

Stein, Leslie: *The Making of Modern Israel. 1948-1967*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 2009. ISBN: 978-0-745-64466-0; 340 S.

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In his latest book „The Making of Modern Israel, 1948 – 1967“, Leslie Stein attempts to provide the reader with an overview of the first two decades of Israeli history. The book does not attempt to present new historical findings, but is „based mainly on secondary sources“ (p. XI). However this should not be regarded as a flaw, but it can be seen as even desirable, as the number of publications about this period have become almost unreviewable – especially since the ongoing argument between the so called ‘New Historians’ and the classical Zionist historians. Thus an attempt to give a qualified overview is welcome.

Naturally most of his attention is directed towards the Arab-Israeli conflict. Four chapters are dedicated to the three wars Israel was involved in: The War of Independence in 1948 (Chapter 1), the war with Egypt (the „Sinai Campaign“) in 1956 (Chapter 5) and even two chapters on the Six Days War in 1967, discussing the prelude und the course of the war (Chapters 8 and 9). These chapters depict the wars accurately and the richness of details gives proof to his broad knowledge on the matter. He manages to explain the decision making processes in Israel before and during the wars through embedding them in the respective domestic and international situation and provides the reader with the Israeli perception of it.

However his attention to details leads Stein at times to become somewhat anecdotal. This can be seen for example, when he portrays Ariel Sharon as a brave war hero who is willing to sacrifice himself to save his comrades’ lives (p. 29); or when Stein writes about the retired soldier Shlomo Baum, who was called to join an elite unit. Accordingly Baum „without any further thought, put aside his plough, packed a bag and [...] his personal tommy gun“ (p. 155).

Three other chapters focus on the domestic situation of Israel. Chapter 3 gives a good

overview of the difficulties Israel had to face in the first years of its existence, when it doubled its numbers of inhabitants due to the mass immigration waves. Additionally Stein manages to explain briefly the background and the situation in the respective state of the immigrating communities.

In two other chapters (4 and 7) Stein sums up interior developments between 1948 and 1967. He gives not only an account of Israel’s political and economical make up, but he also depicts some of the milestones in Israel’s formation. For example he expounds how the religious movements influenced the country’s legal set up (status quo agreement), or how the trials on Kastner and Eichmann brought the Shoa to the limelight of Israel’s public awareness. Also Stein describes the state’s discriminatory attitude towards its Arab population during the first 20 years, highlighting the dispossession and the fact that they have been put under military rule and thus dependent on the „arbitrary whims of military governors.“ (p. 240)

But the passages where Stein is ready to have a critical look at Israeli history are rather rare. Very often Stein is apologetic on disputed issues of Israel’s history. Though found throughout the book, this becomes most apparent on the issue of the Palestinian refugees (chapter 2).

To be understood correctly, Stein does not deny that there were expulsions. He even gives with 726,000 a lower, but still average estimation regarding the number of refugees. But in wide parts of the chapter he is busy strengthening apologetic arguments and alternative reasons for the flight of the Palestinians, often combined with a one sided view on history in order to downplay Israeli responsibility for the refugee problem.

First he invokes (without explicitly naming it) what in Israel has come to be known as the „ein breira“ (no choice) argument: „The Israelis did not feel that the expulsion of various Palestinian villagers was morally reprehensible, considering that the Palestinians sought Israel’s destruction.“ (p. 77) Following the logic of „ein breira“, Stein tries to assure that no moral turpitude can be attested.

Second, Stein doubts that the expulsions were in fact the reason, which caused the ma-

jority of the Palestinians to flee: „There is no way of knowing just how many fled as a consequence [of the expulsions]“ (p. 70). Instead Stein offers the classical argument of Zionist historiography, namely that the exodus of the Palestinians was in wide parts caused by a call of their leadership to leave the land – an argument which is heavily disputed or even confuted, what Stein however tends to ignore.¹

Finally, another illustrating example of Stein's one sided account of the conflict is his depiction of the events in Haifa in May 1948. In order to strengthen his argument that the refugee problem was not mainly caused by Israeli expulsions, he cites the mayor's request for the Palestinian population to stay. But he completely conceals the actual expulsion taking place before the mayor's offer, accompanied by radio and loudspeaker broadcastings in Arabic, that 'judgment day is here' and the 'foreign criminals' should be 'kicked out'.²

On the whole, it is not easy to judge Stein's „The Making of Modern Israel“. He offers a good historic overview of the respective period, his book is elegantly written, easy to read and his knowledge of the material is broad. The strong points of the book are to be found when he describes domestic developments and political decision makings. Yet the book is troublesome in the sense, that he is at times overtly Zionist and thus in his judgments often very one sided and apologetic. Consequently he rejects findings of the so called New Historians like Avi Shlaim or Ilan Pappé right out of hand, with the partial exception of Benny Morris. But even the latter's works are hardly incorporated when reaching critical conclusions. Thus the weakest point of the book is the almost total declining or ignoring of most of the findings of the New Historians.

Therefore only a limited recommendation for the book can be given. If one is interested in a summary of the classical Zionist narrative and some answers to the New Historians, the book is worth reading it. But on the other hand, if one looks for an account taking both sides into consideration it is hardly recommendable. Thus a chance might have been missed here, as a book, which takes certain aspects of both sides into account and qualifies them, without being overtly preoccupied with

one of the sides is still lacking.

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¹ The pivotal claims of the position refusing the leadership argument can be found in: Simha Flapan, *The Palestinian Exodus of 1948*, in: *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16,4 (1987) pp. 3-26; Avi Shlaim, *The Debate about 1948*, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 27,3 (1995), pp. 287-304.

² Cf. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. 2004, pp. 186-204.