conducted their policy from the neighboring Arab countries in disconnection with the reality in Palestine. The Arab military forces were organized as “gangs”, or temporarily summoned villagers, that quickly collapsed when confronting the Jewish organized forces.

2. The lack of a constructive vision of a national movement based on shared territorial identity. The central national aspiration rallying the Arab population was the denial of Jewish existence in Palestine. Once the implementation of this aspiration faced difficulties, and in the absence of any constructive objective to continue staying in the country, running away was simple.

3. The demography of the Arab population, many of whom were originally from the neighboring Arab countries, whose flight was nothing other than “returning home”.

4. The social structure and dependency on the leaders who were the first to leave, thus setting off their dependents to do the same.

5. Psychology of fear of Jewish atrocities as a result of projecting Arab behavioral norms onto the anticipated Jewish behavior.

6. Belief in the final Arab victory as promised by the Arab states, which would facilitate the refugees’ return to their homes and fear, among those who wanted to stay, lest they would be castigated as traitors once the Arab armies conquer the country.

7. The British policy of separation between the two communities by homogenizing the population – Jewish or Arab – in the mixed cities. In effect, this policy encouraged the Arabs to leave but failed to convince the Jews to abandon their homes knowing they could rely on the Haganah for their defense.

Beyond these underlying explanations and more immediate causes of the exodus, to explain its voluntary and early occurrence the official publications resorted to what might be defined as “meta-explanation”, referring to built-in sense of reliance on, and belonging to, a broader Arab space in which the Arab refugees sought a safe haven. Hence, the early 1948 exodus of the Arab elite is presented as a repetition of the latter’s voluntary and temporary exile during the 1936-39 Arab revolt.59 While identifying with the painful loss of the Arab refugees’ homes and lands, the exit from their towns and villages is described as relatively simple, like “going for a journey from one quarter to another in [the same] city”. After all, most of the refugees remained within their homeland territory and among Arabs like them, and thus could not perceive their movement as going to exile.60
To further bolster the argument that the Arab exodus was voluntary, driven above all by fear rather than forced by Jewish violence, the Zionist narrative mobilized various Arab public statements expressing contempt towards the panicked flight and blaming the refugees themselves not only for their tragedy but also for inflicting heavy losses on the Arab armies. At the same time, other statements, made mainly by Arab-Palestinians and published after the 1948 War, ostensibly validated the Zionist claim that the Arab states and the AHC had initiated and instructed the mass exodus: “The Arab governments told us ‘leave so we can enter’. So we left, but they did not enter.” Another Arab source stated that “Had the Arab leaders not disseminated horrific stories about Deir Yasin the residents of the Arab areas in Palestine would not have run away of their homes.” The conclusion drawn from these statements was that this Arab contempt towards the Palestinian refugees is precisely what explains the latter’s need to forge a direct cause-effect connection between the Deir Yasin massacre and their mass exodus.

A booklet in 1978 concisely presented the Zionist narrative on Israel’s War of Independence and underlined the core elements of the Zionist narrative. It was printed in the largest number of copies (including reprinted editions as late as 1996), and distributed to the public at least until 2006. Its continued dissemination across decades without any change, regardless of the Oslo accords, highlights the Agency’s adherence to the original Zionist narrative about the Arab exodus. The following paragraph illustrates the essence of this narrative:

Initially the local Arabs scored successes [in the War]. However, once their momentum was checked and the Jewish community took the initiative in the “Nahshon” operation and execution of ‘Tokhni Dalet’ [Plan D], the Arabs of Eretz-Israel began collapsing quickly. This collapse combined with the calls of the Arab countries to the Eretz-Israel Arabs to leave their localities in order not to get in the way of the Arab armies’ operations, and to [later] return as winners, which was most evident in the mass flight of the Arabs from their localities to the Arab countries … it is worth noting that the flight of the Eretz-Israel Arabs was contrary to
the will of the Jewish community in the land, which on a few occasions called the Arab residents to stay in their localities.\textsuperscript{64}

Only three publications, all by figures other than the Agency’s staff, referred briefly to cases of expulsion of Arabs by the Jewish forces as exceptional and of insignificant scope, though still largely adhering to the argument of voluntary Palestinian exodus (i.e., presenting the Zionist-critical narrative). The limited reference to forced exile of Palestinians is the closest, albeit still a far cry from this critical narrative.\textsuperscript{65} The first publication (1970), by Mary Syrkin,\textsuperscript{66} a Jewish, Harvard University historian and a close friend and biographer of Golda Meir (prime minister in 1969-73), presented a detailed description of the Zionist narrative, while also asserting:

Even though it was not the policy of the “Hagana” to encourage the flight of the Arabs, still a few hostile villages which threatened the road to Jerusalem were evacuated by the commanders of the Hagana. Lifting the siege on Jerusalem was one of the central operations in the war. Therefore, a few villages which served as bases for the enemy were forcibly evacuated … and their residents joined the flight. However, these were just a few incidents which took place at a later phase, and the number of people involved was too small to influence the scope of the mass flight, or to explain it.\textsuperscript{67}

The other two publications, of 1983 and 1987, on the 1936-48 Arab-Jewish conflict and the battles of the Negev Brigade in the 1948 War, respectively, were authored by Meir Pa’il, former Palmach commander, IDF colonel, historian, and a left wing political activist. Referring to the Deir Yassin massacre in the 1983 publication he referred to the moral and political dilemmas of the war, expressing sorrow for “the occurrence of such an affair in our history”, even if the Arabs had perpetrated more severe murders and terror activities. While largely ignoring the expulsion of the Arab villagers along the road from the coastal plain to Jerusalem, he however, underlined the insignificance of the massacre as a contribution to the Zionist interest or as a trigger for mass Arab exodus. Challenging the common argument about the link between this massacre and the mass Arab flight, he rightly points to the fact that most Arab neighboring villages within the radius of 10 km from Deir Yassin, from Beit
Iksa and al-Nabi Samweel in the north, Qalunia in the west, and 'Ein Karim and Maliha in the south, remained in place. The Haganah had to fight for each of these villages and others, paying a heavy price which in some cases ended with scorching failure. In this context, Pa'il refers to the village of Abu-Ghosh (west of Jerusalem) as another case in which the inhabitants remained in place after Deir Yassin, were expelled, but later allowed to return to their village. One may argue that Pa'il's reference to the expulsion of the Abu Ghosh inhabitants from their village and permit to return, one of a minute number of such cases in the country – is nothing but an attempt to show Israel's merciful face. Pa'il's main argument is by far more comprehensive, minimizing the significance of Deir Yassin's massacre as a factor triggering the Arab exodus.

The 1987 publication contained only one sentence about the Arabs residing in the Negev Brigade's area of operations, stating that the residents of the villages conquered by the brigade – Burayr, Hulayqat, Kawkaba, Bayt Tima, Sawafir, Jammama, Huj, Simsims, and Najd – all were “evacuated” to the area of Gaza in the first half of May 1948. Even when these three publications referred to cases of expulsion as marginal and insignificant, their language was typically euphemistic. The word “expulsion” was never used, but rather softer words such as “evacuation” (pinui), “forcibly cleared” (punu be-ko'ah), or “removal with consent” (ba’avarah be-baskamah). The use of such words was not coincidental and meant to reduce the damage to Israel's image. This was another manifestation of the self-censorship that the Agency staff practiced, which was a common phenomenon then in Israeli state institutions.

Moreover, these three publications expressed what will be titled here as “Softening References” – discussion of aspects that minimize the impact of the description of a difficult event. An example is the way Syrkin minimized the meaning of the expulsions emphasizing
that the Haganah had no policy of encouraging the Arab flight, and that the “evacuations”
(namely, expulsions) that took place were very important in order to win the war: "These
were just a few incidents which took place at a later phase, and the number of people
involved was too small to influence the scope of the mass flight, or to explain it."

Throughout the years, the publications presented the Zionist narrative of the causes
of the exodus, for the most part. Only three presented a narrative that slightly deviated from
the Zionist narrative (Zionist-critical), addressing insignificant expulsions, while using
euphemism and Softening References.

DYNAMICS OF THE AGENCY’S PERFORMANCE

Until the 1967 War the Agency did not produce publications that dealt with the 1948 exodus
because the issue was until then of relatively little international interest even after the
foundation of the PLO in 1964. The change of this policy after 1967 was indicated, among
others, by including the Palestinian issue in the Agency’s publications. In addition to the
exodus of some 250,000 refugees from the West Bank to Jordan, the 1967 war also brought
a large population of refugees under Israeli rule and⁷⁴ boosted the prestige and the military
activities of the Palestinian guerrilla groups, especially across the Jordan River, all of which
necessitated the Agency's inputs. The impact of the 1967 War is clearly identified in the
introduction of an Agency's publication from 1970, asserting before discussing the 1948
Palestinian refugees that "The Six-Day War led the State of Israel to practically deal with the
Arab refugees problem … now the State of Israel became a refugee 'Host Country', with
responsibilities. It is worthwhile examining a few questions regarding this matter."⁷⁵

The absence of the Palestinian refugee problem in the pre-1967 publications can be
regarded as official amnesia, or silence, of the state. Since the end of the 1948 War Israel not
only consistently denied its responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem but also stifled
all international efforts aimed at allowing the return of the refugees to their original homes or compensating them for their abandoned property. The regionalization of the conflict and its revision into one between Israel and its Arab neighboring states allowed Israel to frame the refugee problem as a component of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the perpetuation of which was but an Arab weapon against Israel. If there was any Israeli reference to the Palestinian refugees, both in the early 1950s and after the PLO’s founding in 1964 except for some individuals’ literary and poetic expressions – it was mainly in this context and, increasingly as a military threat represented by the guerrilla warfare waged against Israel by Palestinians across the borders with the Arab states.

Since 1968, relevant publications started being produced by the Agency and along the years their extent of discussion regarding the Palestinians increased. Additionally, as time passed more publications dealt with this issue, albeit in the wider context of the conflict and not in the specific context of the 1948 War. The growing scope of Israeli publications presenting a critical narrative about the 1948 exodus as of the late 1970s, obliged the Agency’s staff to address this issue more directly. One of the key figures in the Center describes the early awareness of the critical narrative among the Agency officials: “Twenty years after 1948 there were here [in Israel] many people, thousands of people, that knew that there was expulsion [in 1948]. So what, did we live in a bubble? … The fact that we were working for the Information Center did not isolate us.”

The late 1970s also experienced the 1977 political turnover, namely the rise to power of the right-wing Likud party, the first after three decades of Labor-led governments, which as far as the Agency’s staff was concerned, inhibited the portrayal of the critical narrative by the Agency. Whereas until 1977 there was full ideological identity between the directors of the Center/Agency to the ruling party, underpinning a relatively harmonious relationship
between the two, as of 1977 the Center’s staff became “tainted” by the new ruling party as incapable of properly representing the state. The impact on the Agency was two-fold: first, its staff became more cautious in their conduct, in a manner that inhibited deviation from hitherto prevailing memory; second, the Government’s secretary, amongst others, decreased the use of the Agency’s services.77

Despite its familiarity with the critical narrative about the 1948 exodus, the Agency refrained from referring to it even though the interviewees in this research regarded it as the true story of the exodus. The reasons for this avoidance were diverse. The Agency was obliged to conform to the state’s formal policy and to present Israel in a positive manner: "We had self-censorship about what can and cannot be written … with regard to disputed issues," as described by one of its former directors.78 And a colleague explained: "We … were not going to publish anything that would doubt the Jewish right to establish a state in Eretz-Israel."79 The Agency’s raison d’être was to portray Israel’s image as righteous as possible for both domestic and international purposes. Domestically, such image was necessary in the process of nation-building of the newly founded state, especially in view of the waves of immigrants from dozens of different countries, languages, and traditions, and the need to mobilize them to cope with the enormous security and economic challenges Israel faced. Internationally, portraying Israel positively would help to attain support and cope with the Arab/Palestinian diplomatic campaign. An excerpt from a 1971 publication of the Agency addresses these two rationales:

Parallel to the hot war that the Arabs conduct against us along the borders and in terror attacks against citizens, an Arab propaganda war is being conducted around the world … The aim of the Arab propaganda is to divert the public opinion in various countries, and their governments, to accept the Arab argument and support the Arab fighting against Israel … The aim of this booklet is to strengthen the consciousness of the Israeli youth about the righteousness of our basic position, in addition in order to allow it to stand up against this “propaganda war” when it will have to.80
Three additional causes supported self-censorship: (1) Identification with the Zionist ideology – most of the senior officials of the Agency and Center during the research period supported the ruling Mapai party and later, “The Alignment” and “Ha’avoda”, which remained committed to the founding Zionist-Israeli narratives of the 1948 War; (2) Abiding by institutional norms – the Agency’s staff was cognizant of their duty to “present the state’s point of view” as a basic civil service norm regardless of individual attitudes; and (3) The personal cost of bureaucratic sanctions in case this norm is violated.

The Agency/Center was ostensibly autonomous, without direct bureaucratic supervision. The themes and contents of publications were largely determined and authored by the Agency’s staff or external contractors, with little or no coordination with other official agencies. However, sensitive political issues such as the causes for the 1948 Palestinian exodus required self-censorship and top-down restrictive mechanisms. This included, firstly, the minister in charge of the Agency who often served as an active or passive watch dog of the latter’s appropriate line. In the late 1960s, for instance, when the minister without portfolio, Israel Galili who headed the Center, insisted on reviewing every Agency publication, or someone on his behalf, before being published. The Agency’s staff were aware to avoid deviation from the official policy, particularly following the 1977 political change of government. Second, the Agency’s staff often voluntarily submitted their drafts to their superiors in the government for their inspection. Third, there was apprehension of retrospective criticism of publications by senior political figures such as the minister in charge due to contents that were inappropriate in their view.

Consequently, the Agency’s staff hardly ever considered presenting the critical narrative regarding the Palestinian exodus in their publications. One noted:

The topic of expulsion [of Palestinians in 1948] was not mentioned [in the Agency’s publications … they were not expelled. They left voluntarily or due to the pressure of the
Higher Arab Committee. This was the publishing approach … It [the expulsions] was a taboo … the official position did not admit it.\textsuperscript{86}

To avoid presenting the critical narrative in its publications and yet look credible, the Agency's staff referred to existing studies and records attesting to this type of narrative, though selectively adopting only those sections supporting the Zionist perspective and overlooking inconvenient sections about deliberate expulsions. This tendency is well represented by Nadav Aner's 1984 Agency publication on the Arab refugee problem and options for its solution.\textsuperscript{87} However, since the late 1970s, the Agency's staff became aware of the increasing publications in Israel presenting critical narratives about the conflict (in general and specifically regarding the 1948 exodus). Since the late 1980s this awareness increased due to Benny Morris’s publications on the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem, especially his 1987 book in English and its 1991 Hebrew version. The Agency's staff felt there was a need to produce a new and updated publication that would include the new findings.\textsuperscript{88} With the 1977 political change of government it became paradoxically more acceptable to admit that the Palestinians were expelled because this matched the line of the revisionist ideology about the essence of the Jewish-Arab conflict.\textsuperscript{89}

In the first half of the 1990s the Agency approached Haifa University historian Motti Golani, considered not too critical on Israel’s early history, to write an up-to-date booklet on the 1948 War of Independence, and to deal with the exodus. The Agency rejected his submitted draft and it was never published. A key figure explained:

\begin{quote}
We talked with him [Golani] asking him to insert certain changes [in the draft], but he declined … We felt as we were concerned, the conclusion was that this publication was impossible for the kind of audience we address. He tried to suggest a new concept, post-Zionist, but we did not think it was appropriate for our audience … because this audience is comprised of high school students. Maybe when they reach the university they will be able to read it, but not earlier.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quote}
Later the Agency approached another scholar at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Avraham Sela, to write a concise book on the Arab-Israeli Conflict. Once again, the manuscript was rejected for being explicit about Israeli expulsions of Palestinians, especially as of July 1948.\textsuperscript{91}

Nonetheless, three publications from both pre- and post-1977 did present the Zionist-critical perspective (i.e., voluntary flight accompanied by an insignificant expulsion). The reasons for this slight deviation from the typical Zionist narrative vary from one case to another, underlining the exceptional rather than a substantive change of mind about the Palestinian exodus.

The first publication in 1970 of an article by Mary Syrkin, translated from the original in English at the instruction of the PM’s office, denied the Agency’s staff any discretion for its contents. The publication carried Syrkin’s name as the author, ostensibly indicating her sole responsibility for it.\textsuperscript{92} The second publication, by Meir Pa’il in 1983, addressed the development of the Haganah mobile forces, refuting the common argument about the immense impact of the Deir Yassin massacre on the Arab mass flight and showing that most of nearby Arab villages remained in place and had to be fought for by the Haganah.\textsuperscript{93}

The third publication, published in 1987, also written by Pa’il in cooperation with the Palmach Generation Association, addressed the battles fought by the Palmach Negev Brigade during the 1948 War, and was published for Israel’s 40\textsuperscript{th} anniversary as part of a publications series titled “In Warriors Footsteps”.\textsuperscript{94} It carried Pa’il’s name co-produced with the Palmach Generation Association, thus reducing the Agency’s responsibility as to its contents. This publication barely followed Morris’s 1985-86 critical academic articles, though some of the Agency’s staff were familiar with them.\textsuperscript{95}
Even prior to Shohet’s appointment in 1996, the Agency’s staff were well aware of the critical narrative regarding the 1948 exodus, with which they largely agreed. Nevertheless, during Shohet’s term the Center refrained from any publication on 1948 Arab refugees. This cannot be fully explained by Shohet’s dovish orientation and objection to any government politically-motivated publication, be it in line with Zionist narratives or not, or by the significant budget and manpower cuts that reduced the Center’s scope of activities, especially of producing new publications. He explained that he was also guided by concern lest critically addressing the exodus by the Agency could provoke public controversies or meet the disapproval of his superiors at the Ministry of Education. This concern became real in view of the return to power of a Likud-led government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, which had not hidden its opposition to the Oslo process. Shohet perceived the Agency’s publications as no match, or capable of competing with the media in disseminating information to the public, whose attention to official publications was minute. He recalled:

I thought … that the period in which the state needs to disseminate and publicize its version was finished. Therefore I said that what is already on the shelf, and was published before my period, and some pupil can use it, I leave [intact]. No need to throw it away. But, to publish something new of such kind – it is not appropriate. And take into consideration that every critical journalist … is very critical about everything that the state publishes, and therefore I tried very much not to get into this whirlpool …. [F]or a child that reads it for the first time it is not that important whether [the 1948 Palestinians] were expelled or ran away.

Thus, with no new critical publications of the Agency regarding the 1948 War as of 1996, only copies of a publication that dealt with it in a general manner were re-printed and distributed, at least until 2006. This publication, as mentioned, presents the Zionist narrative.

CONCLUSION

This study provides theoretical insights regarding collective memory in general and official memory in particular, as well as empirical information regarding the Israeli Information Center as a state agent producing and shaping public attitude.
During the 1950s to 2003, the official version produced by the Agency regarding the 1948 exodus largely represented the Zionist narrative. The responsibility for the exodus was exclusively put on the Arabs of Palestine, denying any responsibility of the Jews for their exodus, typically in line with other cases of intractable conflicts (i.e., biased in favor of the in-group, presenting dichotomous black-and-white narratives, with no grey areas).

The logic for formulating such memory was two-fold, internal and external, shaped by conditions of continued conflict and Arab efforts of delegitimization of the State of Israel. Internally, constructing a self-righteous popular memory of the conflict would promote solidarity within the Israeli society and sustainability under conditions of continued conflict. Such memory is an important attribute of the collective identity of the Israeli-Jews, one that would enable them to cope with the difficulties that such a conflict creates but also contributes to the conflict’s perpetuation. Externally, such official memory serves Israel’s efforts to obtain broad international legitimacy, to help Israel cope with the Arab/Palestinian diplomatic campaign demanding the return of the refugees into Israel. This external logic of memory construction should be emphasized, since it is often less discussed in the context of memory of conflicts, compared to the more discussed internal logic.

The findings reassert that collective memory is built around major events such as the 1948 War and its consequences for both Jews and Arabs. Within this context, the publications often emphasized and elaborated on conspicuous episodes, especially the Arab exodus from the mixed cities of Haifa, Safed, Tiberias, and Jaffa, due to their visibility and deeper imprint on popular memory than the peripheral localities, e.g., small villages, even though two-thirds of the Palestinian population on the eve of the 1948 War was rural.

The modus operandi of the Agency was only to a limited degree influenced by the party in power and of the minister in charge of the Center at any given time, regardless of the
individual opinions of the latter’s staff. Similarly, there was almost no difference in the way
different parties in power, or the responsible ministers, supervised the Center. Although
until the 1977 elections most of the latter’s staff, and surely the senior ones, supported the
governments led by the Labor movements, the 1977 political turnover was of insignificant
impact on their publications as far as the 1948 narrative was concerned.

Hence, despite the critical historical narratives published by various societal
institutions since the late 1970s about the 1948 exodus, the Agency strictly adhered all along
to the Zionist narrative. A major factor that explains this tendency was the Agency
bureaucrats’ awareness of their being an indivisible part of the state apparatus. They knew
very well their boundaries and at the same time had been supervised by the political echelons.
Moreover, regardless of their ideological gaps, both the “Labor” and the “Likud” parties
favored the adherence to the Zionist narrative out of deep conviction that adopting a critical
approach to the 1948 Palestinian exodus would be seriously harmful to Israel’s fundamental
interests in both domestic and international arenas.

This phenomenon reflects the difference between state and societal institutions
concerning collective taboos on which the Center had less or no latitude compared to
societal/non-official agents of memory, especially professional historians. For a state
institution to officially admit expulsion in 1948 is tantamount to admitting responsibility for
the Palestinian refugee problem, which would damage Israel more severely than if scholars
or journalists do so. Theoretically, it is suggested that future analyses relate to different
approaches – official and societal – to a given taboo, rather than treating taboos in general at
any given national community.

This study underlines the gap, in fact rival relationship, between collective memory
often represented by official institutions and critical history, and, more specifically, the
former’s sustainability regardless of the constantly developing historical research. Contrary to institutionalized memory agents of ethnic, gender, and class collectives whose primary concern and loyalty are to their identity/interest group, historians and academic scholars are expected to elevate themselves above their political community’s considerations in the service of objective truth even when it collides head-on with their own interest group. The extent to which these types of memory/history agents interact and affect each other is of universal relevance and must be examined along a historical span of time and in close consideration of the context in which such correspondence exists, if any. In our case, although the Agency’s staff was well aware of the new research literature on the 1948 War and Arab exodus, and capable of employing its findings in its products, as a state institution it was, by definition, obliged to produce and disseminate public knowledge of the past in accordance with what was continuously understood as the “national interest”. Hence, the Information Center served as a gate-keeper assigned with preserving the conservative Zionist narrative about the Arab exodus while largely overlooking the critical studies published by historians about the birth of Israel despite, and presumably in contrast to, its growing prevalence both internationally and in Israel itself since the late 1950s.

No matter how credible and heavily documented the historical research on the 1948 War may be, adherence to the Zionist version of that war remained dominant, perhaps serving an essential need of the Jewish-Israeli community in its ongoing conflict, especially with the Palestinian national movements and its international supporters. It thus might be of no surprise to note that the impact of historical research of the 1948 exodus on Israeli public opinion still lags behind the Zionist narrative: Although most studies by Israeli-Jewish scholars since the late 1970s presented the critical narrative of the exodus, a field study conducted in 2008 found that only 39% of Israeli-Jews adopted this narrative.
APPENDIX

INTERVIEWEES

Nurit Braverman, Agency former employee since 1970, Chief Editor since the 1990s, former Director (2000-03).


Benny Morris, scholar.

Haim Ofaz, working for the Agency since the mid-1950s, Director (1973-2000).

Meir Pa'il, former Palmach commander, IDF colonel, historian, left-wing political activist.

Shlomo Rosner, Agency former employee since 1963, Chief Editor (1973-85), member of the Managing Board of the Center until 2003.


Doron Shohet, former Director of the Center, 1996-2003.

NOTES

This article differs significantly in both data and analysis from an earlier version of this study. See Rafi Nets-Zehngut, “The Israeli National Information Center and Collective Memory of the Israeli-Arab Conflict,” *The Middle East Journal* 62.4 (2008): 653–70.


2. Apart from informative publications and movies, the Center also conducted national events and internal journeys.


4. See list of interviewees in Appendix.


29. For a review of such memoires, and newspaper articles containing testimonies of Jewish 1948 War veterans, see: Rafi Nets-Zehngut, “The role of direct-experience people in promoting transitional justice: The Israeli case,” in *The performance of memory as transitional justice*, 30
Some specific examples of newspaper articles: Gil Keisary, “I was the Operation Officer who Issued the Operation Order in Hirbet Hazaz,” Ma’ariv, 17 February 1978; Moshe Carmel, “The Distorted Face of the War of Independence,” Davar, 19 February 1978; “Who was Expelled, How and Why,” Davar, 10 March 1978 [all in Hebrew]. Most notable was Yitzhak Rabin’s memoirs attesting to the expulsion from Lydda and Ramla, the largest single case in the war. The description of the expulsion was censored from the 1979 version of the book but leaked to the media. It was only published in a new edition after Rabin’s assassination. Yitzhak Rabin, The Rabin Memoirs (Berkeley, 1996), 383-4.

30. Especially salient, since the 1950s, was the maverick weekly Haolam Hazeh, edited by Uri Avneri.

31. For example, Matzpen and the Alternative Information Center.


38. Interviews with Braverman, Ofaz, and Shatz.


40. Rafael Rupin, Us, Them, and the Land of Israel (Jerusalem, 1971), 5.


42. Interviews with Shatz, Braverman, Ofaz, Rosner, and Falk (telephone interview).

43. Interview with Shohet.
44. Respective examples are *The War of Independence*, I (Tel-Aviv, 1968) and Pt. II; *(ibid.*, 1978); *Know What to Answer – Questions and Answers for Clarification of Israel’s Opinions on Diplomatic Matters* (Jerusalem, 1969) [Hebrew].


68. Such as in the case of al-Nabi Samweel and Beit Iksa. Ein Karim, Qalonia, al-Maliha, and two other nearby villages (Saris and Beit Mahsir, not mentioned by Pa'il) were conquered only after heavy battles.


76. Interview with Rosner.

77. Interviews with Falk, Ofaz, Rosner, and Shohet.

78. Interview with Ofaz.

79. Interview with Rosner.


81. Interview with Ofaz.

82. *Ibid*.

83. Interviews with Ofaz, Braverman, and Shatz.

84. Interviews with Braverman, Falk, Ofaz, Shatz, and Shohet.

85. In 2002 Likud Minister of Education Limor Livant disqualified the Agency’s publication, a guide to the Palestinian organizations, harshly reproaching the Center’s staff and causing much unrest among them. Nurit Braverman, *Fatah, Tanzim, Hamas and Others: A Guide to Palestinian Organizations* (Jerusalem, 2002) [Hebrew].

86. Interviews with Ofaz and Shatz.

88. Interviews with Braverman, Ofaz, Rosner, Shatz, and Shohet.


90. Interview with Rosner and Braverman.


92. Interview with Rosner.


95. Interview with Rosner.

96 Interview with Shohet.

97. Interview with Shohet.


99. Interviews with Shatz and Shohet.


102. These findings are based on a representative public opinion poll examining the Israeli-Jewish popular memory of 23 major events of the Israeli-Arab/Palestinian conflict, by Rafi Nets-Zehngut and Daniel Bar-Tal, [http://www.collective-memory.info/home](http://www.collective-memory.info/home) (see second under Academic Publications).