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## MIDDLE EAST HISTORY: IT HAPPENED IN JULY; Expulsion of the Palestinians--Lydda and Ramleh in 1948

By Donald Neff

It was 46 years ago when Israel turned its forces against the all-Palestinian towns of Lydda and Ramleh. On July 13, 1948, Israeli troops forcefully compelled the entire population of as many as 70,000 men, women and children to flee their homes. Systematic looting followed. Swarms of new Jewish immigrants flocked to Lydda and Ramleh, and within days these ancient towns were transformed from Palestinian to Jewish municipalities.

Lydda and Ramleh lay east of Jaffa, between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and were to be part of the Palestinian state--as was Jaffa--according to the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947. However, since serious fighting had begun in April 1948, Israel had not only secured its own territory designated by the U.N. as part of the Jewish state but was now expanding its control into areas designated Palestinian. Jaffa had already been "cleansed" of its Palestinian population and come under Israeli control.

The initial attack against Lydda-Ramleh was led on April 11 by Lt. Col. Moshe Dayan, who was later Israel's defense minister and foreign minister. Israeli historians describe him as driving at the head of his armored battalion "full speed into Lydda, shooting up the town and creating confusion and a degree of terror among the population." 1

Two American news correspondents witnessed what happened in the ensuing assault. Keith Wheeler of the Chicago Sun Times wrote in an article titled "Blitz Tactics Won Lydda" that "practically everything in their way died. Riddled corpses lay by the roadside." Kenneth Bilby of the New York Herald Tribune wrote that he saw "the corpses of Arab men, women and even children strewn about in the wake of the ruthlessly brilliant charge." 2

All men of military age were sent to camps and all transport commandeered. The residents of Lydda were promised that if they congregated in mosques and churches they would be safe. On July 12, a brief fire-fight broke out in Lydda between Israeli soldiers and a Jordanian reconnaissance team in which two Israelis were killed. In retaliation, the Israeli commander issued orders to shoot anyone on the streets. Israeli soldiers turned their wrath at those cowering in mosques and churches, killing scores of them in Dahmash mosque alone. Palestinians venturing from their homes were also shot and killed. At least 250 Lyddans were killed and many others wounded. 3

That same day, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion ordered all the Palestinians expelled. The order said: "The residents of Lydda must be expelled quickly without attention to age." It was signed by Lieutenant Colonel Yitzhak Rabin, operations chief of the Lydda-Ramleh attack and later Israel's military chief of staff and its prime minister in 1974-77 and again today since 1992. 4 A similar order was issued about Ramleh.

The next day the massive forced exodus of the Palestinians began. The Ramlehans were luckier than their neighbors from Lydda. Most of the Ramleh expellees were driven into exile in buses and trucks. The Lyddans were forced to walk.

The exodus was an extended episode of suffering for the refugees.

The commander of Jordan's Arab Legion, John Bagot Glubb Pasha, reported: "Perhaps 30,000 people or more, almost entirely women and children, snatched up what they could and fled from their homes across the open fields....It was a blazing day in July in the coastal plains--the temperature about 100 degrees in the shade. It was 10 miles across open hilly country, much of it ploughed, part of it stony fallow covered with thorn bushes, to the nearest Arab village of Beit Sira. Nobody will ever know how many children died." 5

Israeli historian Benny Morris reported: "All the Israelis who witnessed the events agreed that the exodus, under a hot July sun, was an extended episode of suffering for the refugees, especially from Lydda. Some were stripped by soldiers of their valuables as they left town or at checkpoints along the way....One Israeli soldier...recorded vivid impressions of the thirst and hunger of the refugees on the roads, and of how 'children got lost' and of how a child fell into a well and drowned, ignored, as his fellow refugees fought each other to draw water. Another soldier described the spoor left by the slow-shuffling columns, 'to begin with [jettisoning] utensils and furniture and in the end, bodies of men, women and children, scattered along the way.'

"Quite a few refugees died--from exhaustion, dehydration and disease--along the roads eastwards, from Lydda and Ramleh, before reaching temporary rest near and in Ramallah. Nimr Khatib put the death toll among the Lydda refugees during the trek eastward at 335; Arab Legion commander John Glubb Pasha more carefully wrote that 'nobody will ever know how many children died.'" 6

More than just the murderous sun and rough terrain contributed to the miseries of the displaced Palestinians. Israeli soldiers searched them for valuables and indiscriminately killed those they took a dislike to or thought were hiding possessions. The London Economist reported: "The Arab refugees were systematically stripped of all their belongings before they were sent on their trek to the frontier. Household belongings, stores, clothing, all had to be left behind." 7 One youthful Palestinian survivor recalled: "Two of my friends were killed in cold blood. One was carrying a box presumed to have money and the other a pillow which was believed to contain valuables. A friend of mine resisted and was killed in front of me. He had 400 Palestinian pounds in his pocket." 8

### The Outbreak of Looting

After the forced exit of the Palestinians, looting began in Lydda and Ramleh. Israeli historian Simha Flapan reported: "With the population gone, the Israeli soldiers proceeded to loot the two towns in an outbreak of mass pillaging that the officers could neither prevent nor control....Even the soldiers from the Palmach--most of whom came from or were preparing to join kibbutzim--took part, stealing mechanical and agricultural equipment." 9 Israeli troops carted away 1,800 truck loads of Palestinian property, including a button factory, a sausage factory, a soft drinks

plant, a macaroni factory, a textile mill, 7,000 retail shops, 1,000 warehouses and 500 workshops. 10

In place of the Palestinians came new Jewish immigrants and Lydda and Ramleh quickly "became mainly Jewish towns," in the words of historian Morris. 11 Lydda is now called Lod.

The brutal expulsion of the Palestinians of Lydda and Ramleh long remained a sensitive topic in Israel. Rabin candidly wrote about the incident in his memoirs in the late 1970s but the passage was censored by the Israeli government. 12 In 1978, the Israeli censor canceled a TV film based on Yizhar Smilansky's classic *The Tale of Hirber Hiza*, a novella he wrote under the pen name of S. Yizhar about his experiences as a young Israeli intelligence officer who witnessed in 1948 the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes. Smilansky's offending lines included this one: "We came, shot, burned, blew up, pushed and exiled.... Will the walls not scream in the ears of those who will live in this village?" 13

The reverberations of the brutal treatment of the residents of Lydda and Ramleh continue to this day. One of the families forced from Lydda was that of George Habash. He later became one of Israel's most feared foes as head of the militant Palestinian guerrilla group Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. 14 The PFLP today is among the rejectionist groups opposing peace with Israel.

#### Recommended Reading:

Flapan, Simha, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1987.

Glubb Pasha (Sir John Bagot Glubb), *A Soldier with the Arabs*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1957.

Hirst, David, *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

Khalidi, Walid, *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem until 1948*, Washington, DC, Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987.

Morris, Benny, *The Birth of the Palestine Refugee Problem*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Nakhleh, Issa, *Encyclopedia of the Palestine Problem (2 vols)*, New York, Intercontinental Books, 1991.

Palumbo, Michael, *The Palestinian Catastrophe: The 1948 Expulsion of a People From their Homeland*, Boston, Faber and Faber, 1987.

Quigley, John, *Palestine and Israel: A Challenge to Justice*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1990.

Said, Edward W. and Christopher Hitchens, *Blaming the Victims*, New York, Verso, 1988.

Segev, Tom, 1949: The First Israelis, New York, The Free Press, 1986.

Notes:

1 Childers, "The Other Exodus," in Khalidi, From Haven to Conquest, p. 800.

2 Palumbo, The Palestinian Catastrophe, p. 126.

3 Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, p. 206; Palumbo, The Palestinian Catastrophe, p. 127.

4 Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, p. 207.

5 Glubb, A Soldier with the Arabs, p. 162.

6 Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, p. 210.

7 Palumbo, The Palestinian Catastrophe, p. 129.

8 Ibid., pp. 129-30.

9 Flapan, The Birth of Israel, p. 100.

10 Quigley, Palestine and Israel, p. 111.

11 Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, p. 211.

12 It was later published by both The New York Times, 10/23/79, and Newsweek, 11/9/79, and in a book by Rabin's English translator, Peretz Kidron; see Kidron, "Truth Whereby Nations Live," in Said & Hitchens (eds.), Blaming the Victims.

13 Time, "Untimely Story," 2/20/78.

14 Palumbo, The Palestinian Catastrophe, p. 131. Also see Hirst, The Gun and the Olive Branch, p. 280.

Donald Neff is author of the Warriors trilogy on U.S.-Middle East relations and of the unpublished Middle East Handbook, a chronological data bank of significant events affecting U.S. policy and the Middle East on which this article is based. His books are available through the AET Book Club.

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