

Tantura: Documentary about Israeli destruction of a Palestinian village in 1948

Joanne Laurier
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“On the night of 22-23 May 1948, a week after the declaration of the State of Israel, the Palestinian coastal village of Tantura (population 1,500) was attacked and occupied by units of the Israeli army's Alexandroni Brigade. The village, some thirty-five kilometers south of Haifa, lay within the area assigned to the Jewish state by the UN General Assembly's partition resolution. In its occupation, depopulation, subsequent destruction, and seizure of all its lands by Israel, the fate of Tantura was similar to that of more than 400 other Palestinian villages during the 1948 war. But it also shared with some two score of these villages the additional agony of a large-scale massacre of its inhabitants.” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Spring 2001

Tantura, by Israeli filmmaker Alon Schwarz, documents the massacre. Schwarz is best known for his 2016 Holocaust-themed documentary *Aida's Secrets*. His new film, the product of more than two years of research, involves the use of original audiotape recordings, dramatic recreations and never-before-seen archival materials from the 1948 Palestinian-Israeli war shot in Tantura. As the film notes during its opening credits, Israelis claim this event as part of the “War of Independence,” which Palestinians call “Al Nabka” (the Catastrophe).

Before it was erased from the map, Tantura had been a coastal settlement. In June 1948, a few weeks after Tantura's fall, the kibbutz of Nahsholim was established on its lands by Holocaust survivors. It is estimated that 270 to 280 people were murdered in the village.

The documentary chronicles the story through interviews with surviving veterans of the Alexandroni Brigade, some remorseful, others not.

A pivotal figure in the film is Teddy Katz, now in his late 70s and in ill health. While a graduate student in the late 1990s at the University of Haifa, he wrote a thesis about the Tantura massacre, interviewing both Arab and Jewish witnesses, the latter members of the Alexandroni Brigade, recording their testimony on 135 hours of cassette tapes. Katz was subsequently denounced and sued for libel, becoming a pariah in the eyes of the Zionist establishment for revealing the truth.

In an interview with *POV* magazine, director Schwarz mentions that this “story started obviously 73 years ago. But 23 years ago, there was a thesis by Teddy Katz. He was later challenged and there was a big scandal in the papers, as you see in the film. And then there was silence.”

Schwarz further noted that if “you go on Israeli websites today,

you see wall-to-wall criticism of Teddy and his work, saying that he's distorted everything and that's the reality, that it's all lies, that no massacre ever happened. Even left-wing people believe in that. I think discussing Tantura is part of the bigger taboo of not talking about certain things. People in Israel don't believe this story. They don't believe it and they don't want to believe it.”

In the film, Drora Pilpel, who was the judge in the libel suit against Katz, listens for the *first time* to a recording of one of Katz's interviews. “If it's true, it's a pity,” the retired judge tells the director. “If he had things like this, he should have gone all the way to the end.” It is a startling moment.

One former soldier comments in *Tantura* that “there were many Arab casualties, and they were scattered, like garbage.” “It's forbidden to tell,” says another witness sheepishly. Haim Levin relates how a member of his unit went over to a group of 15 or 20 POWs “and killed them all.” Amitzur Cohen claimed that “I was a murderer. I didn't take prisoners.” He chillingly commented that if a squad of Arab soldiers was standing with their hands raised, he would shoot them all. How many Arabs did he kill outside the framework of the battles? “I didn't count. I had a machine gun with 250 bullets. I can't say how many.”

Ilan Pappé, professor emeritus of Haifa University, explains in the film, “I think the self-image of Israel as a moral society is something I haven't seen anywhere else in the world. We are the ‘Chosen People.’ This is part of the Israeli self-identification. And I think it's very hard for Israelis to admit that they commit war crimes. Because basically, the project of Zionism has a problem... You cannot create a safe haven by creating a catastrophe for other people.” The documentary features David Ben-Gurion, one of the founders of the Israeli state, commissioning studies promoting the falsehood that the Arab population left of its own accord.

Schwarz's documentary film argues that victims of the massacre were buried in a mass grave, now the Dor Beach parking lot. The demand has been raised that the site be excavated.

In the film's production notes, Schwarz explains that like “others who grew up in Israel, I was educated on a story that is very beautiful. Our Jewish founding fathers came to ‘a land without a people.’ The Arabs who lived here before 1948 fled by their own will. We are a pure nation; our people were righteous then, like today. We have the most moral army in the world.” The director observes that these stories “we Israelis tell ourselves survived in my mind as absolute truths for my entire adult life,

even after I was a young soldier during the 'Intifada.' ... I believed all these stories and rarely questioned them."

In an interview with *The Intercept*, Schwarz forcefully remarks: "We robbed them [the Palestinians] of their history ... We not only ethnically cleansed them, took them out, denied their return, but we also robbed them of the true story. We robbed them of the right to remember, and that is terrible."

Presumably in the interests of winning over Israeli audiences, Schwarz did not include many statements by Palestinian survivors of the massacre. The Spring 2001 issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* includes a number of harrowing eyewitness accounts.

Muhammad Abu Hana, born 1936: "By morning, the shooting had stopped and the attackers rounded everyone up on the beach. They sorted them out, the women and children on one side, the men on the other. [...] On the beach, the soldiers led groups of men away, and you could hear gunfire after each departure. [...] Toward noon we were led on foot to an orchard to the east of the village, and I saw bodies piled on a cart pulled by men of Tantura who emptied their cargo in a big pit. Then trucks arrived, and women and children were loaded onto them and driven to Furaydis. On the road, near the railroad tracks, other bodies were scattered about."

Farid Taha Salam, born 1915: "After we heard the news that Haifa and the surrounding villages had fallen, we took up a collection to buy arms. What we had was a few rifles and one automatic weapon, a Bren [light machine gun] ... When the attack began, our guards returned fire until the ammunition ran out. Because of our lack of experience, a lot of ammunition was wasted with firing too quickly. Most of the defenders fell back toward the center of the village, others managed to get out of Tantura altogether, and a third group did not leave their posts until they were martyred on the spot or taken prisoner and liquidated."

Yusuf Salam, born 1924: "A week before the attack, my brother Mustafa and my cousin Muhammad, who were staying with some of our relatives at Kafr Lam, were killed by the Jews in an attack on the village. My father was wounded while trying to bring back their bodies. I was awakened by the sound of bullets. I saw them enter the village and even though a white flag had been hung from the minaret of the mosque, they killed every man who crossed their path."

Muhammad Kamil al-Dassuki, born 1935: "At dawn, I saw boats unloading soldiers near al-Burj, north of the village, and they advanced toward the various entrances of Tantura.

"While we were carrying the dead, a young man—it was Mustafa al-Salbud—started to weep. A soldier asked him what was the matter. He replied, 'My two brothers have been killed. Here's the body of my brother Khalil, and here is my brother Muhammad. My mother has no one but me now.' 'What use is your life then?' the soldier asked. And he shot him.

"In the cemetery, I saw cars filled with Jews, some of them laughing and singing, but others were terribly silent."

In the POV magazine interview, Schwarz reveals that it's "very hard to do what I'm doing, psychologically, I went through hell. I love my country, I believe in it, and I hope it will have a future ... One thing I'm sure about, I can't prove it, is that things occurred there that should not have occurred according to military war laws." Given the current official state of Israeli politics, with a

new coalition government that includes a fascist party, Schwarz's effort took some courage.

Israel is a capitalist state founded through "the dispossession of another people and maintained through war and repression, and social inequality at home," as the WSWS has observed. "Unquestionably one of the most potent factors re-igniting anti-Semitism today is the brutal methods adopted by the Israeli government."

The Israeli regime and its apologists routinely lump together hostility to its current mistreatment of the Palestinians with anti-Semitism. They attempt as well to prevent any objective appraisal of what Israel did to the Palestinians in the past. All this serves a very definite purpose, in obscuring political understanding.

These reactionary efforts at self-defense on the part of the Israeli establishment are now accompanied by a ferocious international effort by all major Western governments to equate opposition to Zionism with anti-Semitism.

This is in line with the general effort to conflate opposition to Israel's crimes with hatred of Jews. This comes at a time when right-wing anti-Semitism is on the rise. There is a well-known and well-publicized alliance between the Israeli state and fascist elements all over the world, including Trump and the Republican Party in the US.

Meanwhile, the Democrats and the Biden administration, who shout a great deal about Israel's "right to defend itself" and also smear anti-Zionist opposition as anti-Jewish, encourage, finance and arm the fascist- and anti-Semite-infested Ukrainian regime.

One of the most convincing arguments against these forces and their lying claims is the actual historical record. *Tantura* is evidence that the Israeli state was born in criminal and bloody repression.



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