A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion,
By Tom Segev (Translated by Haim Watzman)
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This is without doubt one of the best biographies that have been written about the most interesting Jew of the twentieth century, David Ben-Gurion. To his credit, historian and journalist Tom Segev manages to captivate his readers over almost 700 pages (not including the footnotes), despite the fact that the story of Israel’s founding father is well known from countless previous biographies and studies.

Segev’s literary prowess, together with his impressive archive work and his tendency to concentrate on anecdotes that encapsulate a larger story, make this book compulsory reading for anyone who wants to understand Ben-Gurion and Israel during its formative years. Moreover, the book also clarifies why Ben-Gurion continues to be relevant to this study. Positions he expressed during his period as prime minister (1948-1963) are still common among the Israeli public, whether consciously or otherwise. In the wake of the recent election campaign, which was accompanied by incitement by Prime Minister Netanyahu against the Arab public, it is fascinating to read how Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Socialist-Zionist left wing, insisted in one of his last speeches in the Knesset that the Arabs must remain under martial law, since “an Arab will always remain an Arab” (p. 595).

But Ben-Gurion was a complex character, and his actions and statements are often contradictory. His anti-Arab remarks are mirrored by accusations against his own people that sometimes bordered on anti-Semitism. During the War of Independence, and during the Sinai Campaign of 1956 alongside Britain and France, Ben-Gurion sought to expand Israel’s borders. Yet after the 1967 War, he was one of the first figures to suggest that it would be better if Israel returned most of the territory it had occupied, since the state could have no future without peace in the region.

Ben-Gurion was born in 1896 in Plonsk, Poland and emigrated to Palestine on his own at the age of 20. From the moment he arrived in the country, he struggled to establish Socialist-Zionist political organisations. In 1930 he managed to unite several labour parties and to head Mapai, which in various reincarnations would continue to lead the Yishuv and the State of Israel until 1977 (until the last election, in which it shrank to just six seats in the Knesset, the descendant of Mapai continued to be one of the two main parties, alongside the Likud). Despite opposition from left and right in the Zionist movement, Ben-Gurion also decided to accept the idea of partitioning Palestine / the Land of Israel, as first proposed in 1937 by the Peel Commission. He also played a dominant role in the War of Independence. Even before war erupted, he anticipated that the Arabs would invade the country and prepared the army for battle, in part through his work to raise funds from American Jews for the purchase of weapons. At the same time he built the army leadership from veterans of the British army, which he admired, rather than from the commanders of the underground movements that had been active in Palestine.

It was also Ben-Gurion who encouraged the IDF to expel as many Palestinians as possible during the war, without issuing an explicit order to this end. By the time the war ended there were only 150,000 Arabs left in Israel, out of a previous population of almost 800,000. Some Arabs fled in fear of the Zionists while others were directly expelled.

Ben-Gurion also ordered the campaign for mass Jewish immigration to Israel, leading the Jewish population to swell from 600,000 at the time the state was established to one and a half million just two years later. He had no compunctions about misleading the US Administration, which was opposed to Israel’s construction of a nuclear reactor, and he also took command of shaping the curricula in the education system. Segev cogently describes Ben-Gurion’s actions at these different decisive junctions, while conversely highlighting his failure to act decisively to help save Jews during the Holocaust.

However, Segev’s biography focuses mainly on Ben-Gurion the person. In this context, the character that emerges is different to previous descriptions. After losing his mother at the age of ten, Ben-Gurion became a melancholy youth, commenting in a letter to friends “I don’t know why I’m sometimes so sad) (26). As prime minister, too, he showed a tendency to violet mood swings between euphoria and melancholy. Segev bases his description on quotes from Ben-Gurion’s journal and letters revealing outbursts of “depression”, “despair” and “loneliness”. I am reminded of a suggestion raised after the 2016 elections in the United States, in an attempt to explain Trump’s surprising victory, that the Democrats had taken Trump’s words literally but not seriously, while his supporters tool them seriously but not literally. Segev, too, shows a tendency to adopt an excessively literal approach when interpreting Ben-Gurion’s written remarks. Every time he complained of “existential despair”, he was not necessarily implying that he was utterly hopeless, but rather sought to convey, in an exaggerated manner, a mood of disappointment.

Segev’s Ben-Gurion is a man who neglected his wife and three children and pursued affairs with more than a few women. In some cases the author provides detailed descriptions of the leader’s sexual performances.

While no-one could claim that this is not interesting, at times the anecdotes come at the expense of a more profound approach to the texts written by the “Old Man”, as Ben-Gurion was known from the 1940s onwards. By way of example, Segev asserts that Ben-Gurion’s “socialism” was merely an instrument for serving the national interest (180). This is true enough, but until the 1930s, at least, Ben-Gurion penned several serious articles explaining his understanding of the meaning of Socialism. He even claimed that it was impossible to be a Zionist without being a Socialist, since in this case the private interest would outweigh the collective one. Segev would have done well to attempt to analyze Ben-Gurion’s writings as well as his practice, which was indeed less Socialist, not least due to historical circumstances beyond his control.

In contrast to Ben-Gurion’s intellectual interest in such fields as Greek philosophy, Buddhism and Spinoza, Segev exposes his profound alienation from Arab culture, in which he took no interest. Ben-Gurion’s attitude to the Arabs can also be seen in his approach toward the Jews from the Muslim countries. He spoke frequently of the need for equality between all Jews, and was appalled by the treatment of Blacks in the United States and by the caste system in India, which he encountered when he visited the country for the first time. At the same time, however, he referred to the Mizrahim as “a primitive community” (621) and demanded that they abandon the traditions they had brought with them to Israel. Ironically enough, the truth is that many Ashkenazim came to Israel from remote towns in Poland and Russia, while many Mizrahim came from cities such as Baghdad, Cairo and Casablanca that were progressive by the standards of the day.

The most interesting revelation in the book is that shortly after the United Nations decided in November 1947 to approve the establishment of a Jewish state, Ben-Gurion was seized by terror at the fate that might await the state. He discretely asked the British to extend their mandate over the country by an additional five years. This was not the only time that Ben-Gurion adopted surprising and contradictory courses of action. Indeed, he commented himself that what made him a great leader was “his willingness to pay the price of victory”, including the price in blood (296). However, Segev’s book suggests that the secret of Ben-Gurion’s strength was due largely to his open mind and his willingness to consider any original idea. In some cases, the ideas concerned were bizarre, such as the proposal to establish an Israeli colony in Equatorial Guinea, or the suggestion that the conflict might be resolved by converting all the Palestinians to Judaism (641). Yet in some cases, plans that initially seemed absurd ultimately proved successful – as in the example of the establishment of a Jewish state after an interlude of 2000 years.