

Censored Voices: A snapshot in time reveals war crimes

By Fred Mazelis
22 June 2016

Directed by Mor Loushy; written by Loushy and Daniel Sivan

Censored Voices, which won the Israeli prize for best documentary last year, is based on a simple but powerful premise. A group of Israeli veterans of the 1967 Six-Day War—almost 50 years after the events—listen to tape recordings of interviews they gave in the weeks immediately after the conflict. The conversations are combined with footage of the war and its aftermath.

The soldiers' accounts, mostly suppressed by military censorship when efforts were made to publish them at the time, reveal truths about the war that have rarely been discussed. At the same time, as the former soldiers listen to their younger selves, their original testimony also functions as a kind of time capsule, exposing the bankruptcy and dead-end of the whole Zionist project.

This significant documentary, directed and co-written by Mor Loushy, is an Israeli-German co-production. Loushy conceived the film after reading a book, based on these interviews, by historian Avraham Shapira. Shapira had led the informal conversations with the soldiers, working with a young teacher, Amos Oz, a veteran of the war himself and, subsequently, one of Israel's leading writers.

Loushy worked for a number of years to convince Shapira to assist her in making this documentary account. She spent years tracking down archival footage, including rare scenes of battle and the beginnings of decades-long occupation. The film opens with Oz and Shapira explaining the context in which the interviews took place, as they traveled to various Israeli kibbutzim to find veterans who would talk about their experiences and reactions.

All of those on tape in 1967, having come of age in the years after the founding of Israel as a Zionist state in 1948, accepted as necessary the dispossession of Palestinians at that time, from land they had occupied for centuries. This makes the interviews all the more revealing and prophetic in their anticipation of the trajectory of Israeli society and politics.

The June 1967 war unquestionably marked a turning point for the Zionist state. Israel tripled the area over which it exercised political and military control, occupying the West Bank, Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights and all of Jerusalem, after a massive first strike had rapidly defeated the armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan.

A wave of nationalist and chauvinist euphoria swept the country and affected many Jews elsewhere, especially in the US and Western Europe. A new Zionist myth was added to the old one,

which had justified the denial of the national rights of the Palestinian people on the basis of the horror of the Nazi Holocaust, subjecting them to Israeli military rule.

The Zionist establishment, still led by the veterans of Labour Zionism who had founded the state two decades earlier, celebrated the military victory and initiated a "Greater Israel" policy, spawning a new social layer—particularly among the Jewish settlers within the Occupied Territories—committed to this expansionist policy. It thereby adopted the policies of its former political rivals, the right-wing Revisionist tendency embodied in the Herut party (now Likud).

The Zionist authorities appealed to history for proof of legitimacy, morality and exclusivity in the Jewish people's right to the newly enlarged country, and encouraged a new wave of religious immigrants from the West to settle in the Occupied Territories. These settlements in turn provided a pole of attraction for some of the most reactionary forces, such as Moshe Levinger, the father of the settler movement, and Meir Kahane and his fascistic Kach party.

The soldiers who gave these extensive interviews in the weeks following the 1967 war did not subscribe to the general enthusiasm and national pride. As the excerpts replayed in *Censored Voices* amply demonstrate, some were ashamed of actions they had witnessed, but which they had not objected to at the time. They worried about a future of continuous occupation and permanent war with their Arab neighbors.

The military authorities deemed most of the discussions injurious to "national morale." Only 30 percent of the accounts were published at the time. These were widely read in Israel, but then largely disappeared from view, and the full interviews remained unavailable. *Censored Voices*, with its first-person testimony about atrocities, the reality of occupation and ethnic cleansing, shows what the Zionist establishment was worried about.

In the invasion of the Sinai, for instance, one of the veterans reports that the orders were to "kill everything you see ... every civilian, every person is your enemy." A paratroop company commander explains they were "ordered to kill soldiers wandering around ... [we] killed 15 soldiers who didn't even try to defend themselves ... In the war, we all became murderers."

A veteran describes east Jerusalem after the war. The chief rabbi arrived, "and all his entire entourage ... They started playing the shofar horn ... an awful sound. I had this feeling of abhorrence,

thinking about religious coercion and all that.” “For me it wasn’t a freed city, it was an occupied city,” the soldier continues. “The more I have visited there since then the more I felt loathing ... Judaism does not sanctify places. This is not Judaism. People are what count for me, not rocks.”

The interviews also dealt with the mechanics of occupation and of ethnic cleansing, a process that depressed many of the soldiers. “You take this Arab, uproot him from his village and turn him into a refugee,” says one veteran. “You just banish him. It’s not just one, two or three people. It’s an evacuation.

“You see the entire village sitting there ... You have to tell them something in order to drive them away. You say [the village] is going to get bombed and that they’d better leave. So they tell you—not one, but several of them—‘all right, let us die here,’ and you have nothing to say ... When you see there is no sign of resistance you realize what ‘holocaust’ means,” explains this soldier. The same man listens, 50 years later, close to tears, to his sentiments as a young soldier.

Another soldier recounts how he saw refugees being forced to leave Jericho. “I identified with them completely. I could see myself in those kids who were carried in their parents’ arms, when my father carried me ... The Arabs were having experiences similar to those we had in World War II. Perhaps that is the tragedy, that I identified with our enemies.”

Some of the soldiers venture to make forecasts of the future. “There is no feeling of joy,” observes one. “I don’t believe this is the last time we’ll have to wear uniforms ... The next round will be much crueler because we’ve become a conquering army.”

Shapira comments, back in 1967, “I don’t know if only wars can destroy nations. A constant state of war can also destroy a nation ... I’m not sure whether in other countries the future of the Jews won’t be safer than in a small state surrounded by enemies ... I feel that not only did this war not solve the state’s problems, but it complicated them in a way that will be very hard to solve.”

The tape-recorded accounts are skillfully interwoven with footage of the war and occupation. Some of the scenes are so close to what is described that they give the appearance of being the actual events.

Brief closing remarks from each of the participants touch on the legacy of the Six-Day War. Elisha and Amitai Shelem, brothers who are among the interviewees, explain that their hope was “to be a free people in our land. As long as we occupy another people we are not a free people. We’ve lost the free people part.”

“We’re heading toward a terrible place,” says Ilan Lotan. “A society that won’t tell itself the truth and won’t look reality in the eyes is in trouble. Big trouble.”

Censored Voices raises issues for which the participants admit they have no answers. Oz himself, vilified by the Zionist right wing for his criticism of occupation and expansion, has continued to defend Israel as a Jewish state and on that basis has supported, even with reservations, repeated murderous attacks on the Palestinians, such as the July 2014 “Operation Protective Edge,” which killed thousands.

Oz and others distinguish the founding of the Zionist state from what came later, and of course there are differences that reflect the sharp shift to the right within Israel. Nevertheless, the whole

trajectory of Zionism can be read in the mournful faces of the old Zionist veterans. These are not men who are proud of the last five decades, and they have little confidence in the future. Whether they agree or not, they are confirming the warning made by Leon Trotsky 80 years ago, that the establishment of an exclusivist Zionist state in Palestine would be a trap for the Jewish people.

The best explanation that *Censored Voices* can come up with is the comment from one veteran that the tragedy of Israel is that both peoples are “right,” that they have competing claims to the same land that cannot be reconciled, and that therefore there is no answer.

This is the only conclusion, as long as the nation-state barriers of capitalism are accepted. The tragedy is not that there is no way forward, but rather that Jewish and Arab workers have been pitted against each other.

Prime responsibility for this rests with Zionism and its imperialist sponsors. There is also the crucial role of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union, however, which cynically backed the establishment of the Zionist state in 1948, and then shifted its diplomatic support to the Arab nationalist leaderships. Above all, the Moscow bureaucracy feared an independent movement of the working class. The Arab bourgeois regimes shared the Stalinists’ fear that the revolutionary movement of the masses would escalate out of control, not just in Palestine, but elsewhere in the oil-rich region.

The apparent paradox, 50 years after Zionism’s greatest military victory, and despite the tens of billions in military and economic assistance Israel has received from its imperialist patrons and wealthy benefactors over the decades, is that Israel has never been weaker or more isolated. However, this is not so difficult to explain. It is not merely the product of the policies of the vile Netanyahu government. It expresses the logic of Zionism itself. Presiding over one of the most unequal societies in the world, the regime’s only answer to its own internal social crisis is to continue to direct it outward in military conflict, while attacking the democratic and social rights of the Israeli working class.

The answer to the false hopes and blind alley of Zionism—along with the decades of oppression suffered by the Palestinian people—must be the struggle to unite Jewish and Arab workers in a common struggle against their own ruling classes and for the building of a socialist society.

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