Year Zero Of The Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929, By Hillel Cohen

Hillel Cohen is a Jewish historian specialising in Arab-Jewish relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He favours a one-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which becomes clear in Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929, the first depth study of the 1929 riots since the 1930s. He focuses specifically on 1929, distinguishing the book from his other works which consider wider periods, such as Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948-1967. Striving for neutrality and using his proficiency in Arabic and Hebrew, Cohen studies the ordinary people of 1929 and rationalises discrepancies between Arab and Jewish experiences of the riots. However, writing in Hebrew detracts from his neutrality and his complex structure complicates the messages within the book.

The title of the book provocatively claims that the year 1929 marked the genesis of Arab-Israeli conflict. However, this immediately risks misinterpretation, as Cohen nuances this assertion within the book. Distancing from the book title, he argues that the 1929 riots marked the creation of the Yishuv, the crystallisation of collective Zionist and Palestinian narratives and consequently, the entrenching of enmity between them. The controversial title has been criticised by Yonatan Mendel, who quite reasonably reminds readers that the Arab-Israeli conflict extends back to the 19th century. This nuance would have been better off reflected in the title to indicate more accurately the content of the book.

Cohen faces several issues inherent in the source base of Year Zero, the largest of which is perhaps the lack of an official Palestinian archive. This demands a difficult pursuit of private accounts from Palestinian families and emigrants, and contemporary publications such as Ibrahim al-Dabbagh's al-Insaniyya. Matching these up with Jewish accounts, Cohen persuasively establishes how records of the same day differ according to their author's convictions. For example, he explores the account of Haganah officer Maurice Samuel, which describes the Arab murder of Jewish wagoner Baruch Rozin in August 1929. Conversely, the Palestinian account of Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh from the very same day fails to mention Rozin's death, instead focusing on the Jewish murder of the Palestinian 'Awn family. By cross-referencing two synchronised accounts – one Jewish, one Arab – Cohen compellingly highlights how selective memory has informed the national narratives of Israel and Palestine since 1929. In doing so, he successfully gives a voice to ordinary Jews and Arabs and reveals their motivations through meticulous analysis.

Structurally, the most pertinent feature of the book is its non-chronological order. Instead, chapters are organised geographically, according to the focal points of the riots, such as Jaffa and Hebron. I found this to be confusing, detracting from the book's accessibility to readers who are not familiar with the Arab-Israeli conflict. Cohen directly addresses this, offering an additional timeline '…for the reader's convenience', thereby acknowledging the inconvenience caused by his non-chronological approach. Whilst the timeline slightly improves the book's accessibility, it also makes it difficult to identify Cohen's target audience; using a structure suitable mainly for experts and yet also providing tools such as timelines which would be unnecessary for them. Overall, the structure will likely cause confusion for most non-experts on the conflict.

However, the reader who is better acquainted with the conflict will be aware that it is one of a contested land. It is therefore possible that Cohen opts for a structure based on location to reflect the territorial nature of the conflict, using geography as a basis for political and ideological discourse. This would link directly to the Palestinian claim to the land on the basis of jus soli, as opposed to the Jewish claim by jus sanguinis. However, this is merely my speculation, as Cohen only justifies this structure as ‘an attempt to express the spirit of the time’.

As a book written in Hebrew and thus targeting a largely Israeli readership, it seemed particularly paradoxical to me that Cohen thus isolated it from the vast majority of Arabs to whom the book directly relates. On this account, I certainly expected Year Zero to be far from neutral, both in its objectives and its arguments. I was therefore surprised at the intense criticism with which Cohen met Jewish and Arab sources alike. As a reader of the English translated version, I was pleasantly surprised to find little to no partisan tone in Cohen’s commentary.

However, the absence of partisanship is precisely what some readers have found problematic. Yisrael Medad, for example, argues that Cohen neglects specific examples of Arab violence throughout the 1920s. To some Jews, an Israeli historian writing about the 1929 riots without clearly taking a pro-Zionist standpoint is unacceptable. Criticising Year Zero on this basis is unpersuasive though, as Palestinian readers could easily denounce it on the same grounds, somewhat negating the argument. Historian Nadav Molchadsky captures this feeling well -Year Zero has no narrative of good versus evil, ‘no unequivocal victims and perpetrators’. This becomes particularly apparent in the occasional stories of inter-community rescues, where even traditional lines of loyalty become blurred. Cohen thus avoids a conventional Zionist narrative, making both Jewish and Arab readers uncomfortable by subjecting their deeply ingrained national memories to rigorous criticism.

I found Cohen’s meticulous analysis very effective in explaining how Arab-Israeli antagonism became established, and how decisions in 1929 have led to the deadlock today. There are omissions in the book, such as discussions of high politics, but he justifies these effectively through his bottom-up approach. Year Zero is provocative in its implication that, as the Jews and Arabs themselves generated their enmity, only they are capable of freeing themselves from it. It is therefore not an easily digested book for either party. However, by exploring how Jews and Arabs broke their national moulds and helped each other in violent times, Cohen makes a strong case that the two communities are not inherently destined for mutual hatred. The book therefore felt relevant, relating directly to the status quo and promoting reconciliation by recounting the events of 1929.