Creation and Manipulation of Archives
The Israeli Exemple

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THE ISRAELI EXAMPLE

Despite historians’ growing interest in memory and its different means of preservation, most historians continue to privilege what was written down at the time of an event, and assign less weight to oral testimonies obtained years afterwards. Memory, whether individual or collective, is perceived as being defective and selective, partial and partisan, more difficult to handle. Memory emerges as a structuring of the forgotten.\(^1\) For this reason historiography is primarily dependent on written sources. Although the notion of archives has evolved and has been extended to cover oral testimony\(^2\), films, photographs, maps, even cassettes, archives tend to remain a stack of old papers.\(^3\) They are the prime tool for historians to reconstruct the past. The issue of their reliability is thus a crucial one. The status of the archives in Israel reveals itself to be highly interesting and instructive in this respect and can provide some answers to this issue.

In Hebrew as in English, the term “archive” designates both the place where the documents are deposited, as well as the documents themselves. In Israel, archives are grouped into three main categories:

1. Private archives which are generally made up of letters, diaries, manuscripts, photographs, or even bank statements and other official documents that a family or an individual has kept. No specific regulation governs this type of archive, which is the exclusive property of individuals and an integral part of their personal heritage.

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\(^2\) See for example the creation of oral archives at the Institute of Contemporary Judaism at the Hebrew University in the late 1980s and the Oral History Department of the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations at the Hebrew University which compiles oral archives on foreign policy and defense of the State of Israel by interviewing and recording Israeli politicians.

\(^3\) Quote taken from discussions of the High Commission on Archives, held in the archives of the State of Israel in September 1993. Reference noted in an article in Hebrew by Lazovik Yaaov, Yad Vashem Archives, *Mahanaim* 9, 1995, p. 268.
2. Historical thematic archives, whose purpose is to assemble as many documents as possible on a given subject in a given place. These archives are typified by their eclecticism, the diversity of their sources and their documentation and the range of languages used in the documents deposited in it. The archives of Yad Vashem created in 1953 in Jerusalem are a perfect illustration. They group everything that can lead to a better understanding of the Holocaust and the perpetuation of its memory. For this purpose the archives are authorized by Israeli law to conduct negotiations with foreign governments and individuals to obtain photocopies or originals of documents relating to the genocide of the Jews during World War II. The archives contain material from various Jewish organizations which were active during the war, underground archives from the ghettos, the minutes of various trials of Nazi war criminals in Israel and in Europe and in particular in Germany, the list of prisoners held in concentration camps, etc. A whole department is devoted to films and photographs covering everything from pictures of Jewish families taken before the war to Nazi propaganda films or souvenir documentaries made by German soldiers.

3. Administrative archives which cover the operation and activities of a specific institution whether public or private. The archives of the State of Israel, the Haifa town hall, the Jewish Agency, the youth movement Bnei Akiva, a kibbutz or a company all belong to this category of archives.

The Israeli Archives Legislation

Definition of documents which must be archived

The Israeli law of 1955 only deals with state archives. It defines the ways in which an archive can be created, the documents preserved in it and access to these documents. It states that all administrative documents which are in any way unusual, produced each year in the offices of ministers and their subordinates should be deposited, after being used, to the archives of the State of Israel. The terminology is vague. A partial list of documents which should be preserved clarifies the lawmakers’ intent. The following are considered to be unusual: protocols of ministerial meetings, records concerning the budget allocated to each department, preparatory and final documentation from professional conferences, the minutes and findings of various commissions and all other protocols, notes and reports concerning the departmental activities of the ministry, records belonging to the minister’s spokesman, including press clippings and photographs, all the copies of letters sent and queries from deputies, the
files of the legal advisor concerning bills of law, even minor ones, written by
the ministry themselves or from another ministry.4

Measures designed to prevent the unauthorized removal of archives
The law emphasizes that all the records in a minister’s possession at
the end of his term of office must be immediately filed, registered and
deposited in the archives of the State of Israel. If the incoming minister
needs them they are obviously not archived but are nevertheless listed and
inventoried. The law specifies that an inventory of current records should
always exist to guarantee that none have been removed. High ranking
officials frequently take documents home or out of the ministry with them
to study; something which is tolerated and permitted by law. However as
soon as their official functions terminate, these officials must return the
documents. If not, because these documents are the exclusive property of
the state and could possibly endanger its security, they are actually
committing a crime and could receive a jail sentence. A 1975 amendment
restates this principle: The possession of documents belonging to an
archive, without prior formal authorization from the state archivist, is an
offence. A government decision of 1984 adds that films, audiovisual
cassettes and the photographs decorating a minister’s office which have a
direct or indirect connection to his work belong to the State. Once his duties
are over, he cannot claim them. This government decision clearly
reformulates the obligation of all ministers and other high ranking civil
servants to return all documents still in their possession at the end of their
term of office. The cabinet secretary is responsible for the inventory and
filing of documents. He is required to check that no file is incomplete. If he
realizes that documents are missing, he must inform the minister and
advise him to return them. When they begin their terms of office, the chief
government secretary informs the ministers and their cabinet heads of their
respective duties regarding the archives. The state archivist reminds them
of this duty at the end of their terms of office.

Duties of the State Archivist
The role of the state archivist goes beyond this reminder. He or she is in
charge of supervising the archives of the main state institutions and the
local authorities. He is required to try to locate the administrative
departments which create archive documents and print instructions for
them concerning in general the way documents should be treated before
archiving them. He must check that important documents are inventoried
on a regular basis and deposited in the archives of the State of Israel. He is

4 See a description of this law in Miriam Ben Porat, Annual State Comptroller’s
called upon to verify temporary department archives frequently. The state archivist is responsible for storing the state archives in conditions which permit any interested person, researcher, or investigator to use them. For this purpose he has a team of specialists and professional archivists. The state archivist defines which documents can be destroyed after use, and which must be kept temporarily. He partially delegates this latter task by authorizing administrative departments to decide which documents are worthy of preservation for a limited period of time.

According to the law, the documents of pre-state bodies, institutions and organizations must be preserved and deposited in the archives of the State of Israel. Any organization that ceases to exist without leaving a successor must normally will its archives to the State.

**Legal Loopholes**

The legal arsenal presented above gives the reassuring illusion that the archives of the State of Israel accurately reflect the activities of government or administrative institutions. It apparently implies no significant document is overlooked. The archives, legally defined and handled in this way, appear to be a fairly safe and reliable way to have access to the historical truth. The legal loopholes are one of the weaknesses of this system. Although the municipalities are autonomous entities, they are placed under the Ministry of the Interior and the law of 1955 on the state archives refers to them in a number of instances. As Zohar Aloufi, the head of the archives of the City of Haifa stresses in her paper presented to the World Congress of Jewish studies in 1994, the law does not define how municipal archives should be preserved. The result is that the situation from one town hall to another varies considerably. In one case the archives are handled by a professional archivist and are carefully classified and recorded as in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. In other cases they rot in a cellar and no list of their contents exists. These documents deteriorate quickly because of dampness, insects or mice, and with time can no longer be used. The law encourages municipalities to acquire the archives of private institutions which are not under their jurisdiction but which can shed light on features of community life. This acquisition policy is left up to the discretion of the person in charge of the city archives, if and when such a person has been appointed.

**Stretching the legislation**

The law is not always perceived as an absolute constraint and is not always adhered to. In 1997, the State Comptroller Miriam Ben Porat investigated the actual application of the law on archives. The results of her investigation conducted in most of the Israeli ministries except for the Foreign Ministry, the Defense Ministry and the Ministry of Integration are...
edifying and surprising and hint at the discrepancy between the strict application of the law and actual fact. The conclusion to her report is very severe: “The ministers have not deposited documents written over a period of decades by ministers, vice-ministers and cabinet secretaries to the archives of the State of Israel and have not taken measures required to preserve them. Some of these documents have been incinerated in violation of the law and some has been stored in different places and are difficult to locate. Most of the documents have disappeared. The state archivist did not satisfactorily check on archive documents and did not find efficient enough means to collect them. As a result numerous documents testifying to government activities, original documents having a obvious value for historical research on Israel are no longer in the hands of the State, are no longer under its surveillance nor have been preserved for the future generations.”

This criticism holds for all the governments since 1948 whether leftist, rightist or governments of national unity. This situation can be attributed as much to negligence as to a lack of qualified personnel as to a manifest desire to dissimulate.

**Negligence**

The State Comptroller’s report is replete with violations of the law of varying severity. The most frequent cases of law-bending are the absence of lists of all current documents, the archiving of documents filed in temporary locations, and the ridiculously small amount of documents deposited in the archives of the State of Israel. On this latter point one comparison suffices. When Ora Namir, the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, left office at the start of 1997, she deposited one hundred and forty three boxes of documents in the archives of the State of Israel whereas the entire set of archives for eight of her predecessors is stored in thirty four boxes of the same size. The difference, too large to be ignored, has raised questions and doubts.

**Illegal Removal of Documents**

Illegal possession of archives by individuals is the prime cause of their disappearance. The problem is so severe that to remedy it, lawmakers found it necessary to add two amendments to the law of 1975 and 1984 mentioned above. In 1995, given the persistence of the problem, the state archivist suggested to the legal advisor of the government to extend to the President of the State, the Prime Minister, ministers, assistant ministers and cabinet secretaries and to all elected officials a measure recently negotiated with representatives of the civil service and already applicable to high ranking officials. It involved asking them to sign a statement

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5 Ibidim, p. 100
committing themselves to return documents remaining in their possession immediately upon termination of their term of duty. Given the existence of several amendments severely punishing this breach of law, the legal advisor rejected the proposal on the grounds it was superfluous. As a consequence other high ranking officials are no longer obliged to sign such a statement.

The quantity of vanished archive documentary material is particularly striking in two ministries. In 1970, instead of being transferred to the archives of the State of Israel, all the potential archive material of the Ministry of the Interior was locked away in two cabinets. The state archivist requested them on several occasions. Finally in 1989 he received the disconcerting response that these archives had mysteriously disappeared. Intrigued and incredulous, and determined to recuperate the precious documents, he instigated legal proceedings that resulted in a police investigation, as finetoothed as it was unproductive. Despite the involvement of the police and security services, these archives remain missing to this day. Because they were not burned, the only hypothesis is that they were illegally removed. The archives of the Ministers of Transportation who held this portfolio from 1948 to 1981 have also vanished. The suspicions this time were clearly directed against the ministers themselves who “ignoring that these documents belonged to the State, took them and forgot to return them.” None of the ministers involved was ever charged or questioned.

This tendency to keep official documents manifests itself at all levels of Israeli political and public life. The local authorities are confronted with the same problem. A sizeable part of their archives, including letters, deeds of sale of land for construction, notarized documents of all types and above all documents concerning their founding or the pre-State period, are in the hands of individuals, former city council members, or people who made significant contributions to the development of the city. The municipalities experience great difficulties in recovering these documents which the families erroneously believe to be their property or their family heritage. When political differences or purely personal conflicts oppose the city officials to holders of archives, the obstacles become insurmountable. Simply perceiving the mayor as a stranger to the town may be enough for the transfer of archives to fall through. In many cases the hostility to the current mayor is so strong that the possessors of the documents prefer to destroy them or sell them to the highest bidder than to relinquish them to

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6 Ibidem, p. 97
7 Ibidem, p. 99
the municipality.\textsuperscript{8} The archivists have practically no recourse and, powerless, can only bemoan this permanent loss.

\textit{Illegal destruction of archives}

The incineration of classified documents is in total contradiction with the principles set down by the law. In 1994, virtually all the documents which were found in the safe of the minister of Finance and which covered the years from 1967 to 1986 were burned, without prior authorization from the state archivist, on the sole orders of the minister's security advisor. The papers that went up in flame, although they belonged to the category of sensitive documents which should be preserved indefinitely, included the conclusions to meetings with the Defense Minister, records concerning the United World Jewish Fund, protocols and work agendas of the cabinet secretary, bills of law, records of subsidies and assistance to individuals, telegrams, protocols of ministerial meetings and others. In this same ministry, it is customary to burn the copies of letters sent by the minister after only a brief two year period whereas these letters should be classified chronologically and deposited regularly in the archives of the State of Israel.

There are other well-known examples of the premature destruction of archive documents. The \textit{Hanotea} organization (literally: the planter) carried out an intense policy of land purchase in the Netanya area at the time the city was founded. The goal of this organization was to redistribute arable land to the inhabitants of the city so that they could work, farm and live off their harvest. Normally the archives of this organization which worked so hard for the development of Netanya and which is now disbanded should have been deposited in the municipal archives. Instead they were burned with the archives of another association, \textit{Bnei Benyamin}.\textsuperscript{9} There is no way of determining whether this was a case of unfortunate error or deliberate destruction. The archives of other pre-State organizations have most likely experienced the same fate, leaving whole segments of the history of the \textit{Yeshuv} to fade from memory.

In the cases above some doubt persists and there may have been negligence or ignorance of the exact wording of the law. In one case however the deliberate desire to destroy compromising documents is clearcut. Interviewed on November 8, 1998 by a reporter from \textit{Galei Tsahal} the Army Radio, Rehavam Zeevi, deputy of the extreme right party \textit{Moledet}, and a former general, revealed that in 1953, on immediate order from Ben Gurion, he burned all the documents proving that the Israeli army was

\textsuperscript{8} See Zohar Aloufi: \textit{The role of private archives in the archives of local authorities in Israel}, Kami 11, volume 2, 1994, pp. 379, in Hebrew.

\textsuperscript{9} Example taken from a point raised by Zohar Aloufi at the World Jewish Study Congress in 1994.
responsible for the attack on the Jordanian village of Kybia. Before he carried the order from his Prime Minister, Rehavam Zeevi copied all the documents which he then hid away. This army operation, which was a reprisal for a bombing, took the lives of sixty nine civilians, mainly women and children, who were dynamited along with their houses. Prompted by the indignation of international opinion, the Security Council of the United Nations voted to officially condemn Israel. Given the level of violent protest, the Israeli government thrust all the blame for the massacre on the inhabitants of the Jordan Valley who dealt on a day to day basis with border terrorism. Ben Gurion accused them of having committed an individually motivated act of revenge. In order to eliminate any traces of guilt on the part of the Israeli government, and to lend credence to the thesis in the eyes of future generations and possible inquiry commissions, Ben Gurion called for the destruction of the military orders which led up to it. He could then calmly state that no Israeli unit had left its base on that night.

Defective Archives

The state archivist is not above criticism either. Irregularities have been reported in the state comptroller’s report concerning his performance. Documents from several ministers were not separated and were classified in the same folder, making researchers’ work all the more difficult. Dating errors also occurred in the archiving of numerous documents that have been erroneously attributed to one minister or another. When the staples or paper clips were not removed or the original cover pages not replaced by those required by law, the state archivist is not obligated to accept these documents, and can refuse to register and classify them in the archives of the State of Israel. These documents, refused for improper presentation, should theoretically be returned to the department where they originated and be deposited there until they are processed correctly. On at least two occasions the state archivist agreed to store improperly prepared documents without registering them. They have thus officially disappeared; there is no list indicating their presence either in the archives of the State of Israel or the temporary lists of the ministries where they came from. Although difficult to find, they could still be located.

In terms of locating mislaid documents, the following breach of the law has greater impact. The state archivist gave his verbal consent that documents from a minister of finances whose identity has not been revealed could be transferred to the archives of the State of Israel as private archives. As such, they have a different status. Private archives are not governed by the same regulations concerning consultation, and access is dependent on the goodwill of the donor. They are not destined for permanent preservation and are destroyed after a period of several years.
Contrary to what is required by law under these circumstances, no accord between the parties was drawn up. The reasons which convinced the state archivist to agree to a tacit arrangement have not been clarified.  

**Reliability of documents deposited in the archives**

Creating an exhaustive and complete archival collection of a state, government or public institution is clearly a challenge since in this respect the Israeli example is doubtless not exceptional. It should be pointed out that all archives have discrepancies, even when a law governs their constitution and creation. The fact that documents are classified in the archives is also not necessarily a guarantee of their absolute authenticity or reliability. For reasons of social correctness, politeness or to reduce tensions, the protocol of a heated meeting may not reproduce all the words exchanged by the participants. Accurate transcription of a debate can be impeded by the terms used, misunderstanding or lack of attention on the part of the stenographer... there is always an unavoidable margin of error.

**Self-censorship in the original documents themselves**

The problem becomes more thorny when the documents destined for the archives are deliberately reformulated and twisted while they are being written. These documents are in fact the “real fake documents” of history. During his lifetime Ben Gurion kept a daily diary of his impressions, and the conclusions of his meetings and discussions. According to several witnesses, he wrote in his diary as the events and meetings were actually taking place. His numerous writings and chronicles have been partially deposited in the archives of the State of Israel, and partially in the archives of the army. The remainder is in the archives of the research institute which bears his name at Sde Boker in the Negev. Ben Gurion had an acute sense of history and was perfectly aware that his diaries and notebooks would be read and analyzed by researchers and historians. He did not hesitate to seize the opportunity provided by his chronicles not only to write history but also to influence historiography by his version of the events. For many years his various notebooks, considered to be a prime historical source, did indeed serve as the basis for Israeli historiography, until in the eighties the first criticism appeared and such renowned historians as Anita Shapira expressed serious doubts as to their degree of accuracy.  

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11 These archives are dependent legally on the archives of the State of Israel.

12 Anita Shapira, *From the resignation of the heads of the national command to the disbanding of the Palmach, the fight for the 1948 defense system*, Hakibbutz
On January 1 and 2, 1948 important meetings were held between high ranking officials and army officials in charge of Arab issues. Among the people taking part were Moshe Sharett, the head of the political department of the Jewish agency, future Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Israel, Reuven Shiloah, future head of the Mossad, Ezra Danin, Gad Meknes, specialist in Arab affairs and the future cabinet secretary for Minister of Minorities and of course Ben Gurion. Two sources contain the details of these meetings which dealt with reactions of Palestinian Arabs to the growing conflictual situation in the country and the responses the Yeshuv could make. The first source is the stenographer’s report, more than ninety-one pages long, recently made available to researchers. The second is the thirteen pages Ben Gurion wrote in his diary. The differences are few in number but they are highly significant. According to the stenographer’s report, Meknes started the discussion by stating “In my opinion, the Arabs were not ready. When the conflict started most of the Arabs didn’t want it to go so far.” Ben Gurion in his diary only notes that “the Arabs were not ready” and totally omits the second part of Meknes’ comments. In other places Ben Gurion adds phrases or details which do not appear in the stenographer’s report. Eliahu Sasson, one of the participants, head of the Arab branch of the political department of the Jewish Agency accused the Jews of having triggered the Arab riots by unwarranted and superfluous provocation. He stated nevertheless that “in Haifa the Haganah knew how to act correctly, it punished those guilty (of acts of provocation) and correctly handled operations so well that the Arab sector of Haifa remained calm.” Ben Gurion retranscribed this passage as follows: “In Haifa, the Haganah performed correctly and managed operations as it should have, such that the city was calm at least until the Etzel incident.” Ben Gurion added on his own initiative “at least until the Etzel incident”. He was alluding to the attack committed on December 30,


13 This stenographer’s report provides another example of misuse of archives for the benefit of an individual. It belonged to the collection of personal papers of Israel Galili which were deposited after his death in the archives of the United Kibbutzim Movement. Given its nature and the stipulations of the law of 1955 on archives, it should have been deposited in the archives of the State of Israel.

1947 by the extreme Jewish group Etzel in front of a bus station near the Haifa oil refineries which took the lives of six Arabs. In reprisal for this attack the Arab workers of the refineries massacred forty of their Jewish coworkers. This very pertinent analysis which Ben Gurion attributes to Sasson (the Etzel attack indeed stirred up the city of Haifa) does not correspond to the opinion expressed by Sasson during the meeting. This additional comment, which places the burden on Ben Gurion’s political rivals and deplores their terrorist military initiatives was probably added for the benefit of future generations.

Ben Gurion apparently censored his own writings considerably, of which there is ample proof. On August 18, 1948 a meeting brought together all the generals of the army, the high ranking officials and chief government heads for Middle East and Arab affairs. A number ministers including Shetritt, the minorities department head and Ben Gurion in person. The meeting was called to decide on the means to be used to prevent the return of Palestinian refugees. During the meeting the idea was put forward to level abandoned Arab villages and to plow over the uncultivated fields. Several participants noted in their own diaries that this proposal was entertained as an extreme measure to discourage the refugees from returning. Ben Gurion makes no mention of this in his notes.15

A final example concerning the troubling silences of Ben Gurion is the following. On September 21, 1948, Ezra Danin, appointed special advisor on the Middle East for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, suggested to Ben Gurion to support the creation in the Transjordan of a puppet Palestinian State instead of recognizing Jordanian authority over this region. Ben Gurion was violently opposed and responded that “that’s enough with adventures and the Palestinian Arabs only have one thing left to do: flee.”16 This sentence ends Ben Gurion’s meeting with Danin. There is no record of this exchange of words in his diary. Danin’s proposal did not interest him and Ben Gurion did not feel it was necessary to record it. He nevertheless carefully noted that day that he had met Danin and that Danin had reported to him about discussion with the Arabs of Tulkarem who belonged to the opposition. Ben Gurion often eliminated anything from his writings which he felt denigrated the image of the army or the State, could threaten the higher interest of the nation or simply because it bothered him. His chronicles should thus be handled with a great deal of caution. Historical criticism has shown that these are not the only

15 Example reported by Benny Morris during the program “personal questions” with Yaakov Agmon on Galei Tsahal, the Army radio, in 1996.
16 Ibidem, p. 93
documents in the history of Zionism and the State of Israel which have been deformed.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Censure of Declassified Documents}

Israeli law imposes restrictions as regards the lifting of restrictions on archives similar to the ones in France. Sensitive files related to state security, i.e. virtually all the military archives, are only accessible after a period of 50 years, except upon special permission which is only granted rarely. The archives of the intelligence and espionage departments are even more highly protected. The other administrative documents and correspondence of individuals who held public office are subject to limitations which can range from twenty to thirty years. The private collections willed to the state archives have specific access conditions set by the donors. In the framework defined by the law, archivists can temporarily withhold some documents in their possession from the public. At the end of the seventies and at the start of the eighties, Ben Gurion’s diaries were made available to research. As the memoirs of a prime minister they were subject to the 30-year rule, and once this period of time had elapsed they were declassified and became available to consultation. Before the public was allowed access, a small number of passages, basically ones which revealed the identities of certain spies or civil servants suspected of crimes or connected to secret arms purchases via a third country were deleted. These censures were designed to protect sources of information and the foreign affairs of the State of Israel. For example, the archivists thought it was preferable to remove sentences from October 17, 1948 which mentioned the thirty dollars that the Bulgarian government demanded from the Zionist movement for each Jew it allowed to emigrate to Israel. They were clearly concerned that these revelations would negatively affect Israeli-Bulgarian relations and would hamper the emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{18} In some instances only a few words were removed from Ben Gurion’s work and were most likely insults or violent terms used against individuals still alive today. In three or four places whole sentences were removed. Generally all the texts which were censured during those years were restored later in totality or were authorized for publication. One both unusual and humorous instance of lack of harmonization remained.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibidem}, pp. 73-103. Benny Morris analyzes the protocols of the World Zionist Congress of 1937, the diaries of Yossef Weitz and Yossef Nachmani head of the KKL in Eastern Galilee from 1935-1965, officer of the Haganah in Galilee, member of the Tiberias city council from 1927-1956, and the protocols of the political meeting of the Mapam party on November 11, 1948 during which the stenographers were warned not to transcribe certain debates.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibidem}, p. 90
On November 16, 1948 Ben Gurion had a discussion with David Ernest Bergmann, a renowned chemist, the chief of the army's scientific department and the future head of the Israeli Atomic Energy commission. Ben Gurion’s “History of the War Years” was reprinted in a version which included the extracts of this interview which was still censured in the Ben Gurion archives in Sde Boker. This type of temporary and momentary censorship is normally understood and accepted by the scientific community and researchers. Nevertheless it should not be ignored or its impact disregarded.

Some researchers complain nevertheless that archivists impose overly strict modes of censure. This happens mainly at the Army archives where the archivists sort the documents before allowing researchers to have access to them. In the early 90s, it was still not unusual for a Mossad agent to check that nothing in the documents shown to independent researchers could desecrate the sacrosant image of the Israeli army. According to these same researchers, who severely condemn it, this tendency has since shifted towards greater liberality and openness without however having disappeared completely. Independent researchers are still treated differently from those designated by the army to write its history, officers or the protégés of influential members of the military hierarchy, or the political elite. The contents of the documents made available to them are not identical. This selective censure affecting a certain category of people is unwarranted since the censored documents do not directly constitute a danger to the security of the State but rather detract from the image of the army. Most of the archives subjected to selective sorting deal with the massacres of Arab civilians, an explosive subject which entirely or partially destroys the myth still cherished by the army of the purity of arms.

Attempted falsification of archives by those using the documents

The letter written by Ben Gurion to his son Amos dated October 5, 1937 is certainly the best known Israeli example of falsification of archives. There is ample consensus concerning this letter, and the experts all agree

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19 For further details see the article by Benny Morris, New Look at the fundamental documents of Zionism, Alpaim 12, 1996, pp. 89-90.


today that it was falsified between the time it was written and the end of the seventies when it was deposited in the archives of the State of Israel. The original document contains a rectification: a sentence and a half are scribbled over in ink. The editors involved in the publication of Ben Gurion’s letters noticed that the ink used to cross out the passage was different from the one used in the rest of the letter. Through modern techniques, the publishing house succeeded in restoring the original version by recovering the hidden words. In the damaged version Ben Gurion states very clearly that he is in favor of a transfer of the population, as stipulated in the recommendations of the Peel Commission Report of 1937, which recommended moving populations between the future Jewish and Arab states. Ben Gurion wrote to his son: “We must expel the Arabs and take their place...”. The original restored version states the exact opposite. In fact Ben Gurion wrote: “We must not expel the Arabs and take their place.” Because the negation was removed, the meaning of the sentence was totally corrupted and numerous, credulous Israeli researchers, never believing for one minute that the letter was not authentic, used this document as such in their works. A fierce controversy flared up among Israeli and foreign researchers, in particular Benny Morris, Shabtai Teveth and Efraim Karsh who more or less openly rejected any part in the falsification of the letter. Because works in French which brought this controversy to the public’s attention implied that Benny Morris was responsible and left doubts as to his rigor and intellectual honesty22, it is worth summarizing the facts briefly in particular since a recapitulation in chronological order is sufficient to clear him totally. In theory, a researcher is supposed to quote his references accurately, and it is commonplace among historians to use quotations from the works of their colleagues without further verification. This excessive trust, exhibited by many researchers, can perhaps be levelled against Benny Morris. In 1985, Shabtai Teveth, the biographer of Ben Gurion and a researcher at the Sde Boker Center published a book on Ben Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs in English. In the English version, Ben Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs, published by Oxford University Press, Shabtai Teveth quotes, page 189, Ben Gurion’s truncated sentence, without the negation. In 1987, Benny Morris, an Israeli historian and journalist relying on the English version of Shabtai Teveth’s book23, unknowingly used the

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22 See in particular Ilan Greilsammer’s narrative of the events in La Nouvelle Histoire d’Israel, essai sur une identité nationale, Paris, Gallimard, pp. 200-206.
23 Benny Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-1949, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 25. The reference for this quote is found at the end of the book on page 304, note 30. It is clear from this note that Benny Morris did not use the original archived letter by Ben Gurion but
falsified version of Ben Gurion’s letter to buttress his thesis that in his heart of hearts, Ben Gurion was in favor, in the 1930s and 1940s, of an Arab transfer. Benny Morris did not however base all his contentions on this single sentence. In 1991, Benny Morris finally had this book on the issue of Palestinian refugees translated into Hebrew. Between the publication of the English version and the Hebrew version, he discovered that Ben Gurion’s letter has been tampered with, and carefully restored the sentence as Ben Gurion wrote it in the Hebrew version of his book.

The rectified letter was not enough to change Morris’ opinion as to Ben Gurion’s desire for transfer. The scratched out sentence was only part of the evidence which was supported by other more crucial data. In 1996 Benny Morris published an article in the Israeli magazine Alpaim in which he discusses the falsification of the document and accuses Shabtai Teveth of having disseminated Ben Gurion’s faked statement in English the world over despite the fact that he had obviously seen the original. In 1985 Shabtai Teveth’s Ben Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs was published by Shoken press in Hebrew, the same year the English version of the book appeared. On page 314 he quotes Ben Gurion’s letter in its entirety with no parts crossed out. Benny Morris nevertheless stops short of accusing Shabtai Teveth of misconduct. Despite the evidence, the Israeli-born historian and London-based lecturer Efraim Karsh, perhaps misled by appearances and because the fabricated version of Ben Gurion’s letter supported Morris’ highly contested theories, insinuated that Benny Morris was responsible for the falsification.

The identity of the true falsifier is unknown but the vituperations from all sides have soured the university debate. The eventuality that a similar corruption of the archives could reoccur cannot be totally excluded. Although the chances are infinitely small, the risk is there.

Despite the deficiencies in the creation and preservation of archives and the instances of document mishandling, archives and written sources should not be rejected but rather examined with greater precaution, critical spirit and humility. Methods in historical criticism need further refining and should be undertaken with greater rigor. It is wiser to increase the number of the archive sources and to compare them systematically. Oral testimony can often enhance written sources, despite the fallibility of human memory. Greater efforts should be made to investigate private

only the quotation made by Shabtai Teveth in Ben Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs, Oxford, 1985, p. 189.


archives which contain a wealth of potential information. In history, nothing is final and narratives based on reconstructions of the past are subject to change if not set down. This however does not legitimate the postmodern position. Rather, historians should be aware of the imperfections of their work, the influences affecting their thoughts and writings, and gaps in the existing sources. They should aim for objectivity and use all means possible to faithfully reconstitute a complex, buried reality. The past is not an illusion and archive documents cannot be reduced to simple unidirectional interpretations of events. Fabrications and the disappearance of archives, errors, censorship, omissions, silences and additions which have been discovered reveal as much about the authors of the documents and the culture as do polished, seamless testimonies of the past.

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