

Episode 12: The Holocaust and the Founding of the State of Israel

Guest: Professor Derek Penslar, William Lee Frost Chair of Jewish History, Harvard University

Hosts: Alexandria, Mert, Yusuf

Bio:

Professor Derek Penslar is one of the world's foremost historians of Zionism and Jewish history. His research explores the political, social, and emotional dimensions of Zionism, Jewish military history, and the global impact of the 1948 war. Notable publications include *Zionism and Technocracy* (1991), *Jews and the Military* (2013), *Theodor Herzl: The Charismatic Leader* (2020), and *Zionism: An Emotional State* (2023). He served as the President of the American Academy for Jewish Research twice, is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and an Honorary Fellow of St. Anne's College, Oxford. His scholarship has reshaped understanding of how the Holocaust, international politics, and global perceptions influenced Zionism and the founding of Israel.

In this episode: This episode explores the transformative period around 1948, examining how the Holocaust reshaped Zionism and international support for Jewish self-determination. Professor Penslar discusses the experiences of Holocaust survivors in Displaced Persons Camps having nowhere to go, the UN Partition Plan (Resolution 181), the outbreak and memories of the 1948 war, and the emotional currents that shaped Zionist thought. Topics include international reactions to Israel's founding, contested narratives of 1948 among Israelis and Palestinians, the reception of Holocaust survivors in Israel, and the role of memory and emotion in forming national identity. He also critically engages with the settler-colonial framework for understanding Zionism. This episode offers listeners a nuanced perspective on the global, emotional, and historical dimensions of Zionism around the early years of the State of Israel.

Links:

Prof. Dr. Derek Penslar: <https://history.fas.harvard.edu/people/derek-penslar>
(Last accessed on October 21, 2025)

Penslar, Derek J. *Zionism: An Emotional State*. Rutgers University Press, 2023.
<https://www.rutgersuniversitypress.org/zionism/9780813576091/>

Penslar, Derek J. *Theodor Herzl: The Charismatic Leader*. Yale University Press, 2020. <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300180404/theodor-herzl/>

Penslar, Derek J. *Jews and the Military: A History*. Princeton University Press, 2013. <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691138879/jews-and-the-military>

Further Resources:

Biltmore Declaration (1942): <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-206268/> (Last accessed on October 21, 2025). At the extraordinary Zionist Conference held at New York City's Biltmore Hotel on May 11, 1942, Zionist leaders explicitly called for the establishment of a Jewish state for the first time.

Resolution 181: Palestine Plan of Partition with Economic Union <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-185393/> (Last accessed on October 21, 2025)

The term "**Nakba**" (Arabic: النكبة, meaning "catastrophe" or "disaster") was first applied to the events of 1948 by Syrian historian Dr. Constantin Zureiq (American University of Beirut) in his 1948 book *Ma'na al-Nakba* (The Meaning of the Disaster). Zureiq used the term to describe the defeat of the Arabs in Palestine, stating, "The defeat of the Arabs in Palestine is not a small downfall – naksa... It is a catastrophe – nakba – in every sense of the word." <https://archive.org/details/zurayk-nakba> (Last accessed on October 21, 2025).

Please also check out our other episodes to explore multiple perspectives.

On the White papers and the Holocaust: Michael Brenner, Oren Kessler

On the 1948 war of Independence / Nakba: Adel Manna, Muriel Asseburg, Gudrun Krämer

Dedication:

We dedicate this Podcast to all victims and survivors of October 7, the hostages and their families, to all innocent civilians killed in Gaza and their grieving families and friends. To our dear guests Udi Goren, Khalil Sayegh, Sima and Mai who shared their losses so powerfully with us. To their families: Tal's wife Ella Haimi, their children Nir, Einav, Udi and Lotan, who never got the chance to meet his father. To Khalil Sayegh's mother and siblings, to Mai's and Sima's family, to her mother Bushra.

To the blessed memory of: Tal Haimi, Lara Sayegh, Jeris Sayegh, Mahmoud, Danny Darlington and Haim Perry.

Disclaimer:

In each episode of this podcast, the invited guests speak on their own behalf. They share their experiences, assessments, and expert perspectives. These contributions are central to the multiperspectivity of the project but do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial team or producers.

Legal & Historical Anchor Episodes:

This podcast may include controversial legal terms of specific technical significance. Their legal applicability requires a thorough expert contextualization; for this, we refer to our legal chapter. All relevant terms of international law, its institutions, current controversies, and the state of jurisprudence are explained in the anchor episode with Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. Claus Kreß LL.M. (Cambridge) (Episode 36). He is co-author of the Rome Statute, Special Advisor to the International Criminal Court, and Judge at the International Court of Justice in the parallel Gambia vs. Myanmar genocide case.

Historical matters are discussed from multiple perspectives in this podcast. Please check the cross-references in the shownotes of the respective episodes for details. All historically contested issues are addressed in the history anchor episode with Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Gudrun Krämer (Episode 21), author of the comprehensive work *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel* (Princeton 2008), a standard reference in the field. For her scholarly achievements as a historian, she was awarded the *Preis des Historischen Kollegs* in 2025, the highest distinction in her discipline in Germany.