



M*emories of Revolt:
The 1936-1939 Rebellion and
the Palestinian National Past*

Ted Swedenburg

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Review by

Laura Zittrain Eisenberg, Ph.D.
Carnegie Mellon Institute

Ted Swedenburg writes about a fascinating topic: the role of memory in helping people and Peoples make sense of historical experiences. In a highly original approach, he analyzes individual and collective memories of aging Palestinian veterans of the Great Rebellion of 1936-1939, a sustained general strike and uprising against British rule and Zionist activity in mandatory Palestine. Swedenburg suggests that there is no such thing as objective reality, but rather only "common sense" perceptions of events which allow for the simultaneous coexistence of actual, fictive, perceived, and conflicting interpretations of events, and an official elite narrative, the overall purpose of both being to make people (or a People) feel good about their community and their own contributions to it.

In investigating Palestinian memories, the author explores discrepancies between Israeli and Palestinian interpretations of the events of 1936-1939 and among different groups within the Palestinian context. The standard Israeli account of the rebellion depicts the rebel bands as gangs (*knufiyot*) of thugs and bandits who took advantage of the political conflict to rob and murder Jews and to settle feuds among themselves.¹

Palestinian memories of the same events respond to the dominant Zionist discourse accordingly, emphasizing the nationalism, patriotism or religiosity of the rebels, and the purity of a struggle conducted



primarily against British troops. The interviews paint a picture of a more broadly based uprising than often appears in Western accounts, to which women and children contributed in non-combative ways and in which both urban elite and rural subaltern elements all actively participated.

Swedenburg dwells at length on the class aspects of the rebellion; rebels hailing from the villages in the countryside invariably recalled their own members taking the initiative, while official Palestinian discourse (dominated by the Palestine Liberation Organization [PLO]) highlights the leadership role of the Grand Mufti, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, and the Husayni notables in directing the uprising. Swedenburg's analysis treats the classic power struggle between the Husaynis and the Nashashibis and explores as well a variety of regional, clan (*hamula*), economic, and social variations among Palestinian perceptions of the great revolt. Also considered are those minority of deviant memories and behaviors, namely accommodation of and collaboration with the enemy.

The author is by training an anthropologist and a historian, although he specifies that the topic of this book, people's memories about the events of the 1936-39 revolt, and not the revolt itself, required him to "unlearn an academic training...that enjoins one to uncover the objective truth." (p. xxvii). The study is based on archival research in Israel, England, and the United States and on fieldwork in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza conducted in 1984-85. The author is most persuasive and original when he bases his analysis upon the hundreds of hours of interviews which he recorded with aged veterans of the 1936-1939 rebellion. Conducting his discussions in Arabic, with solid pro-Palestinian credentials of his own and a Palestinian colleague by his side, Swedenburg succeeded in eliciting extensive accounts from the former rebels. This record constitutes an impressive exercise in oral history and a wonderful preservation of primary source material which will soon be gone forever: the memories of first-hand participants in the event.

The argument is weakest where the author relies on a highly selective collection of second-hand sources, working almost exclusively from pro-Palestinian accounts (Edward Said, Philip Khoury, Sabri Jiryis, and Walid Khalidi) and revisionist Israeli historians highly critical of Israel (Benny Morris, Simha Flapan, Tom Segev, and the more critical works of Meron Benvenisti). Swedenburg offers rare praise for "liberal Israeli historian Yehoshua Porath's monumental study of the Palestinian national movement between 1918 and 1939,"² which he credits as "the most comprehensive account of the 1936-1939



revolt" (and an exception to other Israeli treatments of the event) but then does not utilize Porath's pioneering analysis, which he could have corrected as he deemed necessary. Other works upon which he might have drawn, revising according to his own findings, are those by John Marlowe, Christopher Sykes, J.C. Hurewitz, and Ann Lesch.

The book is logically organized and well-written. Swedenburg writes in the first person and shares with the reader his own thoughts and relevant personal experiences. He presents his own biases up front, in an autobiographical introduction sub-titled "Along the Way to the 'Field.'" The son of a Methodist minister, Swedenburg joined the family as a child on a 1961 trip to retrace the steps of Jesus. Traveling in both Israel and the Jordanian West Bank, he was particularly moved by an afternoon's visit to a desolate Arab village which had lost its farmland and livelihood in the 1948-49 war. Three years later, his father accepted a pulpit in Beirut, where the author was raised. Educated at the American University of Beirut in the late sixties and early seventies, Swedenburg reports being enthusiastically caught up in progressive and pro-Palestinian politics, continuing affiliations clearly reflected in this book. His years in Beirut make his Palestinian sympathies quite natural, although one is troubled by the blithe statement that he began his self-education "about the Palestine problem by reading anti-Zionist Jewish authors like Alfred Lilienthal and Rabbi Elmer Berger." (p. xviii) Surely this is a peculiar way to begin a scholarly career and foreshadows his continued preference for scholarship by Jews critical of Israel. I suspect that the author would not recommend that young Americans living in Israel educate themselves about the Palestinians by reading those isolated Arab authors who denounce their leadership's handling of the conflict. His occasional sarcasm detracts from the work, as does the occasional tendency to fuse with his Palestinian subjects and lose his scholarly distance.

This reviewer's interviews of elderly Israeli Jews who lived in the northern Galilee during the mandate period suggest a convergence of Palestinian and Israeli memory: both Swedenburg's subjects and my own hearkened back to an (exaggerated) idyllic era in the 1920s and 1930s, in which neighboring Jewish and Arab villages enjoyed good relations and individual Jews and Arabs occasionally struck up personal friendships. In both cases, however, Arabs and Jews described their acquaintances of the opposite number as quiet, humble, and apolitical, in other words, not members of a coequal national community but as non-threatening non-nationalists who knew and accepted a subservient position. Most of Swedenburg's interviewees emphasized the anti-British nature of their rebel operations, while



maintaining either a studied silence about attacks against Jewish settlements and individuals or an insistence that attacks against Jewish targets were aberrations committed by other rebel bands in distant parts of Palestine. The Jewish border residents similarly insisted that during the 1936-39 rebellion, their own Arab neighbors had never threatened them, and, in fact, warned them when rebel bands from other regions were preparing to strike.

Swedenburg suggests that these memories serve to reassure his Arab interviewees, and their audience, that they are not inherently anti-Semitic and bear malice only towards those politically active Zionists who would drive the Arabs from their homeland. I agree that the same phenomenon is at work among the Israelis, who similarly insist that they are not intrinsically anti-Arab but only opposed to those who deny any Jewish link to the land and would drive the Jews from territory they claim as legally purchased or won in defensive wars. Swedenburg hints, and I concur, that these memories perhaps also serve to preserve a grain of hope that in the future these two communities could live peaceably together "again."

Unfortunately, there is greater evidence that Arabs and Jews have constructed their individual and communal memories in ways which exacerbate the conflict between them. Swedenburg condemns the adoption by the Israeli "historical apparatus" of a program of "erasure"—deliberately ignoring or covering up evidence of the Palestinian Arab presence from all official monuments, historical sites, archaeological digs, maps, and history books. One might point out that Arabs have long adopted the same unhelpful approach, typified by maps published in the Arab world which simply omit Israel and recent refutations of Jewish connections to Jerusalem's Western Wall posted on the website of the Palestine National Authority. Both cases bespeak the psychological and existential aspects of this bitter conflict. As long as Palestinians and Israelis cling to mutually exclusive, self-glorifying historical interpretations which justify their own side's exclusive claim to the land, no compromise solution to this conflict is possible.³

The last chapter compares the 1936-1939 rebellion with the recent Palestinian Intifada and speaks to the usefulness of history in informing our understanding of contemporary events. The author seems to be unaware of an outstanding article by Kenneth W. Stein comparing and contrasting the two uprisings, published well before this book.⁴ Stein's piece examines in a comparative fashion participant composition, organizational structures, and political reactions within the Palestinian Arab community and should be penciled into Swedenburg's bibliography by all of his readers.



The figure of Shaykh ʿIzz al-Din al-Qassam dominates many of the former rebels' memories and has achieved mythic proportions in popular Palestinian lore. Killed in battle against the British in November of 1935, the charismatic leader inspired both bands of "Qassamites" during the revolt and the contemporary incarnation of the "Qassam Brigades," the violent arm of the Islamic Palestinian group Hamas. The story thus reaches into the present time, where the author joins Edward Said in his criticisms of Arafat and contempt for Oslo.

The book reads quickly and succeeds in casting an old story in a new light. Swedenburg's observations about the complexities and role of memory in making sense of historical experiences applies equally to groups and events other than the Palestinians and the Great Revolt, and should be of interest to a broad spectrum of scholars. The author is at his best when organizing the results of his many interviews. This type of analysis comprises the bulk of the book, which is thus recommended.

Notes

1. Swedenburg, based on his interviews, argues that intra-Palestinian bloodletting was minimal and has been exaggerated by Zionist authors. The source of the emphasis on the rebellion's internecine aspects in Israeli historiography is probably inspired by *Documents and Portraits from the Archives of the Arab Gangs in the 1936-1939 Riots*, a 1944 publication by Hagana Intelligence (SHAI), compiled by veteran agents Ezra Danin and Yaakov Shimoni (new enlarged edition published in 1981 by the Magnes Press of the Hebrew University).
2. Porath, Yehoshua. *The Emergence of the Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1918-1929* and *The Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1929-1939*, London: Cass, 1974, 1977.
3. Kamal Salibi devotes an entire book to this same issue of competing national memories, focusing on post-civil war Lebanon. He argues that Lebanon's many sects must relinquish their individual readings of Lebanese history which claim the state as rightfully theirs, in favor of less self-aggrandizing interpretations which legitimate the claims of other groups. Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
4. Kenneth W. Stein, "The Intifadah and the 1936-39 Uprising: A Comparison," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 19/4, No. 76, 1990, pp. 64-85.