

POLICE & HISTORY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction | |
| Nomi Levenkron & Anat Stern | 9 |
| Political Violence during Nation Building Years: The 1951 'Zealous Covenant' Attempt to Throw a Bomb in the Knesset as a Test Case | |
| Ofira Gruweis Kovalsky | 17 |
| "Night of the Thousand Cops": The Fight Over the Split of Kibbutz Yiftah (1953) and the Shaping of its' Historical Narrative | |
| Joseph Ohayon & Tal Itzhaky | 45 |
| "An Unpleasant Incident": Policing Ethnic Riots in Israel (1960-1970) | |
| Oded Ron | 81 |
| "Myth of Rebirth"? Emergence and Consolidation of the Zaka Organization in Israel (1994-2003) | |
| Haim Zarfaty | 117 |
| 'Organizational Order No.1' – Creation of the Police Force in the Occupied Territories 1967 | |
| Orit Miller-Katav | 155 |
| Literary Review: Radley Balko, Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces (2013) | |
| Shlomi Chetrit..... | 165 |

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Political Violence during Nation Building Years: The 1951 ‘Zealous Covenant’ Attempt to Throw a Bomb in the Knesset as a Test Case

Ofira Gruweis-Kovalsky

On May 16, 1951, newspapers throughout the State of Israel ran headlines proclaiming: “Extremist thugs plot Knesset bombing to sabotage debate on drafting women.” In the information provided to journalists on the day of the event, spokesmen on behalf of law-enforcement officials noted that this was an underground of religious and ultra-orthodox people called “The Camp” or the “Covenant of Zealots,” whose objective was to prevent the enactment of the law for the mandatory conscription of women into the IDF and the imposition of religious laws on the state. The article reexamines the affair through police documents and transcripts of the trial, which have not yet been published, and considers whether an ultra-orthodox underground, associated with the Agudat Israel movement, indeed sought to plant a bomb in the Knesset during the debate on the conscription of women into the IDF. The article describes the background of the events, focusing on the incident that took place in the Knesset, on the conduct of various administrative systems with respect to the four defendants in the case, and on the trial conducted in February-March of 1952.

“Night of the Thousand Cops”: The Fight Over the Split of Kibbutz Yiftah (1953) and the Shaping of its’ Historical Narrative

Joseph Ohayon & Tal Itzhaky

The schism in the United Kibbutz Movement, which took place between the years 1950-1955, resulted from ideological and political disputes between Mapai, the ruling party, headed by David Ben-Gurion, and Mapam, a radical left opposition party to the government. The disputes that arose in the kibbutzim owing to the schism were often accompanied by violent confrontations and resulted in the division of dozens of kibbutzim, the establishment of new ones, and the transfer of individuals, families, and groups to the kibbutzim identified with their movement. The political and social aspects of the schism have been studied in detail, but the conduct of the police and the manner in which they handled the incidents of violence and disorder that accompanied it have not been investigated in-depth to date.

This article focuses on the split of Kibbutz Yiftah in May 1953. Three reasons motivated choosing this particular kibbutz: firstly, Yiftah was established by veterans of the Palmach Yiftah Brigade and was a stronghold of Mapam, hence, a decisive symbol in the overall schism; secondly, the fierce political conflict between Mapam and Mapai over shaping the historical narrative regarding the events that took place in this particular kibbutz; and thirdly, the fact that possibly this was the last time, that the police was called to the kibbutzim during the schism. The article examines the events that took place in Kibbutz Yiftah in the short time that the police were there and traces the patterns of their activity during the evacuation and arrest of members of the United Kibbutz. Alongside a discussion of police actions, the article examines the historical narrative that members of the United Kibbutz sought to establish following the conduct of the police at Yiftah, in an interpretation based on the political conflict that raged at the time between Mapam and Mapai.

“An Unpleasant Incident”: Policing Ethnic Riots in Israel 1960-1970

Oded Ron

Jews and Arabs living between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea have a long and bloody history of ethnic riots. This history began in Palestine, in the 1920s and 1930s, and flared up most recently in May of 2021. This article focuses on ethnic riots that broke out in Israel in the 1960's. It surveys the prominent riots that took place in the mixed cities and in cities with an overwhelming Jewish majority, where Arab residents, workers, students, and consumers lived and visited daily. It addresses the conditions that formed the background for the riots: government policy and the attitude of the Jewish public toward the Arab population in the shared spaces, which were characterized on the one hand by the duality of accepting and encouraging their presence, and on the other by rejection and a perception that they posed a demographic, economic, security, and identity threat. The article chronicles the events of the riots and emphasizes the conduct of the police before and during the incidents. The main argument of the article is that policing policy during the riots largely reflected institutional and civil hostility toward the Arab population, while simultaneously attempted to regard the Arab citizens as an integral part of the Israeli collective, albeit one with fewer rights.

“Myth of Rebirth”? Emergence and Consolidation of the Zaka Organization in Israel (1994-2003)

Haim Zarfaty

The wave of bloody suicide attacks that began in Israel in April 1994 led to many mass and public deaths and posed a series of new challenges for the Israeli police. It also created a challenge for the Halakha and Jewish tradition, which are careful to preserve the dignity of the dead. The police, the operational force on the ground, had to cope with this new phenomenon. An unprecedented answer to the Jewish plight came in the form of ultra-orthodox citizens who volunteered for the civil duty that gradually became the organization known today as Zaka. From the point of view of the police, in the initial stages, the recruitment of the ultra-orthodox was intended to achieve two goals: first, clearing the scenes of the attacks in a way that complies with the basic principles of Halakha regarding dead bodies; and the second, coopting of the leaders of the ultra-orthodox protests, who turned from demonstrators to volunteers recruited to achieve the goals of the police and assist them at the scene of the attacks.

The chain of suicide bombings that began with the Oslo accords and ended with the end of the second intifada also created a revolution in the Halakhic worldview that until then rejected touching or moving dead bodies on the Sabbath, and made it possible to care immediately for the bodies of the murdered.

The ultra-orthodox volunteers who engaged in this activity treated the bodies of the murdered victims in public, violating a strict religious taboo, and at the same time created a new Halakhic and social reality: those who until recently were law-breaking demonstrators, now became part of the law-enforcement system and were attached to the forensics department, which spearheaded the action at the scene of the attacks.

The process of the development of Zaka is divided in the article to three main stages: in the first stage, no special care was given to the remains of bodies left at the scene of the attack, and they were washed with hoses by the fire department or evacuated by individual ultra-orthodox volunteers; in the second stage, an institutionalized cooperation was initiated by the police between the Haifa forensic department and ultra-orthodox volunteers, and a concept of orderly and planned deployment of ultra-orthodox volunteers was formed within Zaka, but only in the northern region; in the third stage, this model was implemented in other regions in Israel, against the background of the expanding wave of attacks, and Zak"á became a nationwide organization.

This Article is dedicated to the memory of Major Zvika Kaplan, son of Zila and Yehuda Kaplan, an Israeli hero who fell in battle during Operation Protective Edge.