A tighter frame could make the viewer see this photograph as a documentation of close friendship between two men. However, the other men sitting to the right of Jabri Amin al Haj reveal the picture of a group encounter, attributing the warmly clasped hands of Jacob Epstein, the Jew and al Jaj, the Arab, a public significance that transcends their personal relations. The two do bring their faces close together to exchange a few words off the record, but these openly public gestures of proximity turn them into a promise made in front of witnesses, one of whom is the photographer. This photographer, Zoltan Kluger, attended the encounter from its very beginning and documented it in its entirety. He even took a classical group picture, as a kind of summary of the successful meeting. This encounter, however, not the first nor the last, was held with the understanding that the interests of each of the communities must eventually be subjugated to their common interest of protecting their joint world, a world that cannot be partitioned and must therefore be shared.

Civil Resistance Against Violence

Jacob Epstein holding hands with Jabri Amin al Jaj during a visit of Jewish settlers from Zichron Yaakov at the Arab village of Subrin. Photographer: Zoltan Kluger, GPO 20.01.1940.

The violence exercised by the sovereign national regime against the population of citizens took place despite the civil resistance of Jews and Arabs to the reality of a war and its antagonistic mobilization. These citizens tried to defend themselves by means of mutual promises, local agreements and civil contracts. In the midst of growing violence and anxiety they tried to avoid enmity and maintain such civil alliances as neighbourly relations and friendships, as well as commercial contacts. Deir Yassin, Sheikh Mouanis, Kibbutz Saris, Beit Ummar, Kfar Etzyon, Majdal, Sidna Ali, Miske and Rishpon are only a few of the places where Jews and Arabs tried to preserve their lives together through local agreements on matters of mutual protection and cooperation.

The constituent violence responsible for driving apart the two populations could not have been done had it not been preceded by co-existence, both historically and ontologically.

Using photography and citizenship as research tools helps us reconstruct the phenomenal field where constituent violence was exercised, affecting not only its direct victims, but all those involved. In order to realize the plan, the constituent violence recorded in the photos is the ultimate evidence to the unavoidability of co-existence of Jews and Arabs as parties to the violence that transformed their relations.

In the 1940s, groups of Jews and groups of Arabs met each other throughout Palestine. These were not chance encounters in public places or business and trade contacts, but rather meetings initiated and what I would like to name 'civil assemblies'. Some were documented in the press and various archives, many of them were documented in the Haganah archive, on which I relied in my reconstruction. Many of these meetings were held in private homes, often with refreshments and coffee boiled over embers and dripped into the cups of guests, others in municipal offices and places of work. At these meetings, various topics were brought up regarding the complex neighbourly relations that had evolved in Palestine as a result of Jewish immigration in the first decades of the twentieth-century. Some of the meetings discussed the fate of sheep that had somehow wandered from one yard to another, others addressed the quality of water and ways of supplying it fairly to all and sundry, while still others discussed ways to resist joining the armed forces on both sides. In certain meetings, discussion revolved around concrete demands for reconciliation, reparation, amendment and change. As soon as the United Nations declared the partition plan in November 1947, these hundreds of assemblies became especially urgent and manifested a common concern for preserving neighbourly relations, refraining from violence and finding ways to provide mutual security for individuals or groups faced by the two nations who wished to exert violence and harm these relations.

Potential history

Potential should be understood here in the dual sense: unrealized possibilities that still motivated and directed the actions of various actors in the past, and possibilities that may become our own and be reactivated to guide our actions. In the context of histories produced under differential regimes, potential history is first of all history not shaped by the dominant discourse and perspective, which, in the context of Israel/Palestine, is that of sovereign nationalism. Potential history insists on restoring within the order of things the polyphony of civil relations and forms of being-together that existed at any moment in history without being shaped solely, let alone exhausted by, the national division.

Seeds of new rights: the right not to be a perpetrator and the right to imagine one's future

Al-Ramle, Photographer not identified. IDF and Defense Archive,12.7.1948

The photograph documents a dual moment of becoming: the Palestinians become refugees at the same time as the Israeli soldiers, who transform their civilian neighbours into refugees, become perpetrators. Since the photograph was taken, the Palestinians protest to return to their homes, while the Israelis, in continuing to be deaf to these protests, reproduce themselves as perpetrators.
Who would agree to expulsion being an acceptable means for determining the environment in which to spend your life? Who would give up the opportunity to transform his ancestors' violence into seeds of a liveable future where forgiveness – sought and granted – is the point of departure for the restoration of a shared sense of the unbearable?
This is a historical document of a moment of destruction, which contains at the same time the potentiality of giving an account, recognizing a debt, seeking and granting forgiveness, reconstructing a just coexistence.
The girls in this photograph, depicted in their plight, are often removed from the phenomenal field where Israelis look for their past or future. They are perceived as part of a separate history: Palestinian history. But this removal could not quell the memory of catastrophe. The outcomes of the Palestinian expulsion and dispossession are out there, in the landscape, in forests and refugee camps, in nightmares and hopes. This can be recognized or denied. The young girls in the photo, whose mothers dressed them in their nice summer flowery dresses that day, as if they were about to go on a short journey, didn't return to their homes.

Becoming refugees was clearly a catastrophe for the Palestinians, but becoming perpetrators or descendants of perpetrators was the catastrophe for the Israeli Jews. As long as history has not been closed and remains incomplete, each of us can claim his or her universal rights, the right not to be expelled from one's home and the right not to be a perpetrator. This right should be restored with another right, the right that perpetrators sought to deprive their victims of: the right to imagine their future, because in depriving their victims of a future, the perpetrators deprived themselves as well.

Military force against citizens

Military force was needed to overcome the opposition of the majority of the land's inhabitants and to realize the partition plan that was based on brutal expulsion and prevention of return. In order to produce such military force, the civil Jewish population had to be recruited and made submissive. The might of war as an existential threat had to be imposed on the population; the dividing line between Jews and Arabs had to be constituted as absolute. This dividing line was the means by which the disaster imposed directly on the Palestinians was transformed into a non-catastrophe in the eyes of the Jewish citizens, into what I have characterized as 'catastrophe from their point of view' – 'their'; of course, referring to the Palestinians.

Partition: a continuous catastrophe

For Jews and Palestinians today, co-existence in Palestine-Israel is not a matter of choice or an ideal situation to which one aspires, but a matter of fact. That this co-existence continues under the same form of violence shaped by the constituent violence of 1947–50 and the ongoing oppression and resistance ever since or under forms is – and has always been – a matter of choice.

The partition resolution to Palestine was not accepted by the majority of the population whose future the partition plan wished to establish, nor did it attempt to preserve the forms of co-existence between Jews and Arabs that had previously prevailed in Palestine. In order to realize the plan, military force was needed to overcome the opposition of the majority of the land's inhabitants: most of the Palestinians and a segment of the Jewish population whose size is unknown. Jews who had not been in the national struggle before had to be recruited to form this military force, and many of them were forced into military service. The might of war as an existential threat had to be imposed on the population; the dividing line between Jews and Arabs had to be constituted as essential and absolute.

Photographer not identified. IDF and Defense Archive

Operation Beser. 3,200 soldiers invaded Tel Aviv with dogs and conducted a careful house-to-house search to flush out those who were already termed 'draft dodgers' (mishtamtim).

Photographer: Hans Pinn, GPO, 1.10.48

A delegation of settlers from Zichron Ya'acov after their arrival for a friendly meeting at the neighboring village of Subrin. Photographer: Zoltan Kluger, GPO 20.1.1940

The three facets of a regime-made disaster:

In 1948, the majority of Palestinians were expelled from Palestine and dispossessed from their land and property. But this event, the Nakba or the Palestinian catastrophe, was only one dimension out of the three created by the establishment of the State of Israel as a Jewish nation state. Its second dimension was the destruction of the fabric of civil relations between Jews and Arabs, and the violent reduction to a national conflict between two hostile sides. This included the denial of the very violence exercised in order to produce and impose the national divide and subsume all aspects of life under the seeming inevitability of the national conflict. The third dimension of the catastrophe was the transformation of Israeli Jews into perpetrators and the formation of their citizenship on the invisibility of the catastrophe they had inflicted upon others.

One of the main features of a regime-made disaster is that it has become quite difficult to recognize the disaster as such. Regime-made disasters often construe the visual and conceptual field in such a way that one misrecognizes what has befallen others as well as what has befallen oneself; once one becomes a perpetrator. But regime-made disasters are not invisible; they leave traces. These traces are seeds for a potential history.

The national-military regime against the demos

From a civil perspective, the so called 'war of independence' was a violent effort by the national-military regime to liberate itself from the people, from the demos, and thus an attack on civil society as a whole. Part of that society suffered immediately from expulsion and dispossession, while others realized only decades later that they had also paid a huge price – becoming perpetrators. The violence they had exerted – allegedly as part of a war of independence – upon the Palestinian residents of the land positioned them as the enemy of the people with whom they had previously shared their lives in multiple and mostly peaceful ways.

Photographer: Edgar Hirschbein, JNF, 1.10.1948

The official caption reads 'curfew'. Actually, we see a lost woman looking for answers and having no one else to address other than a soldier who controls the public space and allegedly affords her security.

Mechanisms of partitioning

The perspective of the national divide that presupposes as a given the existence of two distinct parties to the conflict buries the question of whether these 'two sides' ever existed as truly separate, hostile parties prior to the war in 1948. Rather, one should ask about the use of violence by nationalist movements and how the violence played a role in creating this separation and founding national identity on this separation.

The symbiosis between the military logic and the civil order has characterized the Israeli regime from its inception, and cannot be restricted to the Palestinian sector. Freedom of movement is denied to Palestinians but it is controlled and administered for Israelis too.

When the fate of the entire population – Jews and Arabs alike – is considered, the expulsion, dispossession and destruction cannot be narrated as a Palestinian catastrophe. The events that occurred between 1947 and 1950 appear as the struggle of a local leadership supported by a certain sector in the population, by no means a majority, to impose its rule on the entire body politic and constitute a new regime regardless of the wishes of its other inhabitants and without seeking their consent.

The first day of conscription to the IDF was not a real success. The majority wanted to continue their life. It was followed by a huge operation named 'Beser'.

Potentializing the constituent violence

The Palestinians were enclosed in the Jaffa Ghetto, but the Israeli Jews accepted living in an allegedly civil space where others are confined.

Photographer not identified. With the compliments of 'The Jaffa Arab Committee' (al-Ratba 'L Ra'ayit Sha'un 'Arab Yafa), 1949.

The constituent violence recorded in photos from these years should not be mistakenly and anachronistically read as signs of unavoidable national conflict. What was and still is truly unavoidable is not national conflict, but rather the co-existence of Jews and Palestinians in a shared territory and the open space for a variety of forms to shape, practice, express and represent this co-existence.
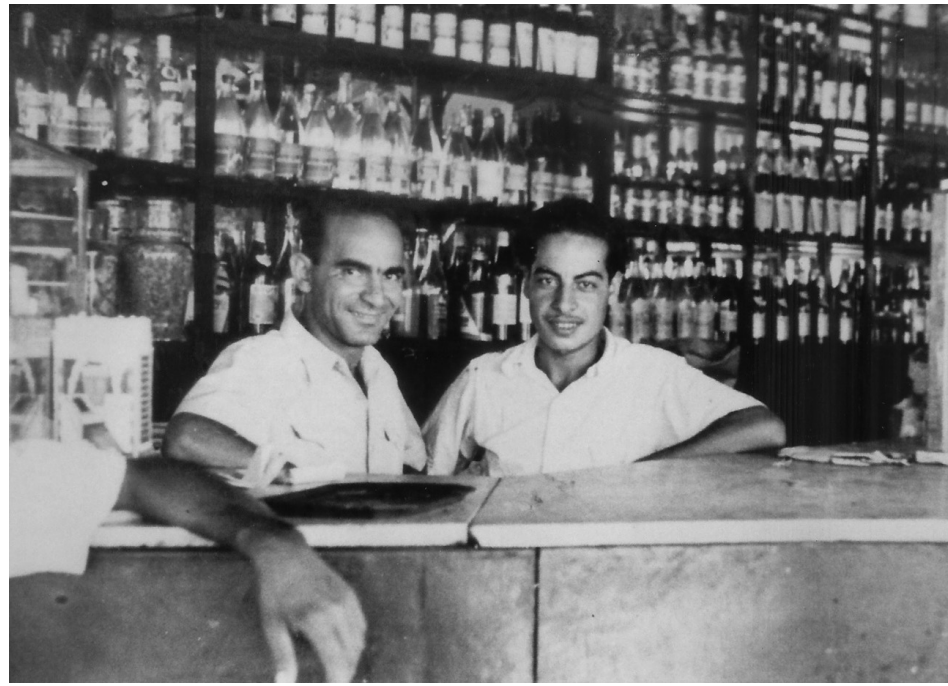
The past cannot be changed perhaps, except in this sense: it can be shown to be incomplete, the closures it seemingly imposed can be reopened, dormant potentialities can surface again and transform the present horizon of the political imagination, for the sake of moulding a still indeterminate future. The wrongs of the past cannot be undone, but the descendants of the perpetrators – if not the perpetrators themselves – can turn them into warning signs of the unbearable, that which should never be repeated.

The photographs presented here are traces of an incomplete past. They record the violence and catastrophe involved in the creation of the Israeli State but at the same time show the unavoidability of the co-existence of Jews and Arabs as parties to the violence that transformed their relations and has been inscribed in their lives ever since.

Thousands of photographs kept in Zionist archives have lain untouched for decades. Historians, who waited for years for the archives to open and for confidential documents to be exposed, ignored available photographs that could provide invaluable historical evidence. Photographs are usually not perceived by most historians as reliable or informative enough. Indeed, photographs do not speak for themselves and are not easily deciphered. They are usually filed carelessly, backed up by an extremely thin layer of information that fails to provide the data necessary for identifying an event, a location, the photographed persons, etc. However, the negligence with which photographs are handled in archives cannot serve as an excuse for ignoring them. Today, would we conceive of passing up remnants of material culture such as pottery shards, flint-stone tools or coins, only because they have reached us without any identifying script? Would we agree to forfeit the enormous body of knowledge about the past that archaeology provides only because archaeologists produce this knowledge out of pottery shards and piles of stones, with very scant help of written documents?

Photography takes place in and through an encounter between people, none of whom can ever dictate alone what will be recorded in the photograph and what will remain concealed. The photograph is evidence of the actual taking place of an event – the taking of a photograph – that the photographic image could never exhaust on its own. This event is an invitation for yet another event: the viewing of the photograph, its reading, taking part in the production of its meaning. The photograph cannot determine the limits of this event. What the photograph shows exceeds that which the participants in the event of photography attempted to inscribe in it. Moreover, their attempt to determine and shape that which will be seen in the frame and the power relations between the participants leave traces that enable one to reconstruct the event of photography as a case of a multiple and often quite complex relationship. Ignoring these thousands of photographic historical documents greatly contributes to the pervasiveness of the perception that the national conflict in Israel/Palestine is as unavoidable as a fact of nature; and of the teleological reconstruction of its historical unfolding.

Citizenship is commonly understood as a legal status granted by the sovereign state to its governed subjects, but never to all of them. In many cases this understanding is shared by the governing power and most researchers, and leads to the anachronistic categorization of the photographed persons as citizens or non-citizens. The viewer thereby takes part in determining the photographed person's status. Trying to distance myself from the point of view of power and to study citizenship from the perspective of its condition, not of its contingent effect, I propose to think about citizenship as a form of being together, a form of sharing a world with others. This is especially true for the time and place with which we are concerned here (Palestine/Israel in the formative years, 1947–51), when the meaning, boundaries and distribution of citizenship were very much at stake. One must therefore suspend the use of fossilized conceptual categories that organize a-priori that which is seen as if it had already been determined within the framework of a national conflict. One is rather invited to reconstruct the formation and deformations of being together of all those taking part in the event of photography. Like photography, citizenship serves at one and the same time as an object of study and a research tool and enables to keep a distance from the ruling perspective and turn it into one of the objects of study.

'Ofakim, a new locality in the Negev, the Arabs neighbors help in building the spot', 19.11.1947.
Photographer: Lazar Dinner, KKL.

The task at hand: transcending the clamp of sovereignty

Rejecting the outcome of the partition fantasy that had been imposed violently during 1947–50 and then appeared as a fait accompli: the law of the nation sovereign state.

Refusing to participate in the violence required since then to preserve the Israeli political regime and the monopoly of Israeli Jews on the power to shape political life in Israel/Palestine.

Historicizing the emergence of the national divide and acknowledging the violent, forced separation of Jews and Arabs in Palestine.

Transforming the violence involved in the partition of the local population into *governing* and *governed* into a civil obligation, a necessity, a pre-condition for the recovery of civil life.

Creating a photographic archive, a new 'surface of appearance' (in Michel Foucault's words), through which a new civil discourse emerges and through which a fantasy of a complete partition in a mixed land would always appear as a form of violence and oppression.

Reconstructing from the photographs the various mechanisms used to impose the 'national divide' on many other forms of Jewish-Arab relations and refusing to participate in them.

Shaping the archive as a civil archive – neither Jewish nor Palestinian – that enables us to account for the entire governed population and look at Jews and Arabs as parties to the violence that transformed their relations and has been inscribed in their lives ever since.

Using the medium of photography and the concept of citizenship in order to write history that would be free of the perspective of sovereign nationality, while placing this perspective itself as an object of study and understanding its role in representing and preserving the 'national conflict' as unavoidable.

Restoring, imagining and inventing seeds of possible futures where forgiveness can be asked and granted on the basis of a shared understanding of what is universally unbearable, that which should not be done, that which should never be violated.

Extracting from the past its unrealized possibilities as a necessary condition for imagining a different future.

Existing together

Unknown photographer

Gan Hawai or El Alamein cafe at Al-Shaykh Muwannis (where Tel Aviv University is located today), 1940s. The place was popular in the forties and the collaboration between the partners – a Jew and an Arab – was reflected in its mixed clientele.

This photo was taken a short time before the U.N. declared the partition plan. One can see Jews establishing a new colony in Palestine, and a Palestinian neighbour helping them. Clearly, Jews and Palestinians were collaborating in the Jewish colonial project. Jewish settlements didn't represent only a threat and the anxiety some Palestinians felt in relation to Jewish immigration was not yet destined to end up in violent clashes. The photograph should be looked at in a non-teleological way. Living as neighbours, Jews and Arabs had various exchange relations, including assisting each other in all sorts of endeavours. The fact that this tissue of relations took place until the very last moment is the ultimate proof that the disastrous cleansing of Palestine was not the only option possible at the time. One does not have to idealize their relations – which could have involved care and assistance as much as exploitation – in order to understand that they were not doomed to end in disaster.

Unknown photographer, The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum

Margo, 1947, rowing with an Arab friend on the left and a Jewish one on the right.

Torrence Collection, University of Dundee

Dr H. W. Torrance speaking to Jewish patients in the courtyard of the Tiberias hospital in 1940, while Arab patients wait in the shade.

'Group photo of the engineering department of the city of Tel Aviv and of the city of Jaffa, Jacob included', Jaffa, 1940. Dor Guez's archive

In this photo, which is from Dor Guez's archive and based on his grandfather's albums, we see the joint staff of the municipal engineering departments in Jaffa and Tel Aviv whose roles and responsibilities made them work in collaboration and coordination.

Unknown photographer, The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum

Haifa hospital. Jewish and Arab medical staff, late 1940s. Sharing time, work space, professional duties and willing to have this sharing in their photo album.

Military governmentality

The unproblematic adoption of the term 'war' to describe the late 1940s as the apex of the 'Jewish-Palestine conflict' eliminates the complex variety of exchanges and interactions between Jews and Arabs, replacing them anachronistically with the outcomes of that period – partition, separation and a seemingly unavoidable 'national conflict'.

The term 'war' assumes as self-evident the existence of two hostile sides that fought one another, and mistakenly identifies the violence carried out by the armed forces with wartime 'battles'. Indeed, many battles were fought, and regular and irregular battalions from the neighbouring Arab states entered Palestine in May 1948, some battles even looked for a short while like episodes of war. The new and varied forms of violence exercised by the Jewish military regime – the separation of population – the old from the young, the men from women and children, the organization of the long lines of expellees, the white flags that were ignored, the systematic house demolitions – must be taken into account and weighed against the scattered battles and violent clashes between armed forces before one calls the period from November 1947 to March 1949 a 'war'.

The unquestioned adoption of military terminology, e.g. 'battles' and 'operations', overlooks the wide range of roles the army played in managing the civilian population, which can by no means be classified and identified as one of the fighting sides in a war, as well as the violent policies seeking to transform the politico-demographic reality in order to establish a new regime in Palestine.

Photographer: Frank, IDF and Defence Archive, 10.6.1949

The border between Jordan and one of the villages in the Triangle (the name of the locality isn't specified). The armistice agreement with Jordan defined a border 624 km in length. It passed through 71 villages and two towns, disrupting the lives of almost 100,000 people who were trapped along the boundary, cutting off people from their lands and preventing them from reaching places that had until then been part of their lives. The Jordanian soldier and the villagers grazing their cows in the meadow on the other side of the fence observe how it separates them from the area which they had used until then for agriculture, commerce, services and leisure.

Military Governmentality – managing the civilian population – the Palestinians, certainly, but the Jews as well – with military logic.

The line separating the Jewish State from the surrounding Arab states and the 750,000 Palestinians that were expelled from it, had to be supplemented with internal lines of separation between Jews who became a majority and the Palestinians who were not uprooted and became a minority.

Photographer: Beno Rothenberg, Israel State Archive, May, 1949.

Wadi 'Ara. The sign reads: 'Purchasing, commerce and parking military vehicles in the area of the village is prohibited. Violators will be punished.' Signs like these were placed at many sites, warning Jews – civilians and soldiers alike – not to enter the 'village'. Omitting the name of the Arab village was part of the effort to turn a lively place into an abstract, hostile site belonging to the 'other side'. Up until the establishment of the State of Israel there had been commercial activity between Jewish and Arab farmers and merchants as well among the Arabs themselves, but after 1948 this activity was monopolized and administered by a few Jewish corporations. The state helped the corporations by prohibiting direct commerce between Arabs and Jews, an act that not only controlled the economy of Palestinians but also shaped the scope of Israeli Jews' citizenship. It is through practices like this that Israel Jews accepted their distorted citizenship, which was based on expulsion, dispossession and continuous inequality, as self-evident and legal.

Signs of Previous Sharing

These fences and borders were meant to separate that which had previously been – intentionally or unintentionally – mixed. Viewing these photos from the 1940s we are actually facing the very moment of the construction of an unbridgeable divide between Jews and Arabs.
In order to implement this dividing line, borders and fences had to separate the newly defined sovereign territory.

Unknown photographer,
The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum

Tel Aviv. Purim procession ('Adleyada'), mid-1930s. Those with caffeya recognized as Arabs are probably not the only Arabs in the audience.

Torrence Collection, University of Dundee

The official caption reads 'two cases of bladder stone'. Note the confidence of the Jewish boy being left with the Arab boy's father.

Three confusions:

A persistent confusion is involved in the use of the term 'War of Independence' (*Milchemet Hashichrur*) to describe the violence practiced in 1948 in Palestine. It concerns three protagonists associated with the liberation that the Jews allegedly achieved: the British, the Palestinians and the Arab States.

Vis-à-vis the Palestinians and the Arab States, 'liberation' was equated with 'survival' and helped portray a war of survival that justified the continued use of violence and the transfer of 750,000 Palestinians. Emptying cities and villages like Bir-al Saba, al-Ramle, Jaffa or Lydd of their Palestinian residents and populating them, instead, with Jewish immigrants had nothing to do with survival. In the late forties, the term 'liberation' or 'independence' connoted more than a simple liberation from a foreign power: it meant a project of decolonization in a manner that camouflaged the colonization of Palestine by the new regime. Furthermore, if we consider the relation between the Zionist forces and the three other protagonists, we see how the term 'war of liberation' is misplaced and misleading in each case respectively: the British left the country voluntarily, and liberation from them did not require a war, while the Palestinians and the Arab States were certainly not the foreign power from which the Jews had to be liberated. Rather, the Palestinians were the indigenous inhabitants of a country, transformed into aliens and expelled from their land by violence described and justified as 'war'. Even though the knowledge needed to untangle this confusion is readily available, the historiography of the period continued to describe the series of events that occurred in Palestine at the end of the 1940s as a transition from 'war' to 'state'. Thus, the exercise of systematic violence to create a clear Jewish majority that would correspond to and justify the formation of a Jewish state and the Judaization of state organs is still conceptualized as being part of an unavoidable war between two nations.