

## WHO CENSORED THE SIX-DAY WAR?

<http://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2015/07/who-censored-the-six-day-war/>

**A splashy new documentary promises to expose the Israeli military's censorship of atrocities committed in the 1967 war. What it exposes is its creators' agenda.**

July 6, 2015 | Martin Kramer

On January 26 of this year, the *New York Times* ran a prominent article by its Jerusalem correspondent Jodi Rudoren about a new Israeli documentary then premiering at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah. According to Rudoren's lengthy [report](#), the film, *Censored Voices*, was an attention-grabbing exposé about the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, also known as the Six-Day War, as told in conversations with soldiers conducted immediately after the war itself.



*An Israeli tank in the Six-Day War.* Paul Schutzer/The LIFE Premium Collection/Getty Images.

Since its Sundance debut, the \$1 million Israeli-German co-production has been screened at festivals in Berlin, Florence, Geneva, Madrid, Toronto, Warsaw, and Zagreb. Its Israeli coming-out party took place at the Docaviv documentary film festival in Tel Aviv (where I saw it), and it is now showing in the country's theaters, generating reviews and feature articles in the major daily newspapers. An Israeli documentary channel will televise the film in August. Rights have been sold in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and across continental Europe, and the film's sales agent will release it in Britain in the fall. An American distributor has purchased U.S. rights, and is planning a theatrical run later this year.

*Censored Voices* is likely to make as big a splash as *The Gatekeepers*, the 2012

documentary featuring six former heads of Israel's secret-service agency—if not a bigger splash. And for the same reason: it stars Israelis indicting their own country for falling short of high standards in the conduct of war. And the film encourages the conclusion that the allegations about misconduct *must be* true, because the Israeli authorities censored the original interviews—in fact, they consigned fully 70 percent of them to oblivion.

Viewers, beware.

## I. Self-Questioning in the Wake of '67

First, the background.

Shortly after the June 1967 war, a book entitled *Siaḥ Loḥamim* (“Soldiers’ Talk”) appeared. It consisted of transcripts of tape-recorded discussions and interviews involving some 140 officers and soldiers, all kibbutz members. The initiators of these heart-to-hearts were themselves young kibbutznik intellectuals, most notably the educator Avraham Shapira and the then-rising young writer Amos Oz. (The latter is one of the aging stars of *Censored Voices*: a photo of him posed before a tape recorder, listening to his own testimony, was spread over three columns in the *New York Times*.)



*Amos Oz listens to testimony he gave after the Six-Day War, in which he fought. Photo by Avner Shahaf.*

In the midst of the country's widespread jubilation at its lightning victory

over the combined forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, the tape recorders had captured the dissenting voices of these fighters. They spoke of their gut-wrenching fear of combat, the cheapening of life in war, their revulsion at killing, and their unexpected feelings of identification with the Arab enemy. While most of the kibbutzniks saw the war as justified, some expressed doubts about the supposed sanctity of the conquered land, even of Jerusalem, and disgust at the incipient Israeli occupation. Hovering over it all was the Holocaust—primarily fear of its reenactment by Arabs against Israel's Jews but also distress over seeming parallels between some of Israel's actions and those of the Nazis in World War II.

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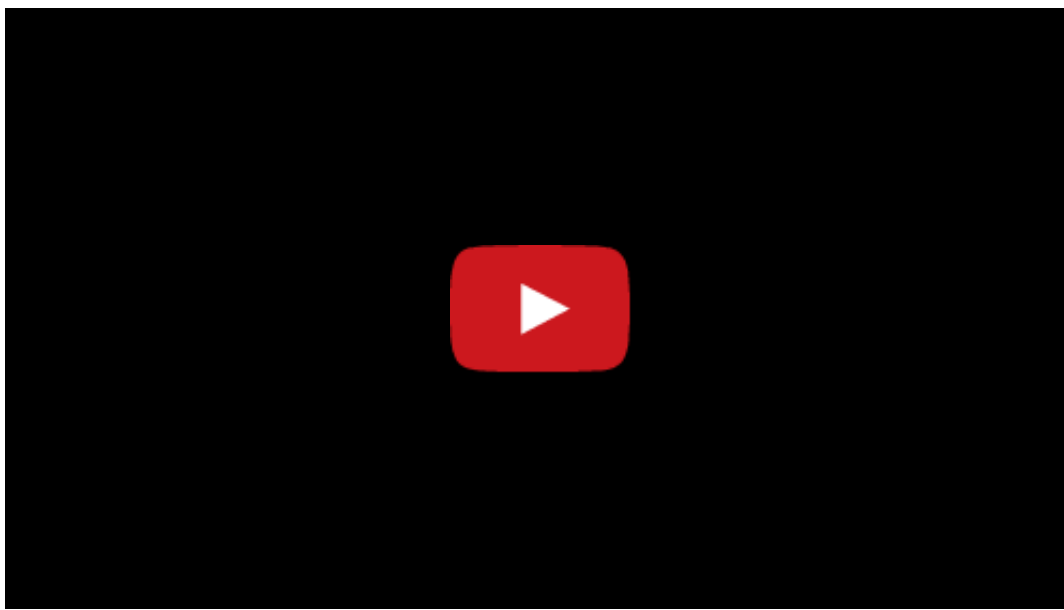
The book struck a chord: *Soldiers' Talk* was a phenomenal success, selling some 100,000 copies in Israel, and its kibbutznik editors and participants became minor celebrities, frequently appearing on the lecture circuit and in the media. Its fame also spread abroad: in the words of Elie Wiesel, this was "a very great book, very great," thanks to "its integrity, its candor. No sleights of hand, no masks, no games. This is the truth, this is how it was." Eventually the book was translated into a half-dozen languages, most notably in an abridged English version under the title *The Seventh Day: Soldiers' Talk About the Six-Day War*. The dialogues even provided fodder for a play performed in New York.

Over the decades, as war followed war, *Soldiers' Talk* was forgotten, or remembered only vaguely as the prototype of a genre mocked by both left and right and known pejoratively as "shooting and crying." Most young Israelis today have never heard of it.

But they will have by now, and so will many others. A few years ago, Mor Loushy, an Israeli filmmaker at the start of her career, learned about the book in graduate school. Upon realizing that it drew on recorded conversations, she set out to find the original reel-to-reel tapes. According to Rudoren's report in the *Times*, she then "cajoled" Avraham Shapira, the "aging kibbutznik and philosophy professor" who had been chief editor of *Soldiers' Talk*, "to share the original audiotaped interviews that he had denied to legions of journalists and historians." Loushy "spent eight months listening to 200 hours of the tapes," identifying the voices and tracking down the former soldiers, now men on the cusp of old age.

In the finished film, the technique employed by Loushy to bring tapes and

veterans together is arresting. The veterans are shown pensively listening to their own voices, recorded nearly a half-century ago, but they aren't asked to reflect in retrospect, and there are no experts to fill in gaps. The effect is thus to transport the viewer back in time to 1967, and to create a sensation of eavesdropping on intimate confessions. The play-back of the tapes is overlaid at intervals with footage from 1967, selected to juxtapose the euphoria of victory against the dark side of the war. All of these techniques are on display in the movie's trailer.



The most dramatic moments in the film come when soldiers testify to witnessing or perpetrating acts of brutality tantamount to war crimes. One soldier admits to lining people up and finishing them off: "It's as though we murdered them. Practically, it's war, and every civilian and every person is your enemy." Another: "I knew I had to carry out orders. People were spotted up on the rooftops, I didn't think at all whether they were civilians or not civilians, whether it was necessary to kill them or not. Everyone we see, we kill." Another: "The next day we turned over the last 50 prisoners and at night we killed about 50 guys. The paratroopers let them bury them all and then an officer came up and finished off the rest of the prisoners, quickly, no problems."

Soldiers also tell of expulsions: "We were ordered to carry out what was called evacuation of the inhabitants. You take this Arab, rooted in his village, and turn him into a refugee, just expel him from there, and not just one or two or three. When you see a whole village go, like sheep, wherever they're taken, and there is no sign of resistance, you realize what Holocaust means."

The bottom line, for one [reviewer](#), is that the 1967 war emerges

not as an Israeli victory against annihilation at the hands of surrounding Arab countries, but as a nation's questionable transformation from a defensive David to a Goliath who exiled and murdered Arab civilians to the bewilderment of its own troops.

Here, then, is the presumed reality of the 1967 war as experienced by those who fought in it. But did we not already know much if not all of this from *Soldiers' Talk* itself? And if not, why not?

Enter now the promotional [claim](#) made by Loushy for her movie—and for her movie's urgent timeliness. "The Israeli army," she writes, "censored the recordings, allowing only a fragment of the conversations to be published" in the book. And [because](#) "the Israeli state had censored these conversations, so it also tells the story of fear. We have, as a society, silenced and denied other voices." This being the case, she [predicts](#) that "the reemergence of those censored voices in Israeli society will undoubtedly stir a great storm," and [declares](#) the special relevance of her film to "the present Israeli reality of our right-wing government still attempting to silence alternative voices."

The central claim of *Censored Voices* is that the Israeli military "brutally" suppressed the soldiers' original conversations. Is it true?

Loushy even puts a figure on the extent of the alleged suppression. Although the editors had "wanted to publish [these conversations] as a book," she has been [quoted](#) as saying, "the Israeli censorship censored 70 percent of what they wanted to publish." In this claim, Shapira himself has backed her up. In a May 30, 2015 report on Israel's Channel 2, he appears with an open file before him. "Here on my desk is a small portion of 200 hours of transcribed conversations. We made a submission to the censor as was customary and required by law. The material was returned to us with approximately 70 percent of it deleted, completely deleted."

This 70-percent figure has popped up regularly in news items and reviews, duly making an [appearance](#) in the American Jewish weeklies *Forward* and *Jewish Journal*: "The Israeli government censored 70 percent of the material. Shapira published the remaining 30 percent in his book." And the figure has been [picked up](#) by the *Economist*: "70 percent of the interviews were censored at the time by the army, anxious that the soldiers' stories of murdering prisoners, shooting civilians, and deporting Palestinian villagers should not cast a shadow over the glorious victory." The film itself opens with the on-screen assertion that the military allowed only 30 percent of the recordings to be published: the only independent factual claim made in *Censored Voices*.

Is it true? As I watched *Censored Voices* gain momentum, something about its back story seemed to me implausible, and on closer examination my suspicions grew. So I followed them. It turns out that the history of *Soldiers' Talk* is far from a simple tale of scandalous state censorship. Rather, there is compelling reason to doubt whether the military censor “brutally” (Loushy’s term) censored the conversations, or censored them much at all.

If that is so, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows, then the promotional hype surrounding *Censored Voices* is a deception. And if *that* is so, it casts into doubt the good faith of the filmmakers. After all, *Censored Voices*, like *Soldiers' Talk*, is itself a product of careful selection. Its director asks us to trust her to have extracted those materials that are both factually sound and broadly representative of the Six-Day War.

Such trust would be sorely misplaced.

## **II. Censorship, or Self-Censorship?**

Any inquiry into the editorial history of *Soldiers' Talk* leads quickly to the work of Alon Gan, a third-generation kibbutznik who today teaches history at the Kibbutzim College of Education. In 2003, Gan completed a Tel Aviv University doctoral thesis on *Soldiers' Talk* with the active assistance of Avraham Shapira himself. According to Gan, Shapira gave him access to the original tapes and transcripts. Here is how a 2005 kibbutz newspaper describes that access:

[Shapira] opened his private archive to Alon [Gan], his outstanding student, and revealed to him the raw material: tens of audio tapes kept at Yad Tabenkin [the kibbutz movement’s archives] and hundreds of pages of transcripts that had turned yellow in his home at [Kibbutz] Yizrael, for preparation of Alon’s doctoral thesis.

It was Gan who first discovered and documented the discrepancies between the taped conversations and the first edition of *Soldiers' Talk*. Of course, much of the raw material was bound to be cut anyway. The conversations had produced 200 hours of tape. As one of the project’s interviewers would later recall, “most of the shelved tapes didn’t make the collection for trivial editorial reasons: narrowness of perspective, space limitations, avoiding endless repetitions. Heart-to-heart conversations took precedence over



conversations whose participants had difficulty opening up.” “We had a lot of material,” said one of the editors, “and just a small part of it went into the book.”

Clearly, however, other editorial principles operated as well. Discarded in particular was material that didn’t suit the editors’ political agenda. Shapira’s interviewers, for example, had gone to Merkaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem in the hope of finding religious soldiers troubled by the same doubts that afflicted the secular kibbutzniks. That five-hour conversation included soldiers who would later become some of the leading lights of the settler movement. Amram Hayisraeli, one of the kibbutzniks who participated in this dialogue, would later [call](#) it “perhaps the most important conversation” in the project. But when Amos Oz read the transcript, he broke into a rage: not one of the six religious soldiers “understood the pain, the moral problem, or that there was any problem at all.” Oz denounced them as “crude, smug, and arrogant,” and “as quite simply, inhuman.”

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Shapira for his part opted to exclude the religious soldiers altogether, and then to dissimulate about it: “I decided that the conversations wouldn’t be included. . . . I didn’t reveal the real reasons to others, and I rationalized it by citing ‘technical reasons.’”

But the editors exercised self-censorship on their own side of the political spectrum, too. For instance: some soldiers had expressed either very radical leftist views or mentioned alleged atrocities against Arab civilians and POWs. In the published text, these references had been either eliminated or tucked under a heavy blanket of euphemism. As Gan’s dissertation reveals in some detail, the editors specifically tweaked and softened passages alleging actions that could be read as contradictory to the Israeli ideal of “purity of arms” or even as war crimes.

In brief, Shapira and his team carefully massaged the material that would enter the published text. Although Gan speculates that in any case “the external censor would not have permitted the editors to publish” certain materials,

it can’t be denied that the editors [themselves] created a picture that emphasized the positive side and the moral dimension in the soldiers’ conduct, and downplayed these descriptions. . . . Different editing of the testimony would have presented the image of some of the soldiers and officers in a different light (or,

more precisely, darkness).

“Of course there was censorship,” Gan concludes, “most of it by the editors themselves, whether for security reasons, or for societal-public reasons, or out of a sense of responsibility to the interviewees.” Above all, in Gan’s view, what motivated Shapira and his colleagues to make the cuts was

a sense of great public responsibility. It was obvious to them that some of the testimony was social dynamite, which should not be published in order not to divert attention from the general atmosphere that the editors wanted to make vivid to the reader.

### **III. 70 Percent**

What happened next? As Gan documents, the “first edit, undertaken by Avraham Shapira [and] done without consideration for external censorship” was printed privately for circulation in kibbutzim. Clearly marked “internal, not for sale,” and issued between drab covers in October 1967, it didn’t trigger the need for approval by the censor.

But copies soon circulated beyond the kibbutzim, and the editors also sent copies to newsmen and writers. Mentions of the conversations and even excerpts from them began to appear in the press. As interest grew, the editors decided to pursue commercial publication—a step requiring submission of the private edition to the chief military censor, Col. Walter (Avner) Bar-On. There the project became stuck: according to Gan, “the chief censor proposed to delete nearly every politically loaded sentence, every sentence describing moral dilemmas such as looting, treatment of prisoners, refugees, etc.”

Had the process ended there, *Soldiers’ Talk* would have been gutted. But it didn’t end there. In January 1968, the editors contacted the army’s chief education officer, Col. Mordechai (“Morele”) Bar-On (no relation to Walter/Avner Bar-On), and pleaded for his intervention. Impressed by the project, he took it under his wing, asking the chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Yitzhak Rabin, for permission to assume responsibility for all content that didn’t expose military secrets. Rabin agreed, and Mordechai Bar-On became instrumental in seeing the project through censorship.

What deletions did the censor demand? In Shapira’s possession, there is a copy of the private edition marked with the many excisions and changes



proposed by Walter Bar-On (in green) and the fewer ones suggested by Mordechai Bar-On (in blue). Together these would have made very substantial alterations to an already diluted text, constituting wholesale state censorship. Shapira and Oz rejected the proposed changes *in toto*; Oz was particularly vehement. A negotiation ensued. "I sat with Mordechai Bar-On," Shapira said in a recent interview, "and together we went over the deletions of the censor, and what we could restore, we restored."

The outcome? Gan saw the copy with the censors' markings, and discovered that almost everything had been restored:

When one compares the public edition with the proposed changes of the censor [Walter Bar-On] and the proposals of Mordechai Bar-On, with the exception of a few changes, it is apparent that the stubbornness of the initiators of the collection to stick, almost exactly, to the first [private] edition, paid off. Mordechai Bar-On apparently accepted [the editors'] arguments and succeeded in persuading Walter Bar-On to agree to them.

The public edition, released in May 1968, carried the caveat that "minor alterations have been made" upon the editors' judgment; Gan finds the alterations "indeed 'minor.'" His unequivocal conclusion:

Aside from minor deletions, the public edition was largely if not entirely identical to the private edition. . . . On the basis of this evidence, it is apparent that the role of external censorship was small, in comparison to the censorship imposed by the initiators of the collection before the censor's intervention.

If this is true, it is doubtful that either the chief censor or Mordechai Bar-On ever saw or heard any of the more disturbing allegations made by soldiers in Loushy's film, all of which had been excised in advance by the editors in preparation of the private edition. Gan also quotes remarks to the same effect made in 1968 by the novelist and educator Yariv Ben-Aharon, one of the editors:

We imposed a severe censorship, we reworked and shortened and cut a lot, and also shelved. The official censorship deleted very little. It's obvious that due to our censorship, there are some flaws in the book, and there are several misses. There are people who speak about killing in general, and the details aren't in the book. This leaves the impression of self-righteousness.

In sum, the claim made by Loushy (and belatedly by Shapira) about massive

state censorship of *Soldiers' Talk* is directly contradicted by Gan's in-depth study of the editorial history of the book. It is also directly contradicted by Yariv Ben-Aharon. And the accusation of "brutal" state censorship is similarly contradicted by Mordechai Bar-On, who was intimately involved in steering the text past the censor.

I queried Mordechai Bar-On, the army's chief education officer at the time, about the claim that the censor had nixed 70 percent of the material. He scoffed: "Maybe two or three percent."

Bar-On, later one of the founders of Peace Now, is still active at eighty-six and takes some pride in the fact that he managed to get *Soldiers' Talk* through military censorship with few changes. "I became the spokesperson for the book [in the army]," he recently recalled. "Here and there I softened some sentence, but overall, not much." "I don't remember today what we weeded from the text," he has written in his recent autobiography, *Child of the Previous Century*: "not much, and anyway, they were things that the editors understood should be downplayed or softened." When I asked him about the claim that the censor had nixed 70 percent of the material, he scoffed: "Maybe two or three percent."

Mor Loushy never consulted Bar-On, who hadn't even heard of *Censored Voices* when I asked him about it a few weeks after it premiered in Israel.

#### **IV. Making Headlines**

The scandal of official censorship, especially by the state of Israel, is headline-making; stringent self-censorship by a kibbutznik editor isn't. That Loushy's film benefits from her narrative of "brutal" censorship goes without saying, and that narrative has been deployed relentlessly in the promotion of *Censored Voices*.

But why has Shapira himself contributed to it? Some context is provided by earlier charges and counter-charges in the wake of Gan's research.

Gan's revelations, appearing as they did in an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, didn't draw attention in 2003. But that changed two years later when the Israeli journalist and historian Tom Segev devoted several pages to *Soldiers' Talk* in his book *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East* (pages 442–47 in the English edition). Segev, relying entirely on Gan's dissertation, accused Shapira and his team of

deliberate doctoring. “Parts of the transcripts were altered,” he wrote, “in a few cases to the point of distortion, before the book went to press, in order to suit the words to the image of innocent young soldiers, humanists in distress. . . . The editors were careful to avoid distancing the speakers from the national consensus—rather, they did just the opposite, placing them at its forefront and center.”

In a subsequent interview, Segev went further: “It’s amazing how thoroughly this thing was edited, censored, inauthentic. There was a confluence of interests between society, which needed an image like this, and the kibbutz, which needed an image like this. They invented this thing.” Benny Morris [echoed](#) the charge in a review of Segev’s book: “The original transcripts were altered and censored by the editors . . . [who] managed to create a ‘candid,’ moving, liberal antiwar text that bore only a partial resemblance to what was actually said in the original conversations.”

Suddenly the *editors*, and above all Avraham Shapira, stood publicly accused of tampering with the soldiers’ words in order to keep them within acceptable bounds. Shapira, who had been celebrated for initiating *Soldiers’ Talk*, now found himself in the dock for bowdlerizing it. “What Tom Segev attributes to me in his book and interview,” he replied, “is very hurtful, not only to the credibility of a central area of my work since 1960, but to my own human character.” For his part, Gan, on whose dissertation Segev had relied, recoiled at this use of his work: “To attribute to [Shapira] manipulation, distortion, and deliberate myth-making is unfair and incorrect. . . . Segev made claims, in my name, that I didn’t intend.”

Whether Shapira’s editing robbed *Soldiers’ Talk* of its integrity is debatable. But one thing is certain: faced with this criticism, he didn’t offer the excuse of military censorship. To the contrary, he insisted: “I take upon myself full and total responsibility for the editing of *Soldiers’ Talk* in its book form—internal responsibility toward all of the participants, and public responsibility.”

“I take upon myself full and total responsibility for the editing of *Soldiers’ Talk* in its book form,” Shapira insisted in 2005. Now he’s backtracking.

Shapira nonetheless learned his lesson. By allowing Gan to compare the book with the original transcripts, he had exposed himself to withering criticism, mostly from Israel’s revisionist school of “new historians.” In that light, it isn’t hard to understand why he later cold-shouldered other journalists and historians anxious to see the original transcripts. As [reported](#) by Loushy, “A lot of major news outlets from Israel tried to take [the

material] from [Shapira] and so did foreign journalists. He never agreed to give it to anyone.” And no wonder: their aim would have been to expose still more gaps between what was said and what was published.

Why, then, did he give that access to Loushy, a recent film graduate with only one earlier production to her name, and a person no less eager to uncover still more gaps? Loushy attributes it to personal chemistry:

I started chasing after him and at first he didn’t answer my calls. Finally I went to a lecture that he gave. Immediately he told me, “OK, come to my kibbutz.” From the first moment we met, there was something there. I don’t know how but he believed in me and we started this amazing journey together.

This is all very cinematic: the wizened old guru impulsively yields to the importunities of an eager young acolyte, and grants her unconditional access to his locked treasure chest of secrets. Perhaps it’s true. Yet Loushy, who desperately needed Shapira’s cooperation to make her movie, was evidently prepared to do something today that Alon Gan, in a supervised and refereed Ph.D. dissertation, could never have done in 2003: absolve Shapira of any blame for *self*-censoring the book.

Did Shapira suggest this to her? Was it her idea? Whatever the precise origins of the claim of a “brutal” 70-percent official censorship, it conveniently lifted the stigma from Shapira. (“Yes, there was censorship,” he has said in a new interview, “and it wasn’t by us.”) It also conferred on Loushy’s “scoop” the strong whiff of scandal that attends to official cover-ups. Israel’s soldiers not only committed crimes, but Israel’s military censor then tried to conceal them. State censorship of atrocity stories can be read as a de-facto admission of their veracity.

## **V. The Trouble with War Stories**

What, then, of the stories told by the soldiers? It would be naive to assume that Israeli soldiers were incapable of committing any of the acts they describe in the film. Expulsions and killings of civilians and even prisoners had precedents in 1948 and 1956. But it would be just as naive to assume that the events unfolded as the soldiers described them.

This is due to the usual trouble with war stories—they mutate and grow in the telling. That isn’t a cliché. A body of research, mostly in relation to

veterans' claims of post-traumatic stress disorder, has analyzed and quantified the problem. One influential study established that nearly 40 percent of Vietnam veterans who claimed to have experienced combat-related stress hadn't had combat exposure in the first place. They were also the ones who more commonly described having witnessed or committed battlefield atrocities. Sir Simon Wessely, the prominent psychiatrist, has [summarized](#) the conclusion this way: "War stories change according to who is doing the telling, who is doing the listening, and why the story is being told now." If one's view is that Israeli soldiers are no more virtuous than other soldiers, one must accept that their testimonies are no more reliable, either.

The historian's solution is to take soldiers' accounts as a point of departure, and then cross-reference them with other sources. The problem with the concept of *Soldiers' Talk* is that it wasn't meant to assemble the evidence that would make this possible. Amos Oz, himself a writer of fiction, set the tone for the project from the beginning: talk not about what you did during the war, he instructed participants, but about what you experienced. "The key word here," Oz recently reminisced, "is what you felt." *Soldiers' Talk* wasn't a project to uncover and document war crimes. It was about eliciting the emotions of the soldiers, in a way more consistent with internal group therapy than with investigation. As a result, the organizers made no effort to collect and corroborate details about specific events, and soldiers gave no names, places, or dates.

*Soldiers' Talk* was never about uncovering and documenting war crimes; it was about eliciting the soldiers' emotions. As a result, the organizers made no effort to collect and corroborate details about specific events.

Not only does *Censored Voices* make no attempt to fill in the missing details. It further obfuscates the picture. Footage is shown to illustrate some of the claims—bodies of enemy soldiers strewn along the road, refugees trudging with their possessions on their backs—but it isn't actual footage of the scenes described by the speaking soldiers, and it bears no identifying captions. We hear voices making confessions or allegations, but we don't know who is speaking, and the soldiers are identified by name only at the end. ("For the most part," [notes](#) one American reviewer, "the men are treated as interchangeable.") In these circumstances, the veracity of any individual allegation is difficult if not impossible to establish.

But let us assume for argument's sake that the actions described in *Censored Voices* took place as described. Let us even assume that the instances Loushy

did not include—she claims there are dozens more—have some grain of truth in them. Would this warrant a revision of the way Israel and the world see the 1967 war? Hardly.

Expulsions of Palestinian Arabs? A few instances (above all, villages in the Latrun salient) are well-attested, but no expulsion affected more than a few thousand people, and some of those expelled were allowed to return (most notably, to Qalqiliya). A much larger number, 200,000, left the West Bank of Jordan for the East Bank. A UN special representative who visited in July 1967 said in a report that he had “received no specific reports indicating that persons had been physically forced to cross to the East Bank.” After mentioning Israel’s claims that it had not “encouraged” their departure, and Arab allegations of brutality and intimidation, the report singled out “the inevitable impact upon a frightened civilian population of hostilities and military occupation as such, particularly when no measures of reassurance are taken.” In short, they fled.

When all was said and done, the 1967 war did not result in the massive displacement of Palestinian Arabs that characterized the war of 1948. That earlier war had emptied entire Arab cities: Jaffa, Lydda, Ramla. The 1967 war emptied none. Instead, it ended with Israel in occupation of solidly Palestinian Arab territories. *Censored Voices* conveys the impression that 1967 had an impact on the Palestinians similar to 1948, when in fact its character and consequences could not have been more different.

Killings of prisoners and surrendering or fleeing enemy soldiers? These happened, and we can infer it from Yeshayahu Gavish, who was head of Israel’s Southern Command in 1967. In a debriefing after the war, he referred to the confusion regarding Egyptian prisoners:

The blame falls on me, not on the staff. It is true that we didn’t know what to do with the prisoners. . . . Our conflict in this war was to destroy the enemy—that was the order, and it is pretty stupid to put in the same sentence, “destroy the enemy” and “take prisoners.” It wasn’t resolved. It began in the first stage, and later we had to deal with the prisoners, and it became clear that destroying the enemy had a certain meaning, with a huge percentage of them wandering around in the field.

But the confusion didn’t last. Israel ultimately took 6,000 Egyptian prisoners, and thousands more were sent on their way to the Suez Canal (where, according to some Israeli witnesses, *Egyptian* forces initially fired on them for retreating). After the war, Israel collected Egyptian stragglers from all over Sinai and sent them home. The International Committee of the Red

Cross (ICRC) [reported](#) this operation in July 1967:

A large number of Egyptian soldiers were in dire straits in the Sinai Desert after the cease-fire. The ICRC delegates were active in the rescue operations, responsibility for which was assumed first and foremost by the Israeli authorities. These operations were made difficult by the fact that the territory was enormous and that many of the soldiers were widely dispersed. They had often to be sought by helicopter, sometimes one by one, and supplies had to be taken to them by tank-lorries. Some 12,000 troops were enabled to return to their home country. The conveyance of isolated troops towards the eastern bank of the Suez Canal and then to the other side was continued until, by the end of June, the operation was nearing completion.



*Captured Egyptian soldiers are transported by an Israeli armored convoy to a prisoner of war camp in 1967. Rolls Press/Popperfoto/Getty Images.*

“I am not saying there were no aberrations,” [allowed](#) then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, during an earlier round of claims about prisoners killed in the 1967 war. But “these events were real exceptions.” Prominent Israeli chroniclers of the war have likewise referred to these as “isolated incidents of Israeli abuses” ([Michael Oren](#)) and “isolated acts of abuse” ([Yossi Klein Halevi](#)). If this is true, then the high-resolution focus on such cases in *Censored Voices* is wildly disproportionate. “There were ugly things,” said one of the original interviewees upon viewing the film, “but to turn them into such a severe situation, it’s exaggerated. . . . Suddenly, in the



eyes of my grandson, I will seem like someone who kills prisoners and expels people. It's not true."

Do such instances, however many they may be, negate or detract from the Israeli narrative of the necessity and justice of the war? Or are they simply evidence that even necessary and just wars aren't ever waged entirely within the rules? The answer of *Censored Voices* to this question is not all that different from the answer given by Breaking the Silence, an Israeli NGO that collects and disseminates testimony of unnamed Israeli soldiers who claim to have witnessed war crimes. Both seize upon events that may be isolated occurrences and isolate them still further, ripping them from their broader context and waving them like bloodied sheets. If Israel cannot wage perfect war, the premise goes, it must not wage war at all, even in its own defense.

Films like *Censored Voices* and organizations like Breaking the Silence seize upon isolated events, rip them from their context, and wave them like bloodied sheets.

The methodology of *Censored Voices* is even more selective than that of Israel-bashing NGOs. Loushy chose events based on the additional criterion of entertainment value. Danny Sivan, the film's producer (and Loushy's partner) has admitted that they didn't want "stories that just transmit information, but that do something to you in the gut, into order to create an emotional cinematic experience and not just an informative document."

Admittedly, a movie theater isn't the ideal setting for forensic analysis of something so complex as a fast-moving, three-front war that changed Israel and the Middle East. A film is not a book or a Ph.D. dissertation. The problem is that, for many of its viewers, *Censored Voices* is likely to be their only encounter with the 1967 war. How many of them are even capable of setting what they have watched in context? For that matter, how many reviewers are so capable? Given the widespread ignorance of Israel's history, even among Israelis, the number is distressingly small.

Of course, this perfectly suits Israel's critics at home and abroad. After almost 50 years of "occupation," they are so embittered that they will automatically retail the worst about Israel's conduct in 1967 without so much as a caveat. If the occupation is an ongoing sin, then it must have been conceived in original sin. Not only does *Censored Voices* benefit from this suspension of critical judgment. It depends on it.

## **VI. Whither Public Responsibility?**

An Israeli columnist, reacting to the film, has [written](#) that Loushy's "naiveté exceeds that of a flower child from the 1960s."

Far from it. Every Israeli who hopes to earn fame by making documentaries knows there is a persistent demand for films exposing Israel's misdeeds, especially if they are attested by Israelis themselves. And nothing is so marketable as a story exposing crimes covered up by the state itself. The formula is irresistible to film-festival directors, high-brow European television channels, and the *New York Times*. Loushy, a graduate of Israel's best-known film school, aimed her film with manipulative precision. Her savvy grasp of the market explains her single-minded selection of content and, more importantly, her steady propagation of the "brutal" censorship meme, seemingly made more credible by giving it a number.

In fact, as I have shown, the claim *detracts* from the credibility of the film. The voices in *Censored Voices* weren't censored, they were heavily redacted, and by the very man, Avraham Shapira, whom Mor Loushy warmly embraced on the stage at the Tel Aviv premiere. "If those voices had been published in 1967," Loushy told the *New York Times*, "maybe our reality here would be different." That's an open question. But she has deliberately deflected her complaint onto the wrong party.

Once upon a time, Israel's intellectual elites still felt enough public responsibility to restrain themselves. Now their successors are busy elves in a cottage industry catering to the world's critics of their country.

Behind this deception lurks the really interesting back story of *Soldiers' Talk*. Muki Tzur, another of the book's editors, has recalled that in 1967, "the country still had the aspect of an underground society that kept its secrets, believing in the value of self-censorship." Once upon a time, Israel's intellectual elites, even on the left, still felt enough public responsibility to restrain themselves. Now their successors are busy elves in a cottage industry catering to the world's critics of Israel—doubters, defamers, delegitimizers. It's not only that they broadcast unsubstantiated claims and strip away all context. They also go on to spew bogus accusations of "silencing" and "censoring"—to create the impression that the state of Israel is engaged in the massive cover-up of crimes.

*Censored Voices*, beginning with its title, fabricates such an accusation right out of the gate. Its theatrical rollout in the United States will qualify it to be considered for an Oscar nomination in the documentary feature category.

Audiences, on guard. Academy, beware.

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***A PDF version of this essay containing links to Hebrew sources not linked to above is available [here](#).***

# WAR IS . . .

<http://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2015/07/war-is/>

## **How do charges of Israeli crimes in the Six-Day War match up with similar charges against American forces in other wars?**

July 13, 2015 | Max Boot

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**This is a response to *Who Censored the Six-Day War?*, originally published in *Mosaic* in July 2015**

Martin Kramer has performed a valuable public service by investigating the origins of the film *Censored Voices* and its claims of Israeli soldiers committing war crimes during the Six-Day War. Beyond the specifics of this particular documentary and that particular conflict, his article, “Who Censored the Six-Day War?,” raises larger issues relating to actual



*American troops approaching Omaha Beach, during the Invasion of Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Wikipedia.*

or imaginary war crimes committed by the armed forces of liberal democracies, whether Israeli or American, British or French.

Generally, such accusations are publicly aired—often in exaggerated form—during controversial or unpopular conflicts and ignored during more popular ones. There is a particular tendency for allegations of misconduct to seize the spotlight in guerrilla wars where troops have trouble distinguishing combatants from civilians. The circumstances under which troops fight, rather than what they actually do, thus prove more important in determining whether or not “war crimes” become a subject of public controversy.

The history of the U.S. armed forces provides a good case in point. In 1899, the United States was drawn into an unpopular conflict in the Philippines as an outgrowth of the Spanish-American war. The treaty ending that war had ceded the Philippines to American sovereignty; before long, American troops were fighting Philippine “*insurrectos*” under Emilio Aguinaldo who had no desire to trade a Spanish king for an American president. As the conflict dragged on, it grew more unpopular. Vocal anti-imperialists like Mark Twain seized on news that American forces were torturing and killing suspected *insurrectos* to denounce the entire conflict. Twain quipped that the Stars and Stripes should be redesigned with “the white stripes painted black and stars replaced by the skull and crossbones.”

In 1902, the Senate got into the act by convening a committee of investigation, and the Army was forced to hold courts-martial to try the most egregious offenders. One major case involved actions on the island of Samar where, following the massacre of an infantry company by *insurrectos* disguised as peaceful peons, Brigadier General “Hell-Roaring” Jake Smith ordered his subordinates “to kill and burn,” slaughtering anyone over the age of ten. Although his orders were not carried out, one Marine officer did summarily execute ten Filipino porters on suspicion of treachery. In the resulting trial, which became a *cause célèbre*, “Hell-Roaring Jake” was convicted of “conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline” and forced into retirement.

By contrast, atrocities that are committed in popular wars tend to be ignored. During World War II, for example, it became common for American troops in the Pacific theater to kill the few Japanese soldiers who tried to surrender and to shoot Japanese sailors trying to escape sinking ships. This was seen as just retaliation for the mistreatment of American POWs in Japanese hands—mistreatment and suffering recently dramatized by the book and movie *Unbroken*.

Even in the European theater, where the Germans generally adhered to the Geneva Convention in their treatment of British and American (if not Soviet) POWs, it was not uncommon for GIs to kill German soldiers trying to surrender. After 80 American POWs were murdered in German captivity in 1944, at least one American general issued explicit orders that SS troops were not to be taken prisoner but rather to be shot on sight. The U.S. troops who liberated the Dachau death camp in 1945 were so horrified by what they found that they summarily executed at least 500 German guards. An internal investigation into this incident could have led to a court-martial for the officers responsible had not General George S. Patton dismissed the charges.

At the time, because of wartime censorship and the even more pervasive self-censorship among correspondents who were supportive of the war effort, there was little awareness among American civilians that their soldiers might not be playing by Marquess of Queensbury rules. There was greater awareness of the “strategic bombing” being carried out by the U.S. Army Air Forces, but no real debate about the fact that, in the process of destroying urban areas, B-17s, B-24s, and B-29s were killing hundreds of thousands of German and Japanese civilians. The prevailing attitude was that the Axis powers had started the war and deserved whatever was coming to them.

Predictably, the war in Vietnam, which became the most unpopular conflict in American history, drew more attention to the misconduct of American soldiers. The most famous and horrifying case of abuse occurred in 1968 at My Lai, where troops of the Americal division slaughtered 347 unarmed civilians. Opponents of the war claimed that My Lai was no aberration but rather the norm. To make their case, antiwar veterans sought to document such abuses in the three-day “Winter Soldier Investigation” of 1971. At a subsequent Senate hearing, John Kerry, one of the leaders of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, testified that his fellow vets

had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam.

Yet few of these claims could be documented. As the Vietnam veteran Scott Swett subsequently wrote:

The Army’s Criminal Investigative Division (CID) had opened cases for 43 [WSI](#) [Winter Soldier Investigation] “witnesses” whose claims, if true, would qualify as crimes. An additional 25 Army WSI participants had criticized the military in general terms, without sufficient substance to warrant any investigation. The 43 WSI CID cases were eventually resolved as follows: 25 WSI participants refused to cooperate, thirteen provided information but failed to support the allegations, and five could not be located. No criminal charges were filed as a result of any of the investigations.

Indeed, under questioning, many of these supposed “eyewitnesses”

retracted their testimony; some, it turned out, had not even served in Vietnam.

The evidence suggests that American troops in Vietnam or the Philippines were no worse behaved than troops in World War II; the difference is that in the former conflicts their misdeeds were magnified and in the latter conflict minimized because of public attitudes toward the cause in which they fought.

**Israel suffers from the same double standard.** The Israel Defense Forces have experienced the greatest criticism of their conduct when fighting insurgents in Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank in wars that were generally unpopular with the outside world and even (in the case of the first Lebanon war and the first intifada ) with a significant sector of Israeli public opinion. What makes *Censored Voices* unusual is that it is an attempt to indict the conduct of the IDF during one of Israel's "good" wars, that is, those fought primarily against uniformed foes with the survival of the nation at stake.

How can this be? One suspects that the explanation can be found in what came out of the Six-Day War: namely, Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, now seen as morally illegitimate by world opinion and by vocal critics within Israeli society itself. In other words, the unpopular consequences of the Six-Day War have now rendered its very conduct questionable. Hence the attempt to expose crimes allegedly committed by Israeli soldiers.

There is nothing inherently wrong with historians, journalists, and filmmakers trying to discover unpleasant truths about warfare. But we should not hold unpopular conflicts to a different and higher standard than wars that enjoy greater public support. At some level, *all* war is hell. Nor should we lose sight of the bigger picture: by historical or global norms—and certainly when compared with their adversaries—the conduct of both the Israel Defense Forces and the U.S. armed forces, notwithstanding inevitable abuses, has been exemplary.



# ISRAEL AND THE MORAL STRIPTEASE

<http://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2015/07/israel-and-the-moral-striptease/>

**Self-flagellation, if performed at the behest of someone else, with money from somewhere else, is no longer just self-flagellation. Israelis would do well to remember this.**

July 20, 2015 | Matti Friedman

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**This is a response to *Who Censored the Six-Day War?*, originally published in *Mosaic* in July 2015**

Readers following the way that Israel is discussed abroad these days might be aware of two intertwined and mutually reinforcing tropes. According to the first trope, the story of Israel is not about complicated events with multiple players but about the moral character of Israel alone. Israel's



*Amos Oz listens to testimony he gave after the Six-Day War, in which he fought. Photo by Avner Shahaf.*

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opponents generally appear as bystanders or corpses. Arabs don't make decisions: they are merely part of the set upon which the Jews perform.

According to the second trope, Israel has dirty secrets that it is trying hard to keep under wraps. Thus, the claim that Israel "crushes dissent" has become common among the country's critics, leading to expressions of the need to "tear off the mask," "end the charade," or "break the silence."

Both tropes are on display in the new movie *Censored Voices*, to which Martin Kramer, in "Who Censored the Six-Day War?," has skillfully applied his historian's toolkit. (Kramer did the same last year in his detailed [deconstruction](#) of Ari Shavit's account in *My Promised Land* of the Lod battle

of 1948, which played to the same tropes.) The movie is about 1967, but it's a product of the present moment. Like the work of the NGO Breaking the Silence, whose recent report on the 2014 Gaza war dominated international press coverage a few months ago, it is of the popular genre we might call the "moral striptease." In this genre, introspective Israeli veterans—of whom Israel has many, a fact of which it can be proud—publicly undress, confessing their failings and those of their countrymen. These accounts are taken at face value and presented as disembodied truths, without details of the environment in which they occurred or the assumptions under which the soldiers operated, and without information that would allow corroboration.

Here, too, as in the work of Breaking the Silence, the creators use soldiers' stories to focus the account of an Israeli war not on its complex causes or the muddled course of events but on the moral failure of the army, and of the nation. Here, too, this is done in the name of the soldiers themselves; other soldiers who might question this way of understanding events aren't asked for their opinion. And here, too, Arabs are not actors but inanimate objects. This is unconsciously emphasized by one of the key characters, Amos Oz, who early in the film recounts how disturbed he was during the postwar national euphoria that "the other side [i.e., the Arab side] was given no expression"—and then participates in an entire movie about the Six-Day War that doesn't let us hear an Arab voice or see an Arab soldier fighting. The two combatant sides in this strange universe aren't Jews and Arabs, but Jews and their conscience.

Like the work of Breaking the Silence, *Censored Voices* was made by Israelis with the help of European funding (in this case, German) and geared in large part toward an international audience. Here, too, an internal discussion is removed from the situation in which it took place—in this case, among kibbutznik veterans of the war who shared knowledge and assumptions and were speaking comfortably among friends immediately after the ceasefire—and transported into a different environment outside Israel, where knowledge and assumptions are different and where the same words mean something else.

Information changes when it moves from one context to another. To cite a recurring example in the kibbutzniks' conversations at the time: it is one thing to remark that seeing displaced Palestinians in wartime reminds you of the situation of Jews in the Holocaust—meaning that you remind yourself of the Nazis—if you are speaking in Hebrew to other shaken Jewish veterans in a bomb shelter a week or two after returning from the battlefield. Saying the same thing, as this movie does, to a sated film-festival audience at

Sundance or Cannes is something else. It is one thing to say this at a time when many Israelis were gripped by elation at their victory and when the plight of the Palestinians was largely ignored both in Israel and abroad; it is quite another to do so in 2015, when Israel has become singled out as the world's most egregious violator of human rights, if not the new incarnation of Nazism. And it is one thing to draw a comparison with the Holocaust in a booklet intended for other kibbutzniks, which is what the soldiers believed they were doing in 1967—and quite another to say this in a movie co-produced by Germans.

The question of context isn't an easy one. Take Ari Folman's animated autobiographical movie *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), a work of considerable genius. Seen by Israelis, or by an audience with a nuanced understanding of Israel, this is a keen account of the hallucinatory experience shared by soldiers during the 1982 Lebanon war and of their attempts to remember certain things and not others—in the case of *Waltz*, the perceived complicity of Folman and his comrades in the Phalangist massacres of Palestinian refugees at Sabra and Shatila. Seen through different eyes, *Waltz* can be understood (incorrectly, in my opinion) as suggesting that at the heart of the tortured Israeli soul is a heinous crime that we Israelis have tried to erase. On this level it plays, as does *Censored Voices*, to the powerful negative tropes that guarantee an Israeli production foreign funding and applause. There are many other examples.

**All of this raises** a key question for Israeli public life as well as for individual Israeli writers and artists. Given the way any scrap of critical information is seized upon, shorn of context, and hammered into a weapon to be used against us, must we Israelis temper the harsh self-analysis that has always been a national point of pride? What is an Israeli writer or director to do? Talk only about tech start-ups, drip irrigation, and the cherry tomato? Remake, again and again, versions of *Exodus*?

Of course not. We in Israel have to live with the fact that much creative work done here will be about “the conflict,” which is, sadly, a central and dramatic part of our lives. And much of that work will be critical, because Israel is a democracy with a history of raucous debate and little patience for jingoism. Foreign money will be involved, because the local market is tiny and local funding scarce. And the work will be consumed abroad, and will necessarily be seen differently there.

My modest suggestion is that Israelis must become more aware of the dangerous tropes that are establishing themselves where their country is

concerned, and avoid them to the extent possible. Although this may sound strange to friends of Israel abroad, many Israelis, including journalists and directors, don't grasp the nature of the international discussion of their country, or the degree to which much of that discussion is unprecedented in its scale and hostility. Such ignorance might have been forgivable five or ten years ago, but it isn't any longer. Playing ball with the "moral striptease" genre is hard to resist—because of the international interest that comes with it, and because it saves you the trouble of actually creating stories and characters with compelling universal appeal. But it should be resisted nonetheless. Self-flagellation, if performed at the behest of someone else, with money from somewhere else, is no longer just self-flagellation, and there is nothing honorable about it.

I would also suggest that Israelis resist the temptation to claim they are bravely flouting "censorship." The claim, merely by existing, largely proves its own inaccuracy, and it is also an insult to people in places where speech is actually censored. Debate here is advanced, open, and often agonized, and the country is so small and talkative that nearly nothing is secret. The fact that the director of *Censored Voices* has earned complimentary coverage in Israel's biggest women's weekly and in El Al's inflight magazine hardly suggests a society "crushing dissent." In fact, it suggests a society where dissent is celebrated even in the heart of the mainstream. One can only imagine the kind of cognitive dissonance this attention must have caused the people promoting the film as a work of brave and lonely protest.

Martin Kramer makes a strong case against the filmmakers' claim that the information about the Six-Day War presented in their documentary was "censored" by the Israeli army. This is not a peripheral detail. To the contrary, it is the claim with which the movie begins, citing the precise figure of "70 percent," and it is the basis for the very name of the movie in English. In fact, as Kramer points out, the army's own chief education officer successfully fought to get the original book through military censorship intact, and eventually the censor himself came around. That story is interesting and telling, but it doesn't match the movie's agenda.

Indeed, when I asked Daniel Sivan, the producer of *Censored Voices*, about Kramer's analysis, he called it the product of a "conspiracy" intended to draw attention away from the film's revelations. He also asserted that the filmmakers have in their possession the original transcripts as "censored by the Israeli army" in 1967. What he didn't explain was why people involved in the publication of the original work agree that ultimately there was almost no intervention by the censor, let alone a 70-percent cut. Nor did he explain why the uncensored version and the censored version are nearly identical.

Careful historical work like Kramer's will be of interest only to those interested in careful history. As a selling point, it is hard to pass up the impression of a great secret revealed. The great secret allegedly revealed in *Censored Voices* is the same one now being constantly "revealed" by international reporters, by the United Nations Human Rights Council, by the mini-industry of foreign activists and officials who have descended on Israel like locusts on a wheat field, and by Israelis who accept their money and play along. That secret is *war crimes*. This is purported to be Israel's secret in the present, and we will be hearing more and more about how it is Israel's secret in the past as well.

# THE POVERTY OF PROPAGANDA

<http://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2015/07/the-poverty-of-propaganda/>

**Peddling vague stories of war crimes for political ends is obviously and utterly immoral.**

July 23, 2015 | Asa Kasher

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**This is a response to *Who Censored the Six-Day War?*, originally published in *Mosaic* in July 2015**

In “Who Censored the Six-Day War?,” his scrupulous investigation of the Israeli film *Censored Voices*, the historian Martin Kramer has performed an important public service. The film is one of the latest entries in what has become a regular feature of culture and politics in Israel. We are quite often invited to watch a



*IDF soldiers from the Nahal Brigade operating in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge.*  
IDF/Flickr.

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film or a play, read a pamphlet or a column, always made of two ingredients: first, stories about IDF commanders or troops who seemingly acted in an ethically improper or even atrocious manner in their military capacity, during an old war or a recent operation; secondly, claims against the Israeli occupation of the territories beyond the eastern border of Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War. The gist of such presentations of alleged stories and political claims is usually the simple demand to jump from the stories, which are presented as facts, to the conclusion, which is presented as a moral obligation. Alas, each of the three parts of the plot—stories, claims, and conclusion—is problematic, ethically or morally, legally or logically.

The demanded leap itself rests on a conceptual mistake that people who are

genuinely interested in war and justice, ethics, morality, or law should not commit. There is a long tradition of theoretical discussion and practical application of the relationships between war and justice. It has been developed first within the framework of theology, then within the framework of moral philosophy and military ethics, and for about a century now within the framework of international law as well. This is the Just-War tradition.

A major element of common just-war doctrines, as developed in that tradition, distinguishes the consideration of decisions made by the authorities of the state to wage a war or carry out a military operation of a certain type (*jus ad bellum*) from the consideration of decisions made by commanders and troops to perform certain military actions during combat (*jus in bello*)—and vice-versa. The major insight into the nature of war-and-justice relationships that is meant to be captured by this distinction is that different systems of evaluation govern decision-making with respect to waging war and conducting war.

Thus, for example, a decision by the U.S. to attack terrorists in Afghanistan, or a decision by Israel to attack terrorists in Gaza, must be made by the duly constituted governing authorities of the nation and justified on the grounds of that nation's right to defend itself and its duty to protect its citizens and other parties who have just been under attack and are still under jeopardy by destroying or significantly diminishing the enemy's ability to continue its aggression. The affected citizenry itself is only indirectly involved in this decision by virtue of having elected the government and, in the case of those in military uniform, by virtue of being called upon to implement its policies.

By contrast, a battlefield decision to attack a given cluster of buildings with, say, an armored company is not made by the governmental decision-makers but by a battalion or brigade commander. The military forces have been given a set of goals to be achieved. The company commander has been given a tactical mission that is professionally considered necessary for achieving the goals of the operation. The commander has to make evaluations of proportionality on the basis of his knowledge of the mission and its military significance within the framework of the operation and on the basis of the intelligence-based expectation of collateral damage to be incurred in the course of accomplishing the mission in a certain way. The commander's ability to make such proportionality evaluations is part of his professional expertise, which includes a conspicuous ethical component. The government is only indirectly involved in the commander's decision: he serves in the military forces of the state and he makes decisions while participating in an attempt to achieve the goals of the operation the



government has decided to carry out.

Ideally, no war is taking place, there being no need to wage it. If, however, a war does take place, most desirable is the situation of a state whose government is justified in waging war and whose citizens in military uniform are just in the actions they take during combat. As is well known, quite often a war can be justified while some activities of troops or their commanders are unjustifiable. Even the opposite combination is possible: the war is unjustifiable, but the actions of commanders and their troops do not violate any ethical, moral, or legal norms, except for their being the state's agents in an unjustifiable war.

**What does all of this tell us** as we view a movie or read stories about the behavior of uniformed Israeli soldiers in wartime or in the course of a specific military operation? At the very least it tells us that we cannot leap from any judgment of, for example, the alleged misconduct of particular IDF troops at a West Bank checkpoint to a wholesale evaluation of the war that resulted in the IDF presence in territories occupied during that war.

Similarly, and at present most importantly, stories about alleged misconduct of troops bear no significance when the issue under consideration is whether IDF presence in the territories should be continued or ended. Such a military presence in occupied enemy territory ends only if the occupying state decides to pull back from all or part of that territory—as Israel has done more than once—or when a peace treaty requiring such a pullback is signed by all parties concerned. Improper behavior on the part of some IDF troops casts no shadow on the political decision to decline to withdraw unilaterally or to turn down peace proposals deemed unacceptable and urge further negotiation.

Thus, the demanded leap from allegations about the behavior of IDF troops to political claims about the nature of war, military operations, or belligerent occupation—the aim of films like *Censored Voices* and of apparent testimonies and traveling exhibits like those mounted by the organization Breaking the Silence—fails to withstand scrutiny and simply collapses.

Of course, movie producers and organizers of exhibits do not accept such arguments, however compelling others may find them. Their rejoinder often takes the form of a slogan like “Occupation Corrupts,” intended to suggest that every person serving in an IDF uniform in the occupied territories is bound eventually to behave improperly or even atrociously. Here, however, they enter the realm of deception.

After all, factual and fully corroborated evidence abounds of IDF troops and their commanders observing the high standards of ethics and morality demanded by the IDF's own Code of Ethics and the stringent legal demands of international humanitarian law. All are educated, instructed, and briefed on how to act properly, and are held accountable for their actions. In order to convince the public otherwise, stories in Breaking the Silence pamphlets are never presented in full detail. Usually, you cannot tell who did what, when, where, and in what operational context. This quality of consistent and deliberate vagueness makes it intentionally difficult if not impossible to tell whether a particular story does or doesn't hold water: whether or not it happened at all, or happened in another way, or was misunderstood, or wrongly depicted or interpreted, or fabricated from the beginning for political purposes.

The use made of these utterly vague stories is immoral. Let us assume that some IDF troops have actually behaved improperly with respect to some Palestinians, and the latter have suffered from the misconduct of the former. It is the official policy of the IDF to see to it that such misconduct does not repeat itself. Some soldiers have indeed been severely reprimanded by their commanders, others have been court-martialed and punished. If we know who behaved in a wrong manner, we know how to improve the behavior of the troops as a whole and mitigate the suffering of the Palestinians involved. If we don't know who did what, when, where, and in what operational context, the IDF cannot effectively ameliorate the suffering. In peddling their vague stories, even if some of them contain a grain of truth, activists of Breaking the Silence have shown their complete lack of interest in improving the conduct of IDF troops or in mitigating suffering. This is obviously and utterly immoral.

It is legitimate to lobby for the withdrawal of the IDF from the West Bank and for a return to the borders of pre-June 1967 Israel. That is a legitimate political position, and people may argue for it in a variety of ways. What is illegitimate in the pursuit of this political end is to resort to flagrantly immoral means. The former never justifies, let alone sanctifies, the latter.

# FALSIFYING THE SIX-DAY WAR

<http://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2015/07/falsifying-the-six-day-war/>

**As *Censored Voices* makes its American debut, my advice to American Jews is this: save your tears—the Six-Day War was decently waged and morally just.**

July 27, 2015 | Martin Kramer

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**This is a response to *Who Censored the Six-Day War?*, originally published in *Mosaic* in July 2015**

In a recent [interview](#), Daniel Sivan, the producer of *Censored Voices* (and partner of the director Mor Loushy), describes the effect of their film on pro-Israel American Jews who saw it at Sundance in January:

From their point of view, even to murmur the word “occupation” is treason. But they

couldn't rage against our film, because we didn't invent the questions within it. They were posed by young soldiers, days after the battles of 1967. So we opened up something with these pro-Israeli Jews. Older people came out crying, they said they'd always been proud of that great victory, but now they feel confused, undermined, and embarrassed.



*Egyptian prisoners and Israeli soldiers in the Sinai during the Six-Day War in June 1967 in Egypt. Fondation Gilles CARON/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images.*

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Yes, *Censored Voices* will provide fodder for Israel-haters (it [already has](#)). But as Sivan rightly points out, such people don't need *Censored Voices* to hate Israel. Its more significant effect outside Israel will be to demoralize a generation or two of American Jews for whom the Six-Day War was a source

of pride, and who will now be told that it really comprised wanton murder and dispossession.

My purpose in writing “Who Censored the Six-Day War?” has been to make these viewers aware that *Censored Voices* is predicated on a deception in its very title. I focused on this issue because I see it as exemplary of a larger problem of misrepresentation. The film’s false claim of “brutal” official censorship begets a larger manipulation: ripping a few events from their context, and presenting them as if they told the whole story of the Six-Day War. The fabricated narrative of how the book *Soldiers’ Talk* evolved thus facilitates a blatant distortion of the war itself.

**Of course, the details** of the film’s bogus claim of official censorship are (to put it redundantly) detailed, and so is my treatment of them. I understand why my respondents Max Boot, Matti Friedman, and Asa Kasher have nothing to add on this point. But Matti Friedman did go to the trouble of contacting Sivan, the producer, to ask him about the censorship claim. Sivan told Friedman that he and Loushy “have in their possession the original transcripts as ‘censored by the Israeli army’ in 1967.”

No doubt there are plenty of deletions marked on those original transcripts, which comprise some 200 hours of discussions. The original editors themselves would have had to make them, in preparing a much shorter text—perhaps twenty hours’ worth?—for publication. According to Alon Gan, who wrote a doctoral dissertation on the subject, the military censor worked from a copy of that *edited* version, which at first had circulated in kibbutzim and which the editors then proposed to publish. In Israel, you submit to the censor what you propose to publish, *after* you’ve edited it. That’s all the censor needs or wants to see.

There is an unbridgeable gap between what Avraham Shapira, the book’s principal editor, now claims—“yes, there was censorship, and it wasn’t by us,” of “70 percent” of the material—and what a fellow editor, Yariv Ben-Aharon, claimed in 1968: “we imposed a severe censorship, we reworked and shortened and cut a lot, and also shelved. The official censorship deleted very little.” If Shapira and the makers of *Censored Voices* now want to establish their revisionist claim, I urge them to deposit in Yad Tabenkin, the kibbutz movement’s archives, *all* of the material in their possession. This will make it possible to reconstruct the editing and censoring of the text along a timeline, using the professional methods employed by historians.

The only person trained in these methods who has seen the material so far is

Alon Gan, and his conclusion is straightforward: “On the basis of this evidence, it is apparent that the role of external censorship was small, in comparison to the censorship imposed by the initiators of the collection before the censor’s intervention.” This verdict will be impossible to overturn so long as the evidence is closely held by a few interested parties bent on exploiting it.

As for Loushy’s claim that the censorship was “brutal,” this contradicts the testimony of Mordechai Bar-On, the army colonel whose intervention with the censor made publication of *Soldiers’ Talk* possible. This is what Bar-On says in his memoirs about the process:

Our meetings were held in a good spirit, out of mutual understanding.... In a special introduction that they added to the public version, the editors thanked me warmly for my assistance. A bond of friendship was formed between me and the editors of *Soldiers’ Talk*, which continues until this day, although we don’t meet very often.

While Bar-On remembers clashing with Amos Oz (whom he found to be “arrogant”), he claims the editors saw him as “a friend of the book.” As I wrote in my essay, Bar-On also told me directly that the censor cut “maybe two or three percent,” not more. That the filmmakers, during years of preparing *Censored Voices*, didn’t even contact Bar-On is a huge failing that casts still more doubt on their good faith. Since their narrative implicates him in facilitating an act of “brutal” censorship, they should have had the decency to seek him out and hear his version.

**I proceed to substance.** Two of my respondents focus on charges of war crimes in broader contexts. Asa Kasher argues that a war waged for the legitimate purpose of self-defense—and the Six-Day War falls squarely in that category—doesn’t lose its legitimacy because some soldiers and officers commit crimes in its prosecution. The war must be waged proportionately and suspected crimes must be investigated. But even the most professional force is bound to sin and err. The perfect war has yet to be fought, so the legality and legitimacy of a war stand independently of its (inevitably flawed) execution. Kasher makes the further point that vague accusations of war crimes—*Censored Voices* is replete with them—don’t enable full investigation, and therefore do nothing to improve the military’s performance or ameliorate suffering. That renders such accusations immoral.

All true, but we live in a world of multiple standards. Being a superpower means never having to say you're sorry. Being Israel means not only having to say you're sorry but also discovering that your apology is never good enough. And it means that your wars are judged as much on how they're waged as on why you've waged them. NGOs that traffic in such accusations (Kasher cites *Breaking the Silence*) depend for their existence on this Israel-specific standard. The effect of such charges, if not their aim, is to deny Israel the right to defend itself under any circumstances, because it can only do so by committing some crime, somewhere.

This is why Max Boot's insights are apt—up to a point. Drawing on American examples, Boot posits that crimes have occurred in all wars, but those committed during popular wars are forgotten while those committed during unpopular wars are exaggerated. And so, he concludes, those who see the Six-Day War as ushering in an endless “occupation” are especially eager to uncover and exaggerate crimes committed in the war's prosecution, to deprive the war of its just status.

Boot is right, and the absurdity involved in this line of reasoning should be self-evident. After all, one can hold that the “occupation” is unjust and unnecessary and still think that the 1967 war was both just and necessary. Israel didn't wage war to expand, it waged war to lift a mortal threat. The war's results didn't close Israel's options, it expanded them. It was decisions made *after* the war, year after year, by Israelis and Arabs, that produced the situation now deplored by Loushy. To portray the war as evil, by blowing a few excesses out of proportion, locates the blame for “occupation” in the wrong place—exactly like blaming the censor for the work of the editor.

But while it would be comforting to think, with Boot, that Israel and the United States share this dilemma, it would also be self-deluding. No one is still trying to reverse the outcome of World War II or the Korean war or the Vietnam war. But many of Israel's critics want to reverse not only the outcome of 1967, but of 1948. They seek to show not only that Israel's borders are the product of criminal acts, but that Israel was founded on crimes. If you claim that My Lai was only one of many massacres, you stir a [debate](#) among a few historians. If you claim that Israel massacred its way to victory in 1948 or 1967, you fuel international condemnations and campus boycotts, and leave confused American Jews in tears.

Matti Friedman thinks that at least some of Israel's own “moral stripteasers” aren't aware that they are feeding this beast. When, he writes, Israeli soldiers among themselves compare their actions with those of the Nazis, they understand it as rhetorical flourish. But when this is retailed more widely, it

reinforces haters who seriously equate Israel with Nazi Germany and Gaza with Auschwitz or the Warsaw Ghetto. And this Holocaust inversion doesn't just happen on the fringe but in leading American universities (as I [showed](#) last year), precisely among people who attend film festivals. I hope that Friedman is right, but when I saw Nazi comparisons made by Israeli soldiers surface in *Censored Voices*, I couldn't but wonder whether they were a deliberate play to the gallery of haters. They buy theater tickets, too.

And yet, I'm not sure that *Censored Voices* belongs in the same category as Breaking the Silence, the NGO that purports to uncover Israeli war crimes, especially in Gaza. Breaking the Silence is intended to make it impossible for Israel to wage war in its own defense, which is why the organization stands entirely outside the Israeli consensus. *Censored Voices*, with its focus on 1967, is an implicit indictment of the continuing Israeli "occupation" of the West Bank. Endorsed by Amos Oz, the film belongs to the "Peace Now" slice of the left. This is why its director can be [interviewed](#) for El Al's in-flight magazine (in Hebrew), [appear](#) as the "woman of the week" in Israel's biggest women's weekly, and even receive a five-page [spread](#), including a "special interview," in *Bamahane*, the Israeli army's weekly magazine for soldiers.

To my mind, the film is closer on the spectrum to Ari Shavit's [treatment](#) of the Lydda "massacre" in his bestselling book, *My Promised Land*. Loushy, like Shavit, casts herself as an Israeli patriot who wants her child to grow up in an Israel freed from the burden of occupying the Palestinians. She, too, claims there is a "black box" (that's Shavit's term) concealing something dark in Israel's past. Long-hidden crimes are adumbrated, then wrenched out of context and exaggerated, not to cripple Israel, but to heighten a sense of guilt and raise the price of the atonement owed to the Palestinians. In the array of arguments for ending the "occupation," this one has purchase among enough Israelis so that the film can be embraced by the mainstream left.

The "brutal censorship" trope gives *Censored Voices* an anti-establishment patina, but it was produced with the full collaboration of the Israeli cultural establishment. Yes, there was German funding, and Matti Friedman is right to pose questions about it. (He's not alone. An interviewer asked Avraham Shapira whether he was aware of the German funding, and how he felt about it. Shapira's answer: "I am not involved in the film, but if it is so, that doesn't seem positive to me.") But the film is a co-production with YesDocu, Israel's leading documentary channel. It also received funding from Israeli sources, including the Israeli national lottery Mifal Hapayis and the Rabinovich Foundation (supported in turn by the Tel Aviv municipality and the Ministry of Science, Culture, and Sport). And why not? After all, *Censored*



*Voices* is essentially an expanded version of *Soldiers' Talk*, and back in 1968, Israel's Foreign Ministry distributed *Soldiers' Talk* as a kind of calling card (causing the editors some consternation at the time).

**In an interview**, Loushy has said that *Censored Voices* “tells a different story” of the Six-Day War, namely, “that it’s also tragic to win a war.” There isn’t one Palestinian, or one Arab, who would ever say such a thing. That’s because they know just what it is to experience a crushing defeat. (If you want a sense of what defeat can do, even to a very strong man, watch this [clip](#) of Jordan’s King Hussein.) Of course, victories can give rise to hubris, and they can be wasted (often by people who didn’t win them). But the victory stands on its own. And it is a victory for which we should still be grateful. As I’ve argued [elsewhere](#), it is the memory of 1967—known in Arabic as the *naksa*, the “setback”—that still underpins the willingness of Egypt and Jordan to sustain peace with Israel.

I read *Soldiers' Talk* not long after its publication (as a teenager volunteering on a kibbutz), and the message that stayed with me is that every victory, however sweeping, comes at some cost. But at about the same time, I read another book, published in 1969 in English, which also became a bestseller in Hebrew translation and, like *Soldiers' Talk*, would later be forgotten altogether. It was an exercise in counter-factual history called *If Israel Lost the War*. In graphic language, it imagined a true tragedy. Its message also stayed with me: defeat in 1967 would have come at an unbearable cost to Israel and the Jewish people.

So when American Jews begin to view *Censored Voices*—it makes its Jewish film-festival [debut](#) on the weekend of August 1-2 in San Francisco—my advice to them is to save their tears. Don’t succumb to deception and manipulation. As wars go, the Six-Day War was decently waged, fairly won, and morally just. Israel has made mistakes. The Six-Day War wasn’t one of them.