

[Submitted to the *Star* on December 22.]

Ben Dunkelman is a familiar historical figure to Canadians. The son of the founder of Tip Top Tailors and a veteran of the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, Dunkelman travelled to Palestine in 1948 to join what became the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). In Canada, his record has been presented as free of serious blemishes, as in Mitch Potter's article "The man who saved Nazareth." However, a careful look at the record suggests a darker picture.

A shift in the academic consensus on this topic can be traced to the release in 1978 of previously classified Israeli documents. That year, without having seen these documents, scholar and historian Nafez Nazzal published *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee, 1948*, focusing on the testimony of refugees. Several years later, Israeli historian Benny Morris came out with the first edition of his *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, based on declassified Israeli material. It turned out that Palestinian claims are corroborated by Israeli hard evidence.

An estimated three hundred Canadians fought in the ranks of the Israeli armed forces in 1948. We need to look beyond the accounts left by these soldiers and the impressions of those who were close to them. The evidence shows that they were involved in serious human rights abuses, including the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes.

For his part, Dunkelman arrived in Palestine in the early spring of 1948. David Ben-Gurion was pleased to put his extensive Canadian military training and experience to use. During his second week as Israeli prime minister, Ben-Gurion wrote about giving Dunkelman responsibility for the "production of 6-inch mortars" for the Israeli army. That was in May. The next month, he appointed Dunkelman as commander of the Seventh Brigade of the newly-established IDF.

Dunkelman is sometimes depicted as a moderate commander, demanding restraint and good conduct from his troops. This story hinges on his refusal to expel Palestinians from Nazareth. When his Seventh Brigade captured the city in July, this Canadian became military governor of a city he describes in his memoirs as "one of the most sanctified shrines of the Christian world." As a renowned Christian centre, Nazareth had been accorded special status in orders from Ben-Gurion himself. Dunkelman was taken aback when a superior officer ordered him to expel the city's Palestinian population. He refused, and the city was spared.

As concerns Palestinian Christians, Dunkelman was indeed a moderate. In early November, he would write to his superiors criticizing the conduct of other commanders, whose "brigades expelled Palestinian Christians from villages that did not resist and surrendered to our forces." On the other hand, his brigade was notorious for its treatment of Palestinian Muslims.

Safsaf was one of a number of villages in the Upper Galilee captured by Dunkelman's Seventh Brigade in the autumn of 1948. It fell on the night of October 29-30. Umm Shahadah al-Salih, a woman living in the village, described the scene the next morning. Villagers were instructed to assemble in file around a pair of houses. "As we lined up, a few Jewish soldiers ordered four girls to accompany them to carry water for the soldiers. Instead, they took them to our empty houses and raped them. About 70 of our men were blindfolded and shot to death, one after the other, in front of us. The soldiers took their bodies and threw them on the cement covering of the village's spring and dumped sand on them."

This was a pattern in village after village.

Israel Galili had been chief of staff of the Haganah, the Zionist underground army in Palestine. In a November 11, 1948 briefing unearthed by Israeli historian Benny Morris, he described the conduct of Dunkelman's men in Safsaf. He spoke of the fate of "52 men tied with a rope and dropped into a well and shot," and of three cases of rape, including of a fourteen-year-old girl. He also described large-scale killing of civilians by the Seventh Brigade in the villages of Saliha, Jish, and Sa'sa'. In Sa'sa', Galili said, Dunkelman's troops committed "mass murder" and then forced all remaining survivors out: "The whole village was expelled."

These facts are no longer open to reasonable dispute, and we cannot ignore them. They have been available to English-language historians since the publication of the testimonies of refugees by Palestinian scholar Nafez Nazzal in 1978, and corroborated by research done in declassified archives by Israel's "New Historians." A refusal to look at such abuses in the past only makes it harder to deal with the problems of the present.

We need to look with open eyes at the historical record, even when it is painful, if we are ever to help find solutions to the enduring problems of the Middle East.

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Dear editors, Here is some select sourcing for your reference. I can provide more extensive documentation if you like.

For the quote from David Ben-Gurion, see David Ben-Gurion, *Israel: A Personal History* (New York: Sabra Books, 1971), 116.

For the quote from Ben Dunkelman on Nazareth, see Ben Dunkelman, *Dual Allegiance: An Autobiography* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), 266.

For the quote from Ben Dunkelman on the expulsion of Christians, see Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 477.

For the quote from Umm Shahadah al-Salih, see Nafez Nazzal, *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee, 1948* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1978), 95.

For the quotes from Israel Galili, see Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 230.