

Pages from David Ben-Gurion's diary.

State Archive

Ben-Gurion's uncensored diary: 'Pester the refugees eastward'

Ofer Aderet

In one of the pages of his diary, David Ben-Gurion details the targets surveilled by the intelligence agencies of the fledgling Israel, which was not yet a year old. The list, written in Ben-Gurion's handwriting, includes "secessionists" (members of the Irgun and Lehi militias, who did not bow to the authority of the Yishuv's elected institutions), "Mizrahi Jews" (specifically the North African immigrants living in transit camps), "political parties" (his political rivals) and the Israeli Communist Party, Maki. Ben-Gurion composed this list after a meeting with Isser Harel, the first head of the Mossad and the Shin Bet security service, who had complained that he had not been allocated sufficient funds or staff.

Since Ben-Gurion penned the list in 1949, it remained hidden in his diary. Only recently, 72 years after it was composed and 48 years after the death of its author, was

it released for publication. The Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research, which has been fighting to declassify documents kept in government archives, is responsible for the development. Akevot requested that the Ben-Gurion Research Institute, which owns the diary, to lift the censorship over broad swaths of the journal, as there is no discernable reason for hiding them from public scrutiny in 2021.

After checking with the Israel State Archives, to which the Ben-Gurion Research Institute is subordinate, the latter acceded to the request and lifted the censorship over some of the documents. In the first phase, parts of the diary covering 1948 through 1953 that had been redacted or blacked out were restored.

Perusing the uncensored version does not reveal any state secrets, but does offer the reader a better understanding of various historical events, not to mention the way the author thought

and felt about them.

On September 26, 1948, Ben-Gurion wrote about Arab refugees who fled or were expelled from their homes during Israel's War of Independence. Ben-Gurion recounts a conversation he had with Yosef Weitz, the director of the Land and Afforestation Department at the Jewish National Fund. The two, it seems, were concerned about these refugees' attempts to return to their homes in Israel.

"There are cases of refugees from Ramle and Lod who reached Gaza through Ramallah, believing that from Gaza it will be easier to return to Ramle or Lod. What should we do?" says the diary, which does not specify whether it is quoting Weitz or expressing Ben-Gurion's thoughts.

The answer comes in the second half of the sentence: "We have to 'pester' them relentlessly...We need to pester and motivate the refugees in the south to move

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DIARY

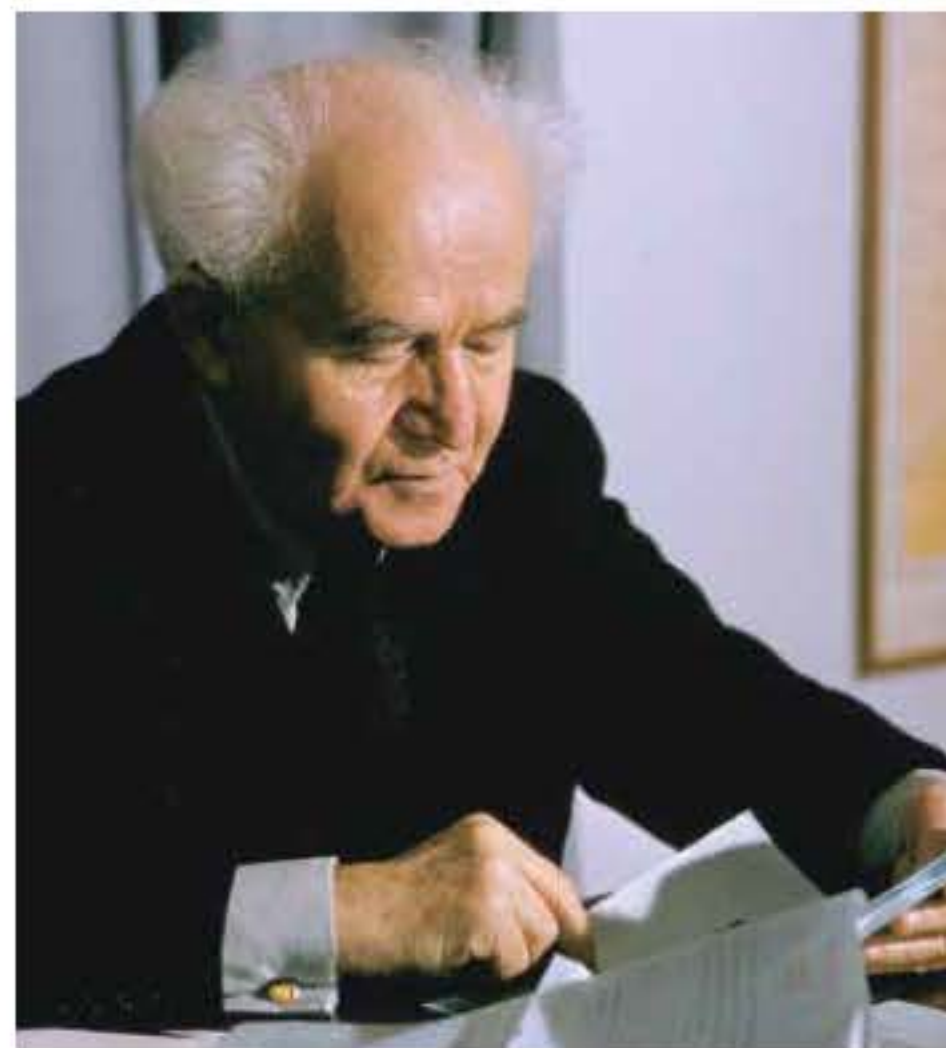
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The answer comes in the second half of the sentence: "We have to 'pester' them relentlessly...We need to pester and motivate the refugees in the south to move eastward as well, since they won't go towards the sea and Egypt won't let them in," he wrote of pushing these Palestinians toward Jordan. "Who will take care of this pestering?" wonders Ben-Gurion in his diary, answering: "Shiloah, with the help of Weitz's committee."

Reuven Shiloah was a leader in the intelligence community and the first director of Mossad. The committee he refers to is the Transfer Committee, which was established in the midst of the war in order to examine government policies regarding Arab refugees, or, more precisely, ways of encouraging them to leave the country.

On April 2, 1950, Ben-Gurion notes in his diary that "things are not right in the Negev," detailing the murder and rape of Arab women by Israeli soldiers and reprisals by the Egyptian army. "Again, our soldiers (Moroccans) caught two young Arab women, and raped and killed them. In retaliation, the Egyptians laid a mine and an ambush, killing five people - three soldiers and two civilians."

At the end of the paragraph Ben-Gurion writes: "I'm sorry about the missed family life, but in our genera-



Ben-Gurion in his office in 1959.

Fritz Cohen / GPO

tion, we have to be cruel - security is not an easy or soft issue. If needed, the defense minister will send people like Motke to be killed. The army needs him, and in my opinion he has to stay." As usual with this diary, it's not entirely clear whether he was quoting Maklef's wife or adding his own thoughts, or whether it was a mix of both. Maklef would go on to become Israel's third chief of staff.

Another newly uncensored section relates to the sinking of the Irgun arms ship Altalena by the newly created Israel Defense Forces in June 1948, an incident which

roiled the Yishuv. In his diary, Ben-Gurion describes a stormy government meeting following pressure to release Irgun members who were detained after exchanging fire with the IDF. The diary refers to individual Knesset and cabinet members as "despicable," "doormats," "contemptible" and "worthless" (though it's not always clear to whom he is referring). Ben-Gurion notes that "the lowlife" must resign, since "I told him that justice must be served for shooting at Jews." He summarized the issue: "That's the situation in the party. I'm in despair."

Also uncensored is a section describing a 1951 meeting between Ben-Gurion and Ernst David Bergmann, a leading Israeli scientist who was responsible for several scientific projects for the military. "Dr. Bergmann came to see me. They've prepared some synthetic material that causes cancer, and it enables testing for cancer at a very early stage," says Ben-Gurion. He does not elaborate.

The uncovering of these censored sections - dozens of them of varying lengths - took two years from the day historian and Akevot researcher Adam Raz filed his request to lift the censorship. However, much material still remains censored in these diaries, as well as in other documents in the possession of the Ben-Gurion Institute. In tandem, Akevot has also asked the State

Archives that many other documents from the period be uncensored, as there is no obvious reason to keep them out of the public eye.

"Uncovering the blacked-out sections (partially so) of the diary is an important step," says Lior Yavne, the director of Akevot, adding that "blacking out archived documents creates huge sinkholes into which important parts of the history of Israel and its society disappear." These blackouts remain in place even many years after the law permits their removal, partly due to a lack of resources, awareness or willingness on the part of the archives.

Raz adds that historical research cannot be complete without a researcher approaching an archive in search of documents that are still censored, with a demand to disclose their contents.

Exposing these previously censored parts of Ben-Gurion's diary illustrates how heavy-handed censorship can be when it comes to historical documents. In many cases, Yavne says, it shows that they were not kept from the public due to security, diplomatic or privacy reasons, "but for entirely different considerations, such as protecting the public image of some institution or figure, or withholding information or preventing discussions on the foundations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." In other cases, sections of Ben-Gurion's diary that

were censored for decades were available in other archives, indicating that there is no consistent policy when it comes to the censorship of archived documents.

Historian Tom Segev, who wrote the Ben-Gurion biography "A State at Any Cost," says that the newly uncensored texts document "Ben-Gurion's vulgar speech." He points to one uncovered section, in which Ben-Gurion uses the moniker "a typical Nazi" to refer to Pinchas Rosen, Israel's first justice minister.

"He meant, of course, that Rosen was a pedant, a Yekke," a term for Jews of German origin. "Ben-Gurion viewed him as a necessary nuisance. There was nothing he hated more than people who said no to him, especially lawyers," says Segev. "The use of the term Nazi indicates the ease with which Ben-Gurion used this epithet," Segev says, adding that Ben-Gurion's rival Menachem Begin received a similar nickname.

Segev is calling for more sections of the diary and other documents at the Ben-Gurion archive to be uncovered. "There are truly important things which were never released for publication, such as the claim that Israel was behind an attack on a synagogue in Baghdad in 1951 in order to encourage Iraqi Jews to come to Israel, as well as the Lavon Affair in Egypt," Segev says. "What's the secret? There are more cases like this."