

An unflinching view

ISRAEL: WHAT WENT WRONG?

By Omer Bartov,
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In *Israel: What Went Wrong?*, Omer Bartov asks a question that is at once historical, political, and unbearably personal: how did Zionism, born as a movement of Jewish self-emancipation, become an ideology of domination over another people? That the question is posed not by an external critic but by one of the world's leading scholars of the Holocaust, an Israeli historian, a former IDF officer, and a child of Zionists, gives this book its unusual moral force.

Bartov begins with Zionism's emancipatory promise, rooted in European anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and the dream of Jewish safety. He does not deny that dream. Indeed, the book's power depends on his refusal to deny it. His own family history — Polish Jewry, the trauma of the Holocaust, Israeli Statehood, and military service — runs through the argument like an exposed nerve. But what began as liberation, he argues, gradually hardened into ethno-nationalism, occupation and, finally, a poli-

tics of permanent violence.

Bartov's central claim is that Israel's present catastrophe was not inevitable, though it can now appear so in retrospect. The book resists the lazy comfort of inevitability. There were choices, missed turns, moral evasions. The Nakba and the Holocaust, he argues, cannot be understood as rival memories competing for exclusive victimhood. They are historically entangled traumas, each foundational to the national consciousness of one people, and each made more dangerous by the refusal to see the other's wound.

The strongest chapters are those in which Bartov brings his scholarly life to bear on Israel's political psychology. His discussion of the "Never Again" syndrome is particularly acute. In Israel, he suggests, the universal lesson of the Holocaust — never again genocide — was narrowed into a tribal imperative: never again to Jews. This shift produced a society at once frightened and ferocious, convinced of its existential vulnerability even when exercising overwhelming military power.

The chapter on children is almost impossible to read without despair. Bartov does not minimise the



horror of October 7 or the murder and the kidnapping of Israeli children. But he places that grief beside the mass killing, maiming, displacement, and starvation of Palestinian children in Gaza. Instead of setting this up as a mathematical comparison, Bartov uses it to pose simple moral questions: can a society mourn its own dead without erasing the children it kills? Can grief remain human without becoming permission for annihilation?

Equally compelling is Bartov's argument about Israel's missing Constitution. What might seem a dry question of public law scholar-

ship becomes, in his hands, a key to the entire tragedy. The failure to constitutionalise equality, rights, and the promises of the Declaration of Independence left Israel vulnerable to the steady privileging of Jewishness over democracy. The occupation after 1967 did the rest, corroding both occupier and occupied, until domination became not an emergency but a structure.

There are moments when the book's moral certainty can feel severe, even prosecutorial. Bartov has little patience for euphemism, and some readers may find his use of the language of genocide diffi-

cult to digest. But that discomfort is partly the point. He is not writing to reassure liberal Zionists that the old dream can be restored by better management, but asking whether the dream itself can survive without a radical reckoning with the violence committed in its name.

The coda gestures towards a confederal future, constitutional renewal, and truth and reconciliation. These proposals may appear painfully remote from the present. Yet Bartov's realism is not the realism of despair. He knows that societies often confront their crimes only after catastrophe. The tragedy is that Israel may not yet have reached the bottom from which such recognition becomes possible.

Ultimately, *Israel: What Went Wrong?* is not simply about Israel. It is about what nations do with memory, what fear does to power, and how liberation movements can become instruments of exclusion when they forget the humanity of those standing in their way. Bartov has written a grave, necessary, and deeply unsettling book, which offers something rarer than comfort: moral clarity without innocence.

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