

# Honest History Isn't Very Honest About Israel

Ari Brown, Education Analyst

## Introduction

Honest History is a children's educational magazine focusing on supplementing in-school history education. Brooke and David Knight founded Honest History in 2018 to create a kids' magazine that "combined equal parts creativity, education, and honest storytelling." The creation of Honest History reflected a broader concern at that time that traditional historical narratives were not neutral and left out underrepresented groups and perspectives (while advancing a specific historical argument, the New York Times' 1619 Project published in 2019 was part of this larger movement.)

In 2020, Honest History won a National Parenting Product Award<sup>1</sup> and boasts tens of thousands of followers across Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. According to Brooke Knight, who serves as the magazine's Editor-in-Chief, Honest History has a "global audience" and partners with "schools, homeschool groups and charter schools."<sup>2</sup> The magazine's mission statement declares that Honest History seeks "to share important, well-researched stories that inspire kids to make a positive impact on history themselves." Each of the issues is written and edited by experts in the subject matter and gives a simple overview of a historical topic paired with

charming illustrations that appeal to their young readers.

To explain their mission, Honest History quotes the University of Pennsylvania professor Zachary Herrmann that "the answer is not to tell students what to think, but rather how to think." Unfortunately, Honest History doesn't follow this advice. Rather than giving children a neutral account and letting them reach their own conclusions, Honest History slants their writing, leading their young readers to the opinions Honest History desires.

## Misleading Historical Framing

Issue 23, "A Home to Many," discusses the Israel-Palestine conflict. As its title suggests, Honest History argues that "Palestine" is a home to many peoples who are tragically locked in an intractable conflict. Honest History presents itself as offering a neutral account of the conflict, but its treatment of events appears selective and, contains significant gaps in Jewish history, and may give readers a negative impression of Israel. The issue skips hundreds of years of history, deemphasizes Jewish history in the Land, frames Zionism as a purely European project, and downplays Arab and Palestinian actions while amplifying Israeli ones. In her preface to the issue, Knight informs her

---

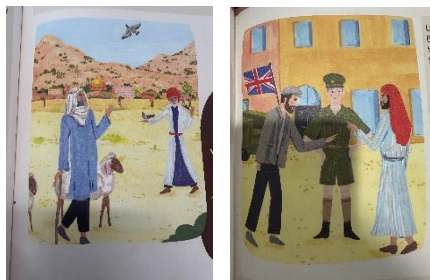
<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nappaawards.com/product/honest-history/#:~:text=Honest%20History%20is%20a%20quarterly%20magazine%20for,pages\\*\\*%20\\*\\*Has%20activities%20at%20the%20end\\*\\*](https://www.nappaawards.com/product/honest-history/#:~:text=Honest%20History%20is%20a%20quarterly%20magazine%20for,pages**%20**Has%20activities%20at%20the%20end**)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wereawomenowned.com/how-honest-history-mag-is-reimagining-the-traditional-history-lesson/#:~:text=EC%3A%20What%20inspired%20you%20to,a%20publication%20didn't%20exist.>

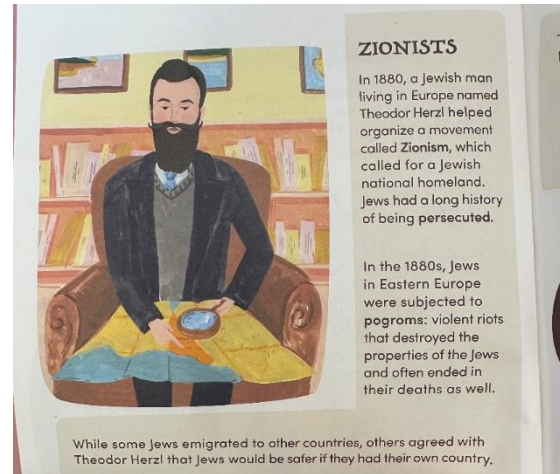
readers that the issue aims to “provide a basic starting point... to begin your own research... and learn more about both sides.” In reality, Honest History twists the history by misleadingly framing Israel and Palestine’s origins.

After giving some basic information about Israel and Palestine along with some fun facts, the issue provides an overview of ancient civilizations of the Levant: the Canaanites, the Philistines, and the Israelites. However, Honest History gives no indication that the Israelites are the ancestors of the Jewish people. When Honest History does discuss Israel’s history it begins in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the Ottoman Empire, writing, “most Ottoman Palestinians, no matter their religion, were Arab,” suggesting that the land is naturally Arab, not Jewish. In addition, this minimizes the deep connection of Jews to the Land. Even after the Temple’s destruction, Jews continued living in the Land of Israel and yearning to return became a central element of Jewish identity.

Honest History pairs this section with an image suggesting that people lived in harmony during this time in contrast with the strife to come. However, the “harmony” of Ottoman rule disguised the fact that Jews were treated as second class citizens and could not even enter holy sites like the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, and there were periodical attacks on Jews such as the 1834 Safed Pogrom. Honest History refers to the region during this time as “Ottoman Palestine,” which is an anachronism as the Ottomans did not refer to the region as such. Palestine was the term used by



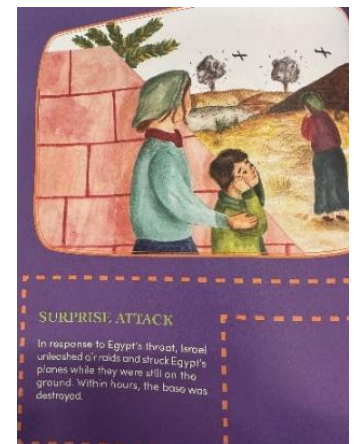
Europeans since Rome renamed the territory from Judea following the Bar Kokhba revolt in 137 CE.



Building on this framing, Honest History proceeds to mischaracterize the Zionist movement as European and colonialist. It refers to Herzl as “a Jew living in Europe” and highlights only Eastern European pogroms, suggesting that Zionism was purely motivated by European Jewish persecution, omitting their connection to the Land of Israel. Furthermore, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews were not only persecuted in Europe, but throughout the Muslim world as well, and while the Zionist movement began in Europe it quickly spread throughout the world with Zionist organizations establishing branches throughout the Middle East.

**Arab Agency**

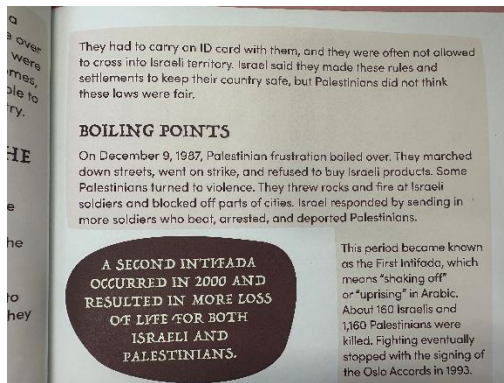
While claiming to provide a balanced account of the conflict, Honest History repeatedly downplays Palestinian and Arab agency, giving the impression that they only act in response to Israeli



violations. For example, when discussing the Six Day War Honest History writes, “the president of Egypt readied Egypt’s troops and threatened to attack Israel.” Honest History then states, “In response to Egypt’s threat, Israel unleashed air raids and struck Egypt’s planes while they were still on the ground.” Honest History gives the impression that Egypt merely “threatened” Israel, obscuring the reality that Egypt closed the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping and expelled UN peacekeepers from the Sinai before moving in Egyptian troops.

When describing the intifadas, Honest History downplays their violence saying that these were protests that only turned violent after Israel cracked down on them. More problematically, Honest History argues that the intifadas broke out in response to Israeli checkpoints and other security measures writing, “they [Palestinians] had to carry an ID with them, and they were often not allowed to cross into Israeli territory... In May 1987 Palestinian frustration boiled over.” In fact, the

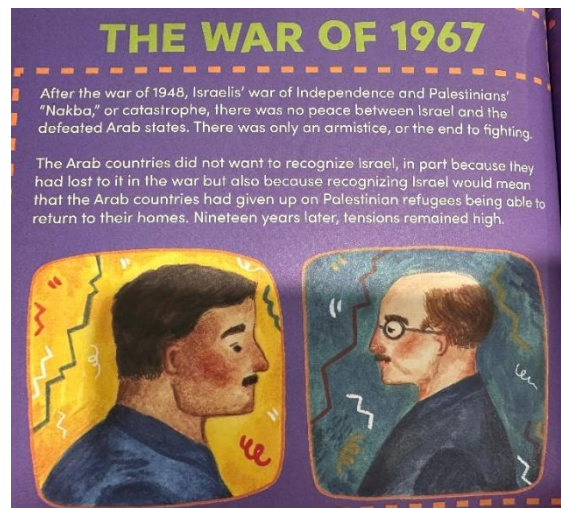
security measures were instituted in response to the Intifada, prior to them restrictions were much



lighter. While discussing the Second Intifada, Honest History writes, “Palestinians did not see change and protested. This protest called the Second Intifada turned violent.” Once again Honest History blames the intifada on Israel not “changing” and that it was a

protest that only “turned” violent because of Israeli actions. In reality, the Second Intifada was violent from the outset and started when Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader, rejected an Israeli offer that would have created a Palestinian State.<sup>3</sup>

### Arab Motives



Finally, Honest History downplays Arab motives in their conflict with Israel. For example, when describing the aftermath of the 1948 War of Independence, Honest History states that, “recognizing Israel would mean that the Arab countries had given up on Palestinian refugees being able to return to their homes.” The Arab states did not refuse peace with Israel because of Palestinian refugees; they refused because they still sought to destroy Israel and reverse the humiliation of 1948.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.camera.org/article/yasir-arafat-s-timeline-of-terror/>



## **Conclusion**

Honest History claims it wants to provide kids with accurate and unbiased stories of the past so they can be better citizens in the future. However, “A Home for Many” suggests that they are either failing in this mission, or worse are being deliberately misleading. They have a worthy goal; it is unfortunate that they are not living up to it.