



Israel can no longer bury the Tantura massacre

Description

ISRAEL: In the late 1990s, I was teaching at the University of Haifa. One of my most popular modules was “the [Nakba](#)”, which, when pressure from the university was too much to bear, had to be reframed as “the history and historiography of 1948”. The main assignment asked students to research what occurred in 1948 in the places where they lived or were born.

There was one extraordinary student, older than me, the ultimate kibbutznik, who wore shorts even on the coldest days of the year and a huge Stalin-esque moustache. He responded eagerly to the assignment and found out that Kibbutz Magal, where he lived, was founded on the ruins of the village of Zeita. Naively, he tried to invite the survivors of the 1948 Nakba to visit and talk to the settlers who overtook their village, but he was scorned and castigated by his fellow kibbutzniks.

I did all I could to encourage the university to change its attitude – a campaign that eventually cost me my job

The student, [Teddy Katz](#), wished to continue exploring 1948 for his master’s thesis, and I suggested writing a micro-history of villages affected by the Nakba. He chose five of them south of Haifa and on the Mediterranean coast. I declined to be his supervisor as I was already at odds with the university over how to teach and research the history of [Palestine](#), so he chose two mainstream supervisors.

The thesis received an [exceptionally high grade](#), and its fourth chapter revealed through documents and interviews with soldiers and Palestinians that in May 1948, the Israeli army perpetrated a massacre in the village of Tantura, south of Haifa – a war crime that escaped most, but not all, of the known histories of the Nakba up to that time.

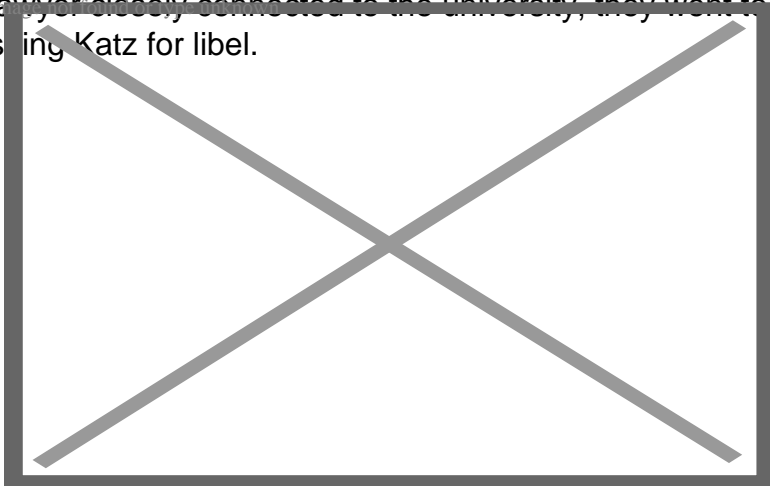
A mausoleum on a beach built over the ruins of Tantura is seen on 25 January 2022 (AFP)
A mausoleum on a beach built over the ruins of Tantura is seen on 25 January 2022 (AFP)

There were 60 hours of interviews about Tantura and documents showing that around 200 villagers were either shot in cold blood or killed by angry soldiers who rampaged through the village in response to the deaths of around eight of their fellow soldiers. The executions were graphically described by

Jewish and Palestinian eyewitnesses and alluded to in the documents, which also described mass graves dug near a graveyard where today there is a [parking lot](#) for the kibbutz built on the ruins of Tantura.

Mounting pressure

Katz was not obliged to tape his interviews, but he shared them with whoever wanted to listen, including myself – and I still have copies of all 60 hours. The very same soldiers who confessed to committing the massacre were horrified to learn that a journalist found Katz's thesis interesting and [published](#) his findings in the daily Maariv. Under pressure from other veterans, and with the help of a ~~lawyer closely connected to the university, they went to court and denied the evidence they gave, suing Katz for libel.~~



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Katz was asked by university authorities to hand over his tapes, which was his first mistake; he was not obliged to do so. On the basis of the tapes and some [insignificant discrepancies](#) between the interviews and their transcription in the thesis – there were six such cases out of hundreds of quotes – the veterans went to court, and the university declared its refusal to defend Katz's excellent thesis.

Then, a Greek tragedy unfolded. Under [pressure](#) from his family, and after a harrowing experience during the first day in court, Katz was convinced to write a Stalinist confession of wilful fabrication of the truth about Tantura. He regretted it a few hours later, but it was too late, and the next stages were unavoidable.

The court forced him to pay the expenses of the prosecution, and he became a pariah in his own kibbutz. The university demanded a new thesis, which he wrote, adding even more solid proof about the massacre – and although he passed, he received a [lower grade](#), and his thesis was removed from the library. Not surprisingly, amid all the stress, he suffered two strokes, and today this once-energetic person is in a wheelchair.

Campaign of delegitimisation

This all occurred in the early 2000s, and I did all I could to encourage the university to change its attitude – a campaign that eventually cost me my job, even though I was a tenured lecturer. I also published in Hebrew an article stating that there was a massacre in the village, but no one dared take me to court.

At the time, Israeli media and the academic establishment at best ridiculed Katz and me; at worst, they called us traitors. The campaign of delegitimisation of my work by leading Israeli historians continues to this day. Students are dissuaded from using my works, you can hardly find them in libraries, and nasty reviews occasionally make their way into local papers, although they are not accepted by the international community.

In a free and democratic Palestine, a memorial in Tantura could be a meaningful reminder of the past

Now, film director [Alon Schwarz](#) was finally able to catch up to the Jewish protagonists in this Greek tragedy. Some of them [confessed](#) on camera that Katz told the truth and recorded faithfully their version of events in 1948. With the help of cutting-edge technology, Schwarz was able to uncover the [mass graves](#), and prodded the judge who was sitting in the original trial to admit she had never listened to the tapes. After listening to one in the film, she acknowledged the verdict could have been very different.

In all this, we should not forget what is important. The massacre was part of an overall crime against humanity that [Israel](#) committed in 1948 and continues to perpetrate to this very day – a crime that is still widely denied. Films or dissertations by conscientious Israeli Jews are not enough to rectify this crime.

The only relevant closure for this ongoing criminality is the decolonisation of all of historical Palestine, and the full implementation of the [right of return](#). In a free and democratic Palestine, a memorial in Tantura could be a meaningful reminder of the past. But when it only appears on the pages of liberal Zionist papers such as Haaretz, it adds insult to injury, without a more concrete rectification of past evils.

by Ilan Pappé

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1. Main
2. Politics-Geopolitics-Gov.-Events

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