

WEEKEND

'Were you ordered to shoot prisoners?'

A short story published after the Sinai Campaign described horrific massacres and rapes committed by IDF soldiers on residents of the Gaza Strip. How far was the fiction from fact?

Adam Raz

In mid-December 1956, a few weeks after the conquest of the Gaza Strip during the Sinai Campaign and immediately after the short-lived Israeli military rule was established there, author Matti Megged published a short story in the daily Lamerhav, entitled "Mr. D.'s Bitter End." Megged portrayed the deeds of a military governor named D., who ruled over one of the cities in Gaza, and the violence, rapes and killings that pervaded the conquered city under the auspices of the Israeli army.

With a sharp pen, in a critique uncommon in the landscape of Hebrew literature of the time, Megged declared that it was the Israeli occupation and its military rule that caused the moral corruption of Governor D. and his subordinates. Better-known works critical of the War of Independence – such as "Khirbet Khizeh" by S. Yizhar, and "The Other Side of the Coin" by Uri Avnery – pale in comparison to Megged's vivid and brutal descriptions. No wonder then that his work was overlooked and not discussed in the extensive literature published over the years about the campaign. This state of oblivion doesn't pertain only to this particular story, but also applies in general to public awareness of the war crimes committed by Israel during the Sinai Campaign, aka Operation Kadesh. The latter was a short war waged by Israel, Britain and France against Egypt, which involved the Israeli army's conquest of the Sinai peninsula, and efforts by those two European countries to take over the Suez Canal after it was nationalized by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Ultimately Britain and France retreated and Israel evacuated the territory it had seized.

Governor D., in Megged's story, justified the soldiers' acts by saying that 'they did not use force, technically. They only told the women that if they resisted, they would all be slaughtered.'

The fact that literature such as Megged's story has been essentially relegated to oblivion has been bolstered by the strict censorship imposed on historical documentation relating to war crimes by the state from its inception to the present day.

The mounting corruption of Governor D. is the axis that drives the plot in this story. At its center is his consent to the acts of rape and massacre committed by Israeli Defense Forces soldiers. The story begins with a "skin-brown girl, bare to the waist" who receives various guests at the house of the governor, who in turn offers her up "to every respectable guest ... and everyone, like you [i.e., the guest], feels a little ashamed at first, but then gets used to the idea ... Everyone gets used to it." The rape of Gazan women by IDF soldiers repeats itself, and one soldier tells his friend: "You should have seen what was going on here last night ... Those dirty Arabs, after we took their women away for work, began to riot. So what did we do? We led some women, the younger ones, to one of the houses, and threatened the men that if they did not stop, we would rape them all in front of their eyes ... Do you think it had no effect? Of course it did ... but it did not prevent us from doing what we promised, even though they stopped the rioting ... we kept them there every night."

The governor justified the soldiers' acts by saying that "they did not use force, technically. They only told the women, at the beginning of the act – as they actually told me – that if they resisted, they would all be slaughtered. It would be more convenient – one of the soldiers told me naively – with three others having to hold the woman down by her arms and legs." The governor, the soldiers said, did not care "if we went wild."

In a moment of candor, the governor explained to an interlocutor that he wanted him to understand "how a man such as myself could stoop so low that he commands his soldiers to shoot unarmed civilians." Megged clarifies, through the character of the governor, "that no more serious things were done here than in any other part of the occupied area. On the contrary. And even if there is a massacre here tonight – we

will not be a vanguard ... This already happened during the first week, and several dozen defenseless residents were killed there."

Publication of the story caused a stir. Yitzhak Gvirtz, an IDF General Staff officer in Gaza at the time, responded in Lamerhav that the narrative created "a difficult mood among the workers in the (military) administration," because the story "came to describe a situation as if it had taken place in the occupied territory." Following inquiries to the newspaper, the editors clarified that publication of the work, in two installments, was "done without sufficient consideration." Megged also stated in response that the story was imaginary, although he added that "in every area of military administration there is danger of a process occurring similar to that which the 'heroes' went through." He did not mention, however, that after the story came out he was attacked by unknown individuals and severely beaten, as he later told his neighbor, historian Yigal Wagner.

To the best of my knowledge, the late historian Eyal Kafafi was the first to mention Megged's story in a few lines in her 1994 book (in Hebrew) on the Sinai Campaign ("An Optional War: To Sinai and Back, 1956-1957"). Kafafi argued that perhaps because it was a literary work, "no military censorship was applied" to it. However, she added, it should be assumed that "there was not too big a gap between imagination and reality."

Today, 65 years after the events mentioned in Megged's story, the obstacles the state places before researchers seeking historical documentation of war crimes committed during Israel's brief military rule in Gaza, from November 1956 to March 1957, are still significant.

Classified in Hebrew only

War crimes committed by the IDF during the Sinai Campaign have been only briefly mentioned in the past, but only in the context of the treatment of prisoners of war. In the mid-1990s, Aryeh Biro, who in 1956 had been commander of the 890th Battalion of the Paratroopers Brigade, admitted that during the operation Egyptian POWs were executed. In an interview with the local paper Yedioth Yerushalayim in 1995, he said: "I shot prisoners at the Mitla Pass ... I did not have time to deal with prisoners. The ones that we managed to screw, we screwed." His remarks caused a stir, and years later Egypt demanded that Israel set up a commission of inquiry to investigate "IDF soldiers' war crimes against Egyptian prisoners" during the 1956-57 operation. The Egyptian authorities based their claims, among other sources, on items published in the Israeli media – particularly Biro's testimony.

Why is it that, despite numerous re-



Arab POWs in the Gaza Strip, 1956. "Only the Arabs are to blame for all this and at every opportunity I take revenge on them; we killed hundreds but for me it is not enough," a Golani soldier wrote in a letter on November 6, the day after the Sinai Campaign ended.

Zionist Archives

mors circulating in the decades that have elapsed since that first Israeli occupation of Gaza, we have such precious few historical records of it? One answer lies in an internal policy document prepared by the IDF and Defense Establishment Archive in 1988 – the "Topics Document," which laid out the classification policy of both the IDF Archive and the Israel State Archives, specifying "axes of security, political and personal sensitivity." It has undergone several incarnations over the years, but the spirit of this document is still clear, explaining why the state precludes any efforts to get to the bottom of the bloody events that took place after the occupation of the Gaza Strip, and continues to conceal other historical information.

Article 3 of the document, for example, discusses "material that may harm the IDF's image [and portray it] as an occupying army devoid of moral foundations." The article warns against publicizing information regarding "violent conduct against the Arab population and acts of cruelty (killing, murder not necessitated by combat, rape, looting, pillage)." Article 4 refers to "material related to the Jewish-Arab conflict, which may harm the security of the state even today." Among the examples cited in the document: "violent conduct against prisoners contrary to the Geneva Convention (killing); not taking notice of white flags." When these are the criteria that prevent declassification of military and political documentation – no wonder it is so very difficult to keep track of historical events.

And yet, testimonies from army commanders and officers occasionally emerge from the darkness. Shaul Givoli, the commander of the 128th Battalion of the Yiftach Infantry Brigade during the Sinai Campaign, who reached the rank of brigadier general and became the IDF's chief education

officer, recalled in his self-published 2014 autobiography, "Stories of My Life," the following exchanges with commanders of another battalion: "When the war ended, Pini, commander of Battalion 13, asked me if I was ordered to shoot prisoners. I replied in the affirmative. 'What did you do?' asked Pini. I told him my intention was to cause fear and panic without opening fire on the prisoners ... 'Did you get that order too?' I asked Pini. 'Yes! And I informed them immediately that I was not carrying out the order.'" What stands out from this conversation is not the fact that commanders refused the order but that an order to execute prisoners was given in the first place.

The very fact of the order being given is borne out by the testimony of then-Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan. When appearing before the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on November 23, 1956, just days after the fighting ended, he testified that the treatment of POWs varied from unit to unit. He said he knew of cases where soldiers lined up prisoners and killed them, instead of taking custody of them. He did not reveal to the committee, however, any information concerning legal procedures taken against said soldiers, and indeed there is no record of any soldiers being prosecuted for murdering POWs. Anyone who wants to read Dayan's actual words cannot do so: The full minutes of the committee are no longer held in the state archives. Dayan's remarks appear in an appendix that the American illustrator Joe Sacco added to his 2009 graphic novel "Footnotes in Gaza." In English you can read the words of the Israeli chief of staff from 1956, but in Hebrew – no.

Sacco, author of several outstanding graphic novels, has dealt before with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While not very well known in Israel, the 432-page work he wrote in 2009 about the 1956 occupation of Gaza is worth reading, as it presents the story of two horrific massacres that took place there.

A reading of "Footnotes in Gaza" sharpens Matti Megged's words, penned decades earlier. Did Megged, born in 1923, a former Palmach fighter and a man who personally knew many soldiers involved in the Sinai Campaign, base his story on actual events? And if such horrific things took place, what was their scope?

To the Jewish public in Israel, the bloody events that took place in Khan Yunis on November 3, 1956, and in the city of Rafah nine days later, are almost unknown. The Palestinian memory is completely different. Every year, memorial events are held in those two Gazan cities, and there are many web pages dedicated to commemoration of the victims. During one recent memorial ceremony, Selim el-Sakka, the former Palestinian justice minister, and head of the committee that is documenting the events of 1956-57, demanded that they be re-investigated and that those responsible be prosecuted. For his part, Alaa el-Din al-Batta, the mayor of Khan Yunis, in southern Gaza, has pointed a finger of blame at human rights organizations and researchers who have not dedicated enough effort to investigating the whole affair.

According to the accepted Palestinian narrative, about 275 Palestinians were killed in the Khan Yunis massacre, while some 111 people were killed in Rafah. After reviewing materials available for perusal, however, these estimates seem high, but there is no doubt civilians were murdered by Israeli troops. Even back in those days, some reports were published about the incidents by foreign correspondents and UN officials, which

led to a few items in the press in Israel and around the world. Information from foreign government and military sources about the atrocities is limited. The bulk of documents held in the IDF archive – including the investigative report of the incidents by the army – are classified. Repeated appeals to review the documentation have been denied. Some of the documents were accessible in the past but re-classified after Haaretz correspondent Amira Hass wrote a brief item on Sacco's book shortly after it came out. The dearth of available documents in the state archives reflects an official policy that's been adopted by the Foreign Ministry on behalf of international *hasbara* (public diplomacy). Palestinian documentation of the bloody events in Gaza, on the other hand, is based largely on oral testimony collected over the years, but its reliability and quality vary. Documentation by UN personnel on the ground, collected by the Akevot Institute in New York, also provides a glimpse of some of the events following Israel's conquest of Gaza.

While there is very little information about the bloody events in Khan Yunis, we have a slightly more complete picture of those in Rafah on November 12. According to a Foreign Ministry document, demonstrations were held

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the day before in that city against Israel's occupation, which escalated due to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's announcement that the UN had demanded that Israel must evacuate the occupied territories. The Foreign Ministry told the Israeli Embassy in Washington that "the army was compelled" to stop the demonstrations "by force," and the situation developed "to the point of shooting the mob (30 Arabs were killed)." Additional details were not provided.

A day after the bloody demonstrations, the 44th Battalion of the 12th Brigade (Negev Brigade), under the command of Gen. David (Dado) Elazar, was instructed to round up local men aged 18 to 45 and hold them in a temporary prison camp as part of a weapons search. Similar operations were carried out elsewhere in the Strip, and such activities often ended without violence. But on November 12, a curfew was imposed on residents of Rafah, and efforts to gather and imprison the men deteriorated into a bloodbath. According to the Israeli account, which is presented, among other things, in the testimony Elazar gave to an officer appointed to investigate the affair (his testimony is currently classified): "The unit opened fire at those who attempted to escape and those who did not follow orders, and as a result 30 civilians were killed." He also estimated that the death toll did not exceed 40. A Gaza resident, who testified two weeks later before UN representatives at the scene, gave a different version: "The killings do not stop. They grabbed 2,000 people, stood them up against a wall and shot them."

UN officials on the ground reported that the number of dead in Rafah accord-

ed with that given by Israel, but they portrayed a different picture. For example, Colonel Robert Bayard, chairman of the Egyptian-Israeli Mixed Armistice Commission, wrote that after hearing a number of accounts, he "arrived at the conclusion that the treatment of civilians is harsh and unjust, and a large number of people were shot in cold blood for no apparent reason." Bayard mentioned many rumors of atrocities, and while most of them can be ignored, some are certainly true. He made a distinction in his comments between reports in the Arab media that Israel was "slaughtering" Palestinian civilians under the guise of searching for Egyptian fighters – and what he deemed to be the actual situation. In a telegram sent to UN officials in New York about the events in Rafah, he wrote: "On Tuesday morning the men of the town were ordered out for screening but they refused to leave their homes. When Israeli soldiers went from house to house to bring them out some began running away. Fire was opened on them."

The mood in Gaza can perhaps best be assessed by reading a letter sent by a Golani Brigade soldier to his girlfriend on November 6, the day after the Sinai Campaign concluded, which is in the IDF archive. "Only the Arabs are to blame for all this and at every opportunity I take revenge on them," he wrote. "I am not satisfied with the amount [of people] I have already killed; we killed hundreds but for me it is not enough. At every opportunity I take revenge on them, and opportunities are not lacking, especially these days when I am among thousands of Arabs. They are under curfew, and this is a great opportunity to do anything we want to them. And I'm doing just that, and I won't stop until I am on my way home, I swear."

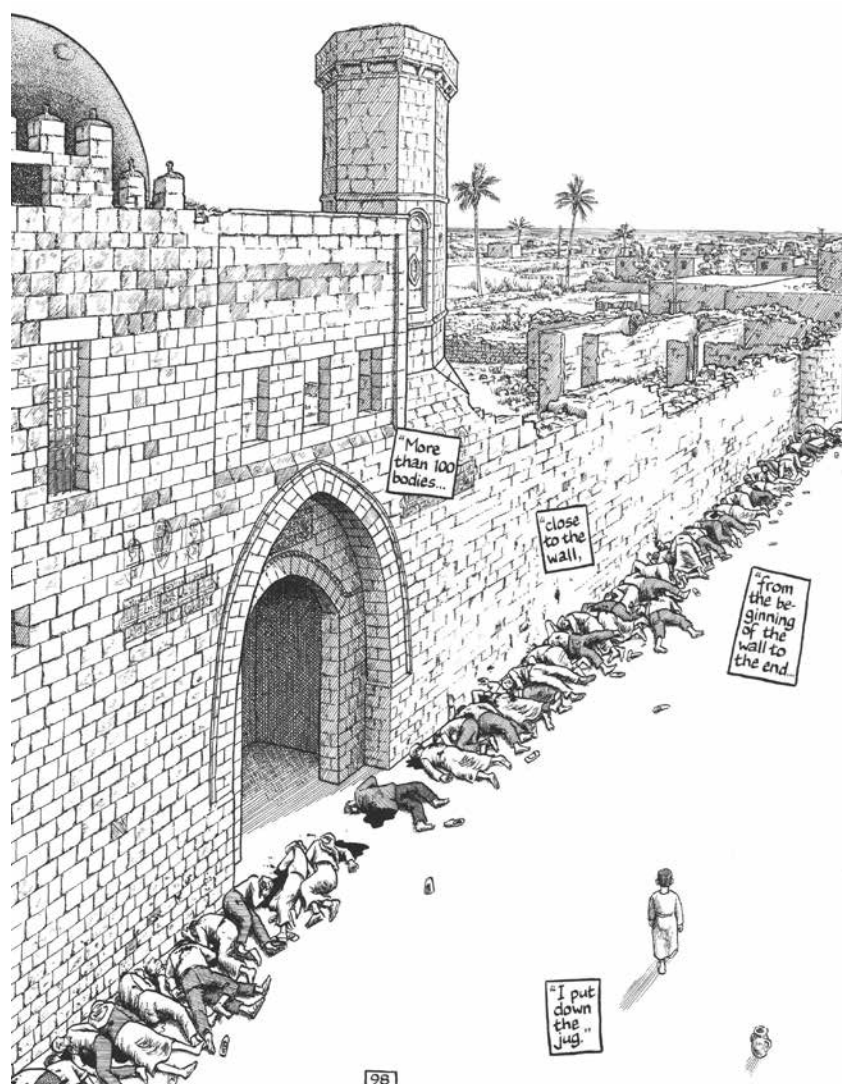
'A few shots'

The Israeli media did not report on the Gaza events for some time after the fact. The exception was the now-defunct Ha'olam Hazeh, which referred only to the massacre in Rafah, reporting on November 28 that "with unparalleled stupidity, this apparatus (the military administration) thought that such an event could be silenced at such an hour ... The Israeli silence seemed to the whole world to be an expression of guilty conscience ... that's the truth. Who has heard of it? Not a single person."

After publication of the unsigned article, MK Esther Vilenska (Maki) raised the issue of the massacres in the Knesset. "The whole country has heard about and is talking about these acts. The Israeli public is ashamed of them and wants them to stop immediately. These murders should not be excused by the fact that they happened during the war. These acts were committed after occupation against peaceful residents."

Referring to the events in Rafah, Prime Minister and Defense Minister Ben-Gurion said in response to Vilenska that some residents of the Strip had violated the curfew and opened fire on the army. "After a few shots were fired in the air, our soldiers had to shoot the rioters; 48 were killed and several wounded." The events in Khan Yunis were not even mentioned. In early March 1957, Israel's military administration in the Strip ended.

The motives behind concealing documentation of the events of Khan Yunis and Rafah in 1956 are the same motives that prevent disclosure today of the full documentation of the Kfar Qassem massacre at about that time. The thunderous silence of the state archives is part of the apparatus of concealment that bolsters the IDF's image: It's easy to be the "most moral army in the world" when documents proving otherwise are classified.



Aftermath of a 1956 massacre in Gaza, depicted in the graphic novel "Footnotes in Gaza" by Joe Sacco. "Footnotes in Gaza" by Joe Sacco © Metropolitan Books, 2010