

Liora R. Halperin, *The Oldest Guard: Forging the Zionist Settler Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), pp. 368.

by Yair Wallach

In standard Zionist periodization, the “First Aliya” refers to the early period of Zionist migration and colonization, between 1882 and 1904. In sociological terms, the group associated with the “First Aliya” are Eastern European Jewish migrants, who established themselves as private farmers in the agricultural colonies, the Moshavot. This group and its legacy have attracted surprisingly little scholarly interest in English. In contrast, there is a considerable body of literature in Hebrew on the “First Aliya,” primarily in the form of Zionist historiography and hagiography—in both scholarly and popular genres—as well as plenty of memoirs, commemoration books, and museums and memorials, dotted around the country. In Israel, this generation enjoys some nostalgic halo as the ones who laid the first foundations for the “new Jewish Yishuv,” but ultimately their role during the British Mandate and the establishment of Israel is seen as a minor one, compared with the organized labor movement.

It is this public image—and its contradictions—which is the subject of Liora Halperin’s excellent book, on the Zionist settler memory culture. In chronological terms, *The Oldest Guard* focuses on the British Mandate and the early decades of the state of Israel—during which members of “the First Aliya” were steadily relegated to the sidelines of Zionism. The Labour Zionist movement, which took over the Yishuv and Zionist institutions, was led by socialist Jews, who typically arrived in Palestine after 1904. The Labour movement was built on a model of communal settlements and cooperative economy, “Hebrew Labour” and the exclusion of Arab workers, and a staunch secularized version of Jewish nationalism. All these were in stark contrast with the First Aliya settlers, who were private landowners, employed Arab workers and rejected the principle of exclusive “Hebrew Labour.” They were mostly religiously observant and hostile to “ideology,” that is, to Zionist socialism.

Against the rising labor hegemony, key members of the Moshavot forged their image as “first settlers,” to defend their role and legacy within the larger story of Zionism. This was a story that cast the first settlers as pragmatic farmers, rooted in

the soil; committed Zionist, yet “apolitical;” able to defend themselves against “the Arabs,” but also to get along with them. Halperin follows this crafting of pioneer mythology through a dazzling wealth of sources, including documents from Moshavot archives, oral history collections, memoirs and press articles, museums and images—and even a commemorative brandy bottle. The book develops its analysis through an attentive reading of the writings of memory agents, colourful and idiosyncratic characters (all men) who include David Tidhar, the private investigator, detective story writer, as well as biographer, who published the 19-volume encyclopedia of “the founders and builders of Israel” (much of it dedicated to the First Aliya); the tireless self-promoter Menashe Meirovitch, a Rishon Lezion colonist who wrote for newspapers and the radio, and regularly lectured school pupils about his legacy; and, above all, the inimitable Avraham Shapira, the “Oldest Guard” from Petach Tikva, with his trademark moustache, walking stick, and Arabian horse. Shapira is a constant presence in the book, as the archetypal “first settler,” who was routinely lauded and celebrated – including in the annual Tel Aviv Purim parade. Renowned for fending off attacks on Jewish colonies, but also for his Arabic proficiency and relations with Palestinians, Shapira provided a model for a settler in the “Oriental frontier,” in close proximity to Palestine’s natives: unstable and dangerous at times, but mostly peaceful, allowing settler hegemony without open war.

Indeed, a central part of the “First Aliya” mythology hinged on their relations with Palestinians, which involved, in virtually all narratives, an agonistic mix of coexistence and friendship alongside violence and confrontation. Emphasizing the unequal and settler-colonial nature of these relations, Halperin terms this “hierarchical co-existence,” as clear relations of domination existed between Jewish farmers and their Arab workers or neighbors. The contradictions within this narrative come to the fore in the narratives around the Nakba. Through a careful reading of settlers’ accounts of 1948, Halperin shows how the expulsion of Palestinians was presented both as a rupture in relations of “hierarchical co-existence,” and at the same an inevitability due to a supposedly entrenched Arab hostility.

The 1948 expulsion made the “First Aliya” and its claim for hierarchical coexistence much less relevant. In 1960, for Shapira’s 90th birthday, a forest was planted and named after him on the lands of the destroyed village of Qula.

Shapira, who had symbolized the idea of frontier “coexistence,” had his name written onto a site of depopulation. Halperin reads these two narratives as complementary and successive forms of erasure: early settlers’ hierarchical relations with Palestinians were based on colonial power and denial, very much like the subsequent narrative of a Jewish exclusive state, in which the Palestinian past was covered up by the forest. And yet, these two narratives may be more at odds than is allowed here. As Halperin finds out, the sign with Shapira’s name has long been removed from the forest to another location. That is to say, the erasure, for which he had lent his name, ultimately erased also Shapira’s own name. Unlike the fallen heroes of the “Second Aliya” (like Yoseph Trumpeldor) Shapira is hardly remembered today. It seems that the value of that early settler mythology of “coexistence” was ultimately limited.

The book does not deal with the history of the Moshavot under Ottoman rule, but rather with the memory of that period. However, cultural memory is produced not only through remembering but also through active forgetting. To understand what the settlers chose to forget, the Moshavot’s Ottoman chapter is crucial and would reveal a more ambivalent and contradictory picture than is provided here. Many if not most settlers in the Moshavot naturalized as Ottoman citizens, in order to be allowed to own land. They became integrated, to varying degrees, into Ottoman state structures, with participation in elections and, after 1908, military service. This means that “hierarchical co-existence” has its limitations in describing the Moshavot during the Ottoman period. In relation to Ottoman state officials, military commanders, or the Arab urban elite of Palestine, Jewish colonists were not in a position of power, even if they could and did appeal to the intervention of European consuls. The Moshavot in Ottoman Palestine presented a hybrid model of European colonization, that, on the one hand, was unabashedly colonial, yet at the same time, integrated within a “native” state. Greater attention to the Ottoman period could help expose the contradictions within settler memory, which in other respects is characterized and analyzed so perceptively here.

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