



BARBARA TUCHMAN'S COMMENTS ON ISRAEL

Author(s): Moshe Yegar

Source: *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Fall 2005, Vol. 17, No. 3/4 (Fall 2005), pp. 147-154

Published by: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25834646>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Jewish Political Studies Review*

JSTOR

BARBARA TUCHMAN'S COMMENTS ON ISRAEL

Moshe Yegar*

Although Barbara Tuchman never devoted a book to Jewish or Israeli history, her perspective on these topics can be gleaned from four articles on the subject and from some passages in her other writings.

In one article she sought the historical meaning of the Nazis' war against the European Jews. The silence of the democratic countries shocked her no less than the crimes themselves.

In 1966, Tuchman visited Israel for the first time, and she described her impressions in a lengthy article. Her second visit took place a year later and coincided with the Six Day War, and her detailed and systematic impressions were published in September 1967.

Tuchman's writings about Israel reveal a high level of sympathy for the young state and sensitivity to its achievements and problems.

Introduction

The American Jewish historian Barbara Tuchman was born in New York City on 30 January 1912 and died in Connecticut on 6 February 1989. She was the granddaughter of Henry Morgenthau, Sr., who was U.S. ambassador in Istanbul from 1913 to 1916. When World War I broke out and the Turks began to persecute the Jewish community

Jewish Political Studies Review 17:3-4 (Fall 2005)

in Palestine, Morgenthau helped mobilize aid to the beleaguered Yishuv. Differences of opinion that developed between him and Chaim Weizmann and some other Zionist leaders in the United States transformed him into an anti-Zionist. His son, Henry Jr., Barbara's uncle, was secretary of the treasury during World War II. From 1947 to 1953, he was head of the United Jewish Appeal and chairman of the Board of the Hebrew University. He was also among the initiators of Israel Bonds and its chairman from 1951 to 1954.

Barbara's father, Morris Wertheim, was chairman of the American Jewish Committee from 1941 to 1943. He was married to Alma Morgenthau, daughter of Henry Morgenthau, Sr. In 1940 Barbara married a physician, Dr. Lester Reginald Tuchman.

Her first work that brought her recognition was *The Bible and the Sword*. She wrote a total of eleven books, receiving the Pulitzer Prize for two of them. None of her longer studies dealt with Jewish or Israeli history; with the exception of what she said about Zionism in *The Bible and the Sword* and a few scattered passages in her other writings, she only devoted four articles to this subject. From these, however, we can glean her perspective on the Jewish people and the state of Israel.

The Jewish People, Zionism, and Israel

Three of Tuchman's articles on Israel are included in her collection *Practicing History*. An article dealing with the reunification of Jerusalem in June 1967 was omitted. She was in Jerusalem at that time and personally witnessed the removal of the barbed wire and barriers that divided the city. However, when it came to choosing essays for the volume, she felt this one was superficial and did not reflect the power of the actual events.¹

Tuchman's first systematic essay on the Jewish people, published on 29 May 1966, was her review of Gideon Hausner's book on the Eichmann trial, *Justice in Jerusalem*.² In this article, written in pain and a great deal of anger, Tuchman attempts to find the historical meaning of the Germans' murder of Europe's Jews and the world's allowing it to take place. The German genocide, the indifference of the Allies, the ban on Jewish refugees from entering the United States or Palestine, made it clear that, apart from a few exceptions, the non-Jewish world was quite comfortable with the "Final Solution."³ The silence of the democratic countries, except for Denmark, Sweden, and Switzerland,⁴ shocked her no less than the crimes themselves.

Tuchman castigates Hannah Arendt's term "the banality of evil" to describe the murder of six million Jews, this having been exactly

the defense used by Eichmann who portrayed himself as just a routine civil servant. She sharply criticizes those who say the Jews cooperated with their executioners and went passively to their deaths. She points to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising as proof that when they could, Jews fought despite the same awareness of their hopelessness as their ancestors who fought the Romans. Their brethren in Palestine also fought against forces that attacked them, but prevailed and won their independence. She also mentions that the Germans murdered both Russian and American prisoners of war with no resistance.⁵

On another occasion, she points out that the passion to be free is one of the positive traits of humanity and that the Jews are noted for fighting for their freedom. She mentions three Jewish rebellions against foreign rule: the Maccabees against Antiochus, the Zealots against the Romans, and Simon Bar Kokhba against Hadrian. "The rebellion was crushed, but the zeal for selfhood, smoldering in exile through eighteen centuries, was to revive and regain its home in our time."⁶ This in essence was her view of Zionism.

Tuchman openly admitted that she was anti-German.⁷ She believed there was something cruel and barbaric in this people's character, as revealed in German acts of brutality at the beginning of World War I in Belgium that she described in her book *Guns of August*.

First Impressions of Israel

In 1966, Tuchman visited Israel for the first time. She published her impressions on 14 January 1967 in a long article in which she conveyed the facts, historical nature, and significance of the new nation as well as the feelings it aroused.⁸ This essay later served as the introduction of the Fodor tourist guidebook on Israel.

Tuchman points out that: "No nation in the world has so many drastic problems squeezed in so small a space, under such urgent pressure of time and heavy burden of history, as Israel." It had to sustain national existence while coping with the hostile actions of its four neighboring countries, which together had pledged to annihilate it. The boycott they had imposed on it prevented commerce, transportation, and communication on all of its land borders. The article continues to detail the unique problems Israel was facing.

Tuchman also describes Israel's various accomplishments, and poetically evokes its "dramatic" desert vistas. "It was no accident that God was invented and two religions originated here." The ubiquitous archeological and historical discoveries stimulated her spirit and enabled her to imagine the many seminal events over the centuries.

She also writes appreciatively about the testimonials that Israel preserved to the struggle against the British and the War of Independence: the illegal immigrant ship *Af Al Pi Khen* in Haifa, the Syrian tank at Kibbutz Degania, the armored vehicles on the road to Jerusalem, and of course the commemoration of the Holocaust at the Martyrs Forest and Yad Vashem. The latter building, as it appeared at the time of her visit, was in her opinion the most impressive one in all of Israel: "As such it keeps the memory alive, not merely to mourn but with a sense, perhaps of some mission to history." Divided Jerusalem also evoked for her a special emotion tempered with sadness.

Tuchman discusses the Arab enmity toward Israel, and specifically the terror attacks of Fatah supported by Syria, the Israeli victims, and the UN condemnation of Israel's retaliatory actions. She suggests that the Arabs are "paranoid" in their attitude toward Israel, and that the Jews' rebuilding of the land reminds the Arabs of their failures and shortcomings. In the War of Independence in 1948 and the Sinai Campaign in 1956, the Israelis "put territory under their feet at last in the land they once ruled, and they do not intend to be uprooted again....In any event, the territory never formed part of an Arab state in modern times, having passed from Turkish sovereignty to the British Mandate."

Tuchman went on a comprehensive tour from the northern Galilee to Eilat. Her account combines stylistic literary depictions of the scenery with information on the difficult reality of daily life in the country and the insecurity caused by Arab hostility. Tuchman did not like Tel Aviv, but was charmed by other places. The development of Beersheba impressed her, as did, in particular, the construction of the port of Eilat. She was fascinated by visits to an officers' training school with its commander Meir Pa'il, and to the school for the General Staff with its chief Mordechai Gur. Regarding the IDF soldiers, it struck her that "Jewish sorrow has gone out of their eyes." In general, she emphasized the Jews' efforts to renew the Land of Israel in contrast to the neglect by the Arabs and the Turks.

Tuchman found that Israelis "looked different" from Diaspora Jews. The reason, she concluded, was that "Israel is theirs; here they are not a minority; they are on top." That did not mean their lives were easy; they had internal conflicts and tended to political fractiousness. She was struck, however, by the sense of purpose and motivation. In Israel, things that were "impossible" like the settlement of the Land, the draining of the swamps, self-defense against multiple enemies, or absorbing such large numbers of immigrants, were achieved. She was especially amazed by the development of the Negev, which according to the British Peel Commission of 1937 could not support human inhabitation.

Tuchman was also interested in Israel's water problems, the "Who is a Jew" debate, the tensions between religious and secular Jews and between immigrants from Middle Eastern countries and the veteran Ashkenazi population, and Israel's aid programs to foreign countries. She recognized the new state's deficiencies, however, and did not say everything was fine. Materialism was beginning to replace the pioneering spirit. Thousands of Israelis had left the country seeking a higher standard of living and less stress—"to escape geography," as she put it.

Tuchman learned much from her extensive visit. It seems she did not meet with politicians; at any event, she does not refer to any by name. The only Israeli leader mentioned in her writings, and that in only one article that dealt with the limitations of leaders in general, was Golda Meir. She observes: "her roughness is natural rather than neurotic, besides required by the circumstances."⁹

Observations after the Six Day War

Tuchman's affinity for Israel was of a special nature, different from the identification typical of members of pro-Israeli Jewish organizations. It was the affinity of an American based on the deep historical sense that the Jewish people had returned to its homeland. As she remarked in the introduction to her book *Notes from China*, "the restoration of the state of Israel after a gap of nearly two thousand years struck me to be an event unique in history."¹⁰ She was awed by Israel's perseverance and believed historical justice was on its side.

Tuchman returned to Israel within a year and wrote her impressions on the Six Day War in a detailed and sympathetic article that was published in September 1967.¹¹ She took special interest in the IDF and its achievements, and opened the piece with the statement: "A people considered for centuries non-fighters carried out in June against long odds the nearly most perfect military operation in modern history." A few years later in April 1972, she slightly qualified her assessment in a lecture to American officers dealing with the Vietnam War: "the most nearly perfect, or at any rate the least-snafued, professional military performance of our time, was that of the Israelis in the Six-Day War of 1967."¹²

After describing the new situation brought about by Israel's victory, she continued: "That the armed forces who achieved this result drew on statehood of less than twenty years and on a population more than half immigrant raises questions about the components of effective military power. Who are the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and how

did they do it?" She responds that while the basic components were motivation and compelling necessity, these alone would not be adequate without capacity. Tuchman theorizes that what furnished this capacity was the brainpower with which this people is endowed, now channeled for the first time since the Exile into the military art of defending their own homeland.

Moreover, the IDF General Staff developed an "Israeli answer," in terms of tactics, weaponry, and training, to the country's particular military needs. In part, this reflected the political experience of disillusionment in pinning one's hopes on others. But the basic factor was temperamental, deriving from the self-reliance of the early Zionist settlers from whom the higher-level officers, largely native-born, were descended. "What forged the Israeli armed forces was that the state had never known peace."

Tuchman explains that the IDF strategic doctrine is built on three fundamental realities: no natural obstacles on which to base a defense, no territory to yield, and no room to retreat. This dictated a principle of taking the war immediately to the enemy's turf, since unlike other countries, for Israel defeat means annihilation. Many in Israel knew from experience, such as the Hebron massacre of 1929, what an Arab victory portended.

Although Tuchman knew that the phrase "the espresso generation" was used to describe Israeli youth before the Six Day War, she wrote that they surprised everyone with their dependability and military prowess. The article also reviews the reserve-duty system and its origins in the prestate Haganah and Palmach fighting organizations and in the ranks of the British army during World War II. She also emphasizes the IDF's unique lack of foreign advisers.

Having visited the battlefields in Sinai, Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights, Tuchman writes that it is hard to understand how the soldiers surmounted the challenges. She then explains the political background of the war, the abandonment of Israel to its fate by the nations of the world and the UN, and the widespread feeling in Israel during the crisis period that the Arabs might complete the work of the "Final Solution." When war finally broke out, the IDF surged forward as if released by a spring.

Tuchman devotes several pages to describing the air force and its detailed preparations for the brilliant destruction of the Arab air forces while still on the ground. She notes the precision of the intelligence that the air force and the rest of the IDF had in their possession. She was also much impressed by the swift and effective care provided by the army medical corps. She expresses admiration for the IDF's doctrine of "after me," meaning that officers go first, and cites data on casualties and the high percentage of officers among them.

Tuchman goes on to compare the IDF soldier and the Arab soldier; “essentially the war was a conflict of societies.” The Jews, who had realized the Zionist dream of returning to their land and created a modern state in it, had undergone a mental and emotional revolution. Instead of passive sufferers, they had become masters of their own fate. “The Israelis possessed a secret weapon—a homeland.” In contrast, Egypt and Syria, for all their talk of socialism, had not undergone any change that influenced people’s lives and did not have a precious society to fight and die for. She details the shortcomings of the Arab armies and claims that the Russian assistance was ill-suited to them.

A Changed Jewish People

“The amazing victory,” Tuchman notes, “brought no parades or cheers or the usual celebrations of triumph. Israel’s concentration on grief over its losses would have seemed exaggerated in any other country. In Israel, its origin is in the long history of the Jewish people. It comes from an old, inherited high value placed on human life.”

Tuchman concludes the article by observing that the Jewish people, for so long and so often the victims of violence, have had to become, against their ethic, users of violence. Exactly as with the United States, the Jews realized that to win the right of nationhood they would have to rely on military force. Despite the pride in the IDF, she notes that many Israelis are troubled by their success. It had been barely a generation from Auschwitz to the conquest of Sinai and reunification of Jerusalem. The transformation was very sudden; in less than a lifetime the Jews had gone from being persecuted to ruling over others. The question was what they would make of the conquest and what it would make of them.

Notes

- * This article is derived from a longer study in Hebrew on Barbara Tuchman and her work as a historian. The article was translated from the Hebrew by Shalom Bronstein.
- 1. Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), pp. 3–4.
- 2. “The Final Solution,” review of *Justice in Jerusalem* by Gideon Hausner, in Tuchman, *Practicing History*, pp. 118–22.
- 3. Tuchman, *Practicing History*, p. 212.
- 4. If she had known then what has subsequently been learned about these three countries, she would have been more restrained in her praise.

5. Tuchman, "Final Solution."
6. Tuchman, *Practicing History*, p. 240.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
8. "Israel: Land of Unlimited Impossibilities," in *ibid.*, pp. 123–45.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
10. Barbara Tuchman, *Notes from China* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. xi–xii.
11. Tuchman, "Israel's Swift Sword," in *Practicing History*, pp. 173–87.
12. Tuchman, *Practicing History*, p. 280.