The 1948 war, known as either the Nakba or the War of Independence, is a foundational event for both Palestinians and Israelis. Many books have been written about the war, but few have examined the process by which regular people were convinced to fight or the interplay between official ideology and the perspectives of soldiers on the ground. Shay Hazkani’s book, *Dear Palestine*, compares the military propaganda used to recruit and indoctrinate soldiers in the Arab Liberation Army (ALA) and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) with personal letters from these soldiers. The letters of Jewish soldiers were collected by the IDF military censor, while the letters of ALA volunteers were obtained by Jewish forces during the war. Hazkani gained access to these private materials from the IDF Archive after a legal battle that remains ongoing. The letters provide a bird’s-eye view of the soldiers’ opinions and thoughts, which often did not comport with the party line.

The book is divided into five chapters, each exploring different aspects of the 1948 war. The first chapter examines “pan-Arab” and “pan-Judaic” rhetoric in pamphlets and other recruitment materials produced to entice potential supporters to join the warring sides. It shows how messaging was tailored to different Jewish and Arab audiences. Holocaust survivors in displaced persons (DP) camps in Europe were pitched significantly different recruitment messages than Moroccan Jews. Similarly, Syrians, Iraqis, and Lebanese Arabs were pitched differing rationales—patriotism, Islam, pan-Arabism, combating European colonialism—for joining the ALA. Hazkani found that while many ALA volunteers emphasized religious and pan-Arab motivations for their fighting, others hoped that their enlistment would elevate their family status within society.

The second chapter analyzes IDF and ALA indoctrination efforts. While recruitment messages shifted from location to location, once recruits arrived in theater, the official propaganda shifted. ALA indoctrination focused on promoting pan-Arabism, combating European colonialism in Palestine, and painting the enemy as *dhimmis*...
(protected religious minority) who overstepped their position. Compared to the IDF, the tone of the ALA propaganda was “more measured, less violent, and placed greater emphasis on universal values and international law” (p. 118). Hazkani believes that this was in part because ALA’s patrons, most notably the Syrian president Shukri al-Quwwatli, feared rebellious veterans returning from Palestine to overthrow their regimes. The IDF, on the other hand, focused on normalizing the use of military might and shedding the diaspora’s pacifistic tendencies. IDF propaganda depicted Palestinian Arabs as a modern incarnation of the Amalekites—the enemies of the ancient Israelites whom the Bible commands to annihilate. IDF educators hoped to “condone the physical eradication of the invading armies and indifference to the fate of Palestinians, be they combatants or civilians” (p. 208). These efforts were largely successful among Ashkenazi Jews, with only a minority expressing discomfort in their private letters. They were less effective among Jews recruited from Arab countries, especially Moroccans.

The third chapter analyzes how volunteers and their families understood their motivations and actions, based on letters that were either seized or censored by the Israelis. This chapter explores how official ideology was often not reflected in the personal letters of soldiers in the field. The fourth chapter relies on similar sources to assess how ordinary men and women experienced the violence they encountered during the war. It points out that the arrival of ALA volunteers from neighboring countries instilled in some Palestinians a sense of optimism, undermining their urge to enlist. Hazkani’s sources also tell harrowing tales of violent massacres, the mutilation of corpses, and displacement of Palestinians on a massive scale.

The final chapter deals with the end of the war and the complex question of “return,” which was viewed very differently by Ashkenazi Jews, Moroccan Jews, and displaced Palestinian Arabs. Interestingly, many Moroccan soldiers expressed disappointment with Ashkenazi racism and wanted to return to Morocco. Similarly, Hazkani reveals that many American Jewish volunteers were disenchanted by their experience, complaining that Israeli Jews lacked “real idealism” and had become power hungry. One letter from a disillusioned American volunteer described the creation of the State of Israel as “a just cause” while describing Israeli Jews as “cheaters,” “irresponsible,” “terrible people,” who were “not worthy of playing this historical role” (p. 181). Mixed feelings remain a hallmark of diaspora relations with Israel.

In the end, the IDF was more effective in its mobilization efforts, recruiting many thousands more than the ALA and fielding better-equipped and better-trained soldiers. The IDF capitalized on the security fears of Holocaust survivors in DP camps in Europe (where most recruits came from) and the state resources at its disposal. The ALA, on the other hand, was a makeshift army with little financial support and recruiting from disparate Arab societies. Yet observers have known this for a long time. The originality of Hazkani’s book lies in its exploration of how recruitment and indoctrination propaganda influenced the development of identities. While it offers some insight into the Arab experience (the ALA lasted only about one year), the book does an extensive job exploring how the IDF helped shape the warrior ethos of the “New Jew,” which remains the core of Israeli identity. Dear Palestine will be useful to anyone interested in the interplay of war and identity formation.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


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