

Contested Lands, Contested Memories: Israel's Jews and Arabs and the Ghosts of Catastrophe. By Jo Roberts. Toronto: Dundurn, 2013. Pp. 302. 24.99 USD\$ paper.

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It is a well-known claim within the peace education field that every educational activity must take historical and political context into account. Focusing on the universal common characteristics and interests of the conflicting sides may draw an optimistic vision that is detached from the historical and political roots of the conflict. Such superficial activities are known in the Israeli-Palestinian context as Homus-Labanne meetings, due to their tendency to be dominated by joint meals. In a stark difference to this approach lies the idea of historical dialogue. The basic assumption of *Contested Memories: Israel's Jews and Arabs and the Ghosts of Catastrophe* is that understanding the other's pain is essential for every reconciliation and healing process.

The assumption that knowing the historical roots of pain is necessary for reconciliation underlies the implicit rationale of the book and its two explicit goals: **First** to describe the collision between the different narratives of the Israeli-Jews and Israeli-Palestinians in relation to two great sources of pain, the Holocaust and the Nakba. This goal also includes the presentation of this collision as an important factor in the present lives of both sides. **Second**, to support the claim that the acknowledgement of the pain of the other is an important element in the reconciliation and healing process.

Roberts certainly succeeds in her first goal, but less so with the second goal. She approaches the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from a perspective of memory, thus systematically introduces the conflict and the memories connected to it. Right from the first moment, Roberts creates great expectations by presenting an impressive collection of contributors, interviewees and readers to whom she gives thank. These include, amongst others, Hillel Cohen, Noga Kadman, Sami Abu Schehadeh, and Uri Hadar. These are all key researchers in the attempt to understand how historical events are shaping the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and societies. The book meets these expectations fully as it supplies us with a thorough and interesting overview of the conflict, its history, politics, demography and culture.

She skillfully describes the tragic historical events, and connects them to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the manner of how they are remembered and dealt with within Israeli society today. Especially illustrative is the description of the Eichmann trial which is referred to as a shocking and traumatic event. Yet, the importance of this description is Robert's perspective that looks at the trial as a cathartic experience that processes the Holocaust as a "unifying national story, weaving the disparate threads of Israeli Jewry into a common whole" (pg.104). Another is the description of the 1948 Nakba in Jaffa, including the exodus from the city and the experience of becoming refugees. This description is unique because it integrates the events of 1948 into a progressive history of the Palestinian Nakba. It continues to tell the story of the internally-displaced refugees from nearby villages that were gathered (by the IDF) in Jaffa, disowned of their property by the "present absentee" law, while living under the military regime until 1966. This period was followed by years in which Jaffa suffered from poverty and crime. Roberts finishes the descriptive historical account of Jaffa, with the present gentrification trend that again displaces the Palestinian population away from the city. This step-by-step description of the ordeals of the Palestinians in Israel demonstrates an important point. The Nakba is an ongoing event, "it's economic and political repercussions, continue to frame the experience of Palestinians in Israel"(pg. 206).

Yet, the book goes only a short distance to achieve its second proclaimed goal, which is to support the acknowledgement in the pain of the other in a manner that facilitates the entanglement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One reason for that is the central implicit assumption that the roots of pain in this context are identical to the roots of the conflict. The choice to focus on Nakba and Holocaust is justified because these two historical catastrophes are central to shaping today's national identity and culture of the Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Yet, it is important to note that, unlike popular views, these traumas are not necessarily the source for the conflict nor are they its starting point. Roberts does not dispute the implicit claim that the Holocaust is the main reason for the establishment of Israel. It implies that Israel, as a Jewish state, is a moral imperative and that "their new state was shelter from that traumatic past and security against similar future" (pg. 17). Ethically, the connection between the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel, allowed Israelis to disregard the Palestinian Nakba in name of security. On the other hand, the very same connection between the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel is used by the Palestinians to depict themselves as the ultimate victims of the Holocaust. Or in the words of Halabi in a discussion with Roberts (pg. 159): "To have as our narrative that we are the victims of the victims of the Holocaust". Both of these ethical positions lose ground once it is clear that Israel was not necessarily a consequence of the Holocaust.

Actually, the connection between the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel is debated, and is not as straightforward as presented by Roberts. In his book *Wars Don't Just Happen*ⁱ (2002) Motti Golani argues that the state of Israel was established in spite of the Holocaust, not because of it, he uses demography and political science to support this claim. Many of the Jews that were killed in the Holocaust were potential immigrants to Palestine, and thus the Zionist movement lost invaluable manpower. Moreover, the Yishuv (Zionist institutions in Palestine) were considerably weakened during World War Two, as they directed resources to support the British in their war against the Nazis. This is not a mere historical debate; it has practical implications in today's political positions of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Another historical issue that should be clarified is the starting point of the conflict. It did not start in 1948 nor was the Nakba its first violent expression. Hillel Cohenⁱⁱ points at 1929 as the point in which the tensions over the future fate of the land of Israel/Palestine cultivated into a visible national conflict. He claims that the growing number of Jews arriving to Palestine in the 1920's and the rise of Arab and Palestinian nationalistic sentiments were the roots for the conflict.

Taking into account that neither the Nakba nor the Holocaust is cause or the starting point of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, force us to view Robert's book in a different light. Indeed, the two societies are haunted by the catastrophes they suffered that for a great extent shape their position in present political and social discourse. Still, recognizing these pains maybe a necessary step but clearly it will not affect the real root causes of this conflict.

ⁱ Golani, Motti. "Wars Don't Just Happen (Hebrew)." Ben-Shemen: Modan, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Cohen, Hillel. "1929: Year Zero of the Jewish-Arab Conflict (Hebrew)." Jerusalem: Keter, 2013.