[**Battle of rival memories**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1625525/battle-of-rival-memories)

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THE Nakba is to the Palestinians what the Holocaust is to the Jews. There is a difference though. Nobody in their senses would deny the horrors inflicted on European Jews by Nazi Germany. The Israeli state on the other hand has been doing its best to erase the memory of the horrors inflicted on the Palestinians since May 15, 1948, the Nakba Day, when it drove out 700,000 Arabs, mostly women, children from their homes. Palestinians observed the day this past week amid a furious and largely unequal battle that raged between the Hamas militants in Gaza and the Israeli military.

The *Haaretz* newspaper, possibly Israel’s most liberal daily, has pursued the theme of Israeli denial of the Nakba as a significantly damning cover-up of a heinous crime. Norman Finkelstein, a Jewish author and civil rights activist whose parents were rare survivors from a large family that perished in the ghettoes and concentration camps under Nazi occupation, has been a vocal critic of what he sees as the exploitation of the Jewish tragedy by a stridently right-wing Israeli state. His widely acclaimed book The Holocaust Industry is devoted to a detailed recording of how the mass murder of six million Jews became a commercially and politically exploitable event for Israel.

The US has ably assisted in this cynical endeavour, as Finkelstein notes. Only the other day, the US State Department was accusing Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan — by no means an innocent man on many counts — of anti-Semitism because he chided the Jewish state for murdering Palestinian children. It was the Turkish Jews who spoke up for Erdogan, and pointed out that Erdogan’s criticism of Jewish attacks on Arab civilians in Israel and the killings in Gaza by Israeli military didn’t spring from any racism.

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Finkelstein too had noted this tendency within the US establishment to readily summon memories of the Holocaust to underscore any event it disapproved of.

“The more revealing point, however, is when the US invokes the Holocaust. Crimes of official enemies such as the Khmer Rouge bloodbath in Cambodia, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo recall the Holocaust; crimes in which the US is complicit do not.”

In fact, just as the Khmer Rouge atrocities were unfolding in Cambodia, the US-backed Indonesian government was slaughtering one-third of the population in East Timor. “Yet unlike Cambodia, the East Timor genocide did not rate comparison with the Holocaust; it didn’t even rate news coverage. Just as the Soviet Union was committing what the Simon Wiesenthal Centre called ‘another genocide’ in Afghanistan, the US-backed regime in Guatemala was perpetrating what the Guatemalan Truth Commission (subsequently) called a ‘genocide’ against the indigenous Mayan population.”

The Carter administration invoked the memory of the Holocaust as it sought a haven for Vietnamese ‘boat people’ fleeing the communist regime. The Clinton administration forgot the Holocaust as it forced back Haitian ‘boat people’ fleeing US-supported death squads. Examples of similar obfuscation are legion.

The time is long past to open one’s heart to the rest of humanity’s sufferings, says Finkelstein. “You can’t compare any two miserable people, as Plato humanely observed, and say that one is happier than the other.” In the face of the sufferings of African-Americans and Palestinians, Finkelstein says, citing his mother’s credo: “We are all holocaust victims.”

The dictionary explains holocaust as a great or complete devastation or destruction, especially by fire. It of course makes a more familiar reference to the holocaust as “the systematic mass slaughter of European Jews in Nazi concentration camps during World War II”. Holocaust also means any mass slaughter or reckless destruction of life. Nakba in Arabic has similar connotation — devastation or destruction.

The *Haaretz* is one of Israel’s liberal newspapers and thus inevitably more balanced than many others that have surrendered their souls to the ascendant right-wing Jewish state. In a write-up about the Nakba Day, the newspaper carried a revealing piece a couple of years ago, titled ‘[Burying the Nakba: How Israel systematically hides evidence of 1948 expulsion of Arabs](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-how-israel-systematically-hides-evidence-of-1948-expulsion-of-arabs-1.7435103)”.

Around 2015, Israeli historian Tamar Novick “was jolted by a document she found in the file of Yosef Waschitz, from the Arab department of the left-wing Mapam Party, in the Yad Yaari archive at Givat Haviva,” the *Haaretz* report said. The document, which seemed to describe events that took place during the 1948 war, began:

“Safsaf [former Palestinian village near Safed] — 52 men were caught, tied them to one another, dug a pit and shot them. 10 were still twitching. Women came, begged for mercy. Found bodies of 6 elderly men. There were 61 bodies. 3 cases of rape, one east of […] Safed, girl of 14, 4 men shot and killed. From one they cut off his fingers with a knife to take the ring.”

The unidentified writer, according to the paper, goes on to describe additional massacres, looting and abuse perpetrated by Israeli forces in Israel’s ‘war of independence’.

The Upper Galilee village of Safsaf was captured by the Israel Defence Forces in Operation Hiram towards the end of 1948. Moshav Safsufa was established on its ruins. Allegations were made over the years that the Seventh Brigade committed war crimes in the village. Those charges, said the *Haaretz*, are supported by the document Novick found, which was not previously known to scholars. It could also constitute additional evidence that the Israeli top brass knew about what was going on in real time.

Other historians told her they too had come across similar documentation in the past.

When Novick tried to return to the documents, she found they had disappeared. Israel’s defence ministry teams have been scouring the country’s archives and removing historic documents. “Hundreds of documents have been concealed as part of a systematic effort to hide evidence of the Nakba,” the *Haaretz* said in a telling reminder to the rest of us about the threat that archives and libraries face under right-wing governments.

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