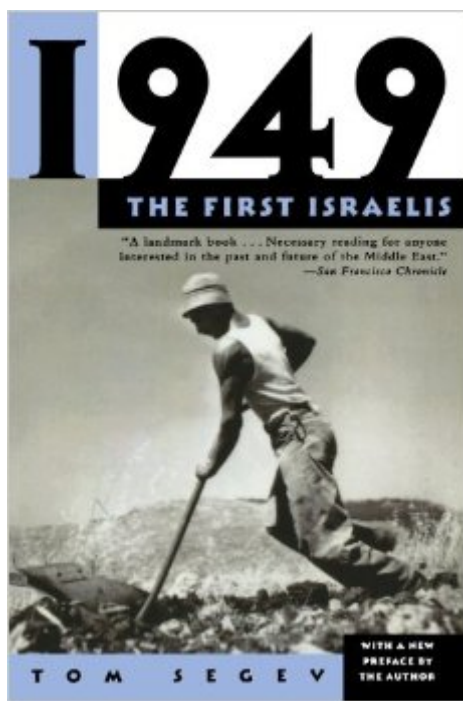


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# 1949: The First Israelis



## Synopsis

The founding of Israel in 1948--one of the seminal events of the century--offers a heroic narrative with few parallels in modern history. In 1949, a controversial best-seller in Israel, Tom Segev draws on thousands of declassified documents along with personal diaries and correspondence to reconstruct the unvarnished story of Israel's first year. Segev reveals the lofty aspirations that guided the state's leaders as well as the darker side of the Zionist utopia: the friction between the early settlers and the immigrants, the lack of good-faith negotiations with the Arabs; the clash between religious and secular factions; the daily collision of the Zionist myth with the severe realities of life in the new state. Unflinching in its observations, this bold chronicle is indispensable for understanding the dilemmas that continue to confront--and divide--Israeli society.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I have been searching for information around the 1949 magic carpet operation, since my parents were part of that operation. Tom Segev's book gives a very complete view of the events around the immigration, both politically and within Israel where they had the task of assimilating the new settlers. And there are tidbits in my parents letters home that sync up perfectly with what Tom is describing! I give kudos to Mr Segev for painting a realistic picture of the struggles of that time period, complete with all the warts! Tom Segev's book is far more comprehensive about 1949 events in Israel than any other reference I have found to date.

This is a really fantastic book and one of the few to really write about the times in a completely

unbiased fashion. It manages to touch upon every aspect of Israeli life in 1949, from war, to immigration, to education, to corruption, to triumph. In addition to accurate and detailed occurrences and the events leading up to them, intimate details of both significant and little known players are discussed. If you want to know what was really going on during that time and what the principals were thinking, read this book. If you're sick of reading literature that is either Pro-Arab or Pro-Israeli, read this book.

Perhaps Segev's finest work next to *One Palestine, Complete, 1949* chronicles the often messy business of building the Jewish state. From the conflict between Arabs and Israelis, the tensions between native born Israelis and immigrants, the battles between religious and secular Jews, and the spotty, sometimes faulty business of developing an "Israeli" identity, Segev provides a handy view of topics seldom (until recently) treated by Israeli historians. He does what American historians have known for sometime: the official historical version of a nation's development is often quite at odds to what actually occurred; or, in the case of the new Israeli historians, what can now be read in (recently opened) Israeli government documents. Unless you come to this book with a hard and fast agenda, it will be well worth your time to read and absorb its fascinating thesis and historical details.

There are many reviews of this item. They freely inform the reader about the general features of this book, and I will not repeat them. Instead, I approach this book from an entirely different angle.

**LOOTING: A COMMON OCCURRENCE** This subject has been brought to public attention by Jan T. Gross (especially his *GOLDEN HARVEST*) and a sympathetic media. Poles were widely portrayed as some sort of heartless and primitive people because, during and after the war, some of them had looted Jewish property. In actuality, looting is an unremarkable phenomena, especially in times of war or other social upheaval, and it knows no specificity in terms of nationality. [For more on this, see the first Comment.] Tom Segev, the author of this book, and an Israeli journalist-historian, takes the question of looting to a new level. That is what I focus on in this review. The information quoted below had been taken, by Segev, from official publications and archival data. (pp. 333-336).

**1949-ERA JEWISH SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS LOOT PALESTINIAN** The following statements are repeated directly from this book. Where necessary, I have provided explanatory comments [in brackets]. [Regarding Israeli soldiers stealing from an Arab dry goods store]: The company commander explained later that his experience in the occupied neighborhoods had taught him that in such cases it is impossible to control the men. (p. 68). [A generalized phenomenon]: During the war and afterwards plundering and looting were very

common. "The only thing that surprised me," said David Ben-Gurion at a Cabinet meeting, "and surprised me bitterly, was the discovery of such moral failings among us, which I had never suspected. I mean the mass robbery in which all parts of the population participated." Soldiers who entered abandoned houses in the towns and villages they occupied grabbed whatever they could. Some took the stuff for themselves, others "for the boys" or for the kibbutz. They stole household effects, cash, heavy equipment, trucks and whole flocks of cattle. (p. 69). In Haifa, Jaffa and Jerusalem there were many civilians among the looters. "The urge to grab has seized everyone," noted writer Moshe Smilansky. "Individuals, groups and communities, men, women and children, all fell on the spoils. Doors, windows, lintels, bricks, roof-tiles, floor-tiles, junk and machine parts. ..." He could have also added to the list toilet bowls, sinks, faucets and light bulbs. (p. 70). The Military Governor of Jerusalem, Dov Yosef, wrote Ben-Gurion: "The looting is spreading once again. ...I cannot verify all the reports which reach me, but I get the distinct impression that the commanders are not over-eager to catch and punish the thieves. ...I receive complaints every day." (p. 70). A secret report, written by the Custodian of Abandoned Property tried to explain how people "succumb to the grave temptation of looting," and why. First there was the massive flight of panic-stricken Arabs who abandoned thousands of apartments, stores and workshops as well as crops and orchards. Second, the property concerned was in the midst of the front-line combat area during the transition from mandatory to Israeli rule. This meant there was no stable authority with which to be reckoned. "...The moral sense of the few who were attacked by the many and managed to survive, justified the looting of the enemy's property," reported the Custodian. "passions of revenge and temptation overcame great numbers of people." The Custodian attributed it all to the "weakness and greed of many Israelis, who in normal circumstances would never have permitted themselves to act thus with regard to other people's property." (pp. 70-71). Minister Mordehai Bentov asked about a convoy of spoils which left, Jerusalem and Minister Cizling said: "When they enter a town and forcibly remove rings from the fingers and jewelry from someone's neck, that's a very grave matter. ... Many are guilty of it." (p. 72). Yosef Lamm, MK (MAPAI) stated, "None of us behaved during the war in a way we might have expected the Jewish people to behave, either with regard to property or human life, and we should all be ashamed." (p. 72). Minister of Agriculture Aharon Cizling wrote to Ben-Gurion: Again and again in our meetings we discuss the issue of the abandoned property. Everyone expresses shock, bitterness and shame, but we have yet to find a solution...up to now we have dealt with individual looters, both soldiers and civilians. Now, however, there are more and more reports about acts which, judging by their nature and extent, could only have been carried out by (government) order. (pp. 73-74). And so tens of

thousands of Israelis, soldiers and civilians, helped themselves to the spoils. One took an armchair, another a rug, a third took a sewing machine and a fourth-a combine; one took an apartment and another took a vineyard. Very quickly and easily a whole class-albeit a small one-of newly prosperous people appeared on the scene: merchants, speculators, contractors, agents of all sorts, industrialists and farmers. Some stole what property they could, others received theirs legally. A good many of the transactions fell into that gray area between what the law permitted and what was considered illegal, between outright robbery and official expropriation. (p. 79).

**THE DEIR YASSIN MASSACRE**The name of that village has become infamous throughout the Jewish world, the Arab world and the whole world. In Deir Yassin hundreds of innocent men, women and children were massacred. The Deir Yassin affair is a black stain on the honor of the Jewish nation. The Zionist movement, the army and our government of the time (the Jewish Agency Executive), all felt this acutely and most unequivocally condemned the deed at the time. (p. 88; See also p. 25).

**ISRAEL AND COMMUNISM: NO SHARP DEMARCATION**[Jan T. Gross had argued that Jewish support for Communism was minimal because, after all, once the Jews finally got a State of their own, they did not adopt Communism. The argument is, first of all, a non-sequitur, as Jews in a Jewish State of their own do not necessarily think and act the same way as Jews within a gentile nation.As it turns out, and as shown by the statements below, which I repeat from Segev, it is evident that there was in fact a substantial Communist flavoring to the new State of Israel, and that the boundary between outright Israeli Communists, and Israeli Socialists, was not clear-cut.]The ideology of Israel's social and political establishment contained an extraordinary hybrid of Eastern European rabbinic traditions combined with the Marxist message of the enthusiastic, conspiratorial Russian revolutionism. (p. xii).The Israeli CP sought to create a Stalin-type regime in Israel. MAPAM believed in democratic socialism, yet its leader, Yaakov Hazan, is on record as saying, "For us the USSR is our second socialist homeland." (p. 279).

The book tarnishes the glow of the romantic fairy tales about Israel's being founded by heroic pioneers who made an empty desert bloom. One does not have to be a complete cynic to believe that people of Arab descent in the territory from which Israel was carved were uprooted and driven from their homes or that there were significant conflicts among those who arrived from the diaspora to settle in the Jewish homeland. Myths however "needed" for psychological comfort make it more difficult to deal with today's problems and to find solutions.

Tom Segev gives an honest account of Israel's first days. One develops a clear understanding of

the many challenges (including defense, absorption of new immigrants, and a decent standard of living for all) that faced Israelis and their government. After reading this book, one cannot but appreciate the tremendous contribution of Ben-Gurion's pragmatic leadership in ensuring Israel's survival during this difficult period and in shaping Israel's future. I highly recommend it to anyone who wants to gain an insight into the harsh realities of nation building. After reading this book, they will have a deeper appreciation of the sacrifices all made to make Israel a reality in 1948-1949.

Tom Segev obviously has a personal agenda which is not to present history in a true and factual manner. This book is Segev's distorted fictional account of 1949; however, it is NOT a true account of the events of 1949 or the years leading up to it.

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