



Israeli soldiers
Palestinians from a
camp near

Hell No, They Won't Go

Hundreds of Israeli soldiers refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories

By Mary Abow

In December 2000, 23-year-old Israeli army Lt. Ishai Sagi was called up for emergency duty in the West Bank. With the second *intifada* in its third month, Sagi's mission was to protect a road that led to a Jewish settlement. "I was ordered to make sure that every Palestinian who raised a stone was shot," he says.

High cliffs rose up on either side of the road. Palestinian children sometimes dropped stones off the edge, endangering settlers who sped past in cars below. Sagi found himself confronted with a terrible choice: "I could either shoot and kill a Palestinian boy who picks up a stone, or let that stone fall and kill a car of Israeli settlers."

The picture was complicated further when the settlers themselves gathered every other Friday to throw stones at Palestinian cars. "My soldiers began asking me, 'Ishai, are you telling us we have to protect Israeli settlers who throw stones at Palestinians, but shoot Palestinians who throw stones at settlers?'" he recalls. "I had trouble answering them."



STEVEN FEUERSTEN

Ishai Sagi

By August 2001, Sagi had notified his commanders that he would no longer serve in the Occupied Territories and was doing time in a military prison. When he was released, he joined Courage to Refuse, a movement of Israeli conscripts, soldiers and reservists who refuse to fight beyond Israel's 1967 borders. (The campaign has recently changed its name to the Refuser Solidarity Network.) Sagi became the 31st soldier to sign the campaign's "Combatant Letter," a petition stating that the undersigned would no longer, "rule, expel, destroy, blockade, assassinate, starve, and humiliate an entire people." The letter—with 468 signatures at last count—calls the army's operations in the Occupied Territories a "War of the Settlements" to maintain control over some 200 fortified Jewish colonies, while leaving the borders of Israel exposed.

The campaign's Web site has become a forum for soldiers to explain their decision and unburden themselves. Assaf Oron, a onetime sergeant major and the eighth soldier to sign the Combatant Letter, describes how his army service turned him into "the perfect occupation enforcer." He writes: "Where else can you go out on patrol ... walk the streets like a king, harass and humiliate pedestrians to your heart's content ... and at the same time feel like a big hero defending your country?" But when Oron's comrades began trying to outdo each other with

stories of murderous beatings—who had beaten more Palestinians to death, and whose tales were bloodier—he knew he too had to get out.

In general, all Jewish Israeli men and women are conscripted into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) at age 18. Men serve three years and are then required to perform annual reserve duty until they reach age 45. Women serve for about two years and mostly are exempted from the reserves. Currently, more than 1,000 soldiers, conscripts and reservists have publicly refused to serve in the Occupied Territories.

Conscientious objectors are not new in Israel, but what makes this movement different is that many of the resisters are high-ranking officers, majors and captains who have seen years of active combat. The "refuseniks," as they're called, represent an array of political opinions. Few would call themselves pacifists. Many, like Sagi, are "selective refusers" who refuse to participate in the occupation but are willing to serve within Israel. After 26 days in a military jail, Sagi was reassigned to such a post. But he says that in recent months, as the number of refusers has mounted, the army is sending them straight to prison. At present, 50 conscientious objectors are incarcerated—more than at any other time in Israeli history.

The concept of selective refusal took root in the wake of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, an incursion that dislodged the PLO from its Beirut headquarters. Growing numbers of soldiers saw the invasion, which claimed the lives of nearly 18,000 people, mostly civilians, as an act of blatant aggression and refused to participate.

Ram Rahat was part of that early movement. A doctor who had moved to Israel from Canada in 1980, Rahat was drafted into a medical unit that would be sent into Lebanon. "I knew from the start that this was something I couldn't be a part of," he recalls. "Israel invaded Lebanon despite the fact that for an entire year before the invasion, there had been a cease fire between the PLO and Israel that had been meticulously observed by the PLO."



STEVEN FEUERSTEN

Ram Rahat

Rahat explained his concerns to his commanding officer, whom he describes as "a sympathetic man," and was transferred to a medical supply base outside Tel Aviv. By 1985, more than

3,500 reservists had signed a petition saying they weren't going to Lebanon. "That may not mean like a lot, but it's the equivalent of 150,000 American troops refusing to go to the Gulf War," Rahat says. And not all of them were met with such sympathy; 168 servicemen were jailed, some repeatedly, for their refusal.

With that petition, the movement to support selective refusal, known as Yesh Gvul ("There is a Limit"), was born. Despite intense surveillance by the police and security services, Yesh Gvul continues to counsel soldiers, providing moral and material support to refusers and their families. Rahat says the movement in the '80s helped end the invasion of Lebanon, and he believes a similar movement today can end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He says, "We did it before," he says. "We can do it again."

While Yesh Gvul helps those who are "selective resisters," others refuse to serve in the IDF entirely. Months before the Combatant Letter went public, a group of 62 high school seniors, some of them anticipating their 18th birthdays, drafted their own petition. The so-called Senior's Letter, now with 170 signatures, was faxed to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in September, informing him that they would not be taking part in the occupation and declaring that "land expropriation, arrests, executions without a trial, house demolition, closure, torture and the prevention of health care are only some of the crimes the state of Israel carries out, in blunt violation of international conventions it has ratified."

The first to sign the petition was Haggai Matar, an 18-year-old from a town near Tel Aviv. During a spring speaking tour in Chicago, sponsored by the Jewish group Not In My Name, Matar called for an end to U.S. economic and military aid to Israel. He has visited the West Bank several times—not as a machine-gun toting soldier, but as a humanitarian worker. On those trips bringing food and medicine to besieged Palestinian villages, he witnessed the mistreatment of Palestinians by Israeli troops. "There is no way I can take part in anything that has to do with this government, this army, this occupation," he says.

Matar cites a 1958 Israeli Supreme Court ruling on the infamous Kafr Qassim massacre, when Israeli border police gunned down 50 Palestinian villagers who defied an army curfew. At trial, it came out that the villagers were never told about the curfew. When the police argued they were "just following orders," the judge convicted them with the following words: "On certain orders, the black flag of manifest illegality flies. ... A soldier has not only the right, but also the duty to disobey such orders."

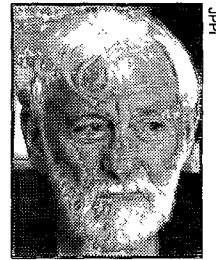
"The entire occupation has a black flag flying above it," Matar says. But because Israeli law does not allow men to refuse on the basis of conscience, Matar expects to go to jail in October. Typically, sentences are for 28 days in military prisons. But new conscripts who refuse to serve usually receive two or three consecutive terms, and Matar expects to remain in jail for three to four months before being discharged.

Yet despite the threat of jail, Matar says, the movement to refuse has been growing. "More and more people are starting to say, 'Hey, why should I waste three years of my life trying to get myself killed?'" Many young people try to get out of serving by playing crazy. "They say, 'My parents are divorced and I can't

deal with it. I have nightmares. I sweat. I take drugs. I'm gonna kill myself.'" Others try to make the case that they have migraines or back problems for which they can be released or given a lower-profile assignment. "The army actually prefers that," he continues, "they would rather declare someone insane than admit that there are objectors."

The petitions from conscripts and reservists have reinvigorated the Israeli peace movement and inspired other sectors of society. An "Open Letter from Faculty Members," signed by 317 professors from different Israeli universities, has pledged to support students who "encounter academic, administrative or economic difficulties as a result of their refusal to serve in the territories." And something of a consensus has begun to form around the incendiary issue of terrorism. Yes, the suicide bombers are coming into Israeli cities and killing civilians, but what drives them? "By being in the Occupied Territories, we are creating a base of terrorism," Rahat says. "Every time we go in with another operation, we're creating more and more hate."

Perhaps no one can put the refusal movement in perspective better than 78-year-old peace activist and former Knesset member Uri Avnery, who calls himself a "reformed terrorist," in reference to his long ago involvement with the Irgun, an armed Zionist group. "This is the beginning of a process," he wrote recently. "Nobody can know yet how powerful it will become and how far it will go. But one thing is certain: Something is happening." ■




Uri Avnery



Haggai Matar

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Building Bantustans in the West Bank

By Charmaine Seitz

RAMALLAH, THE WEST BANK—Ramallah is eerily quiet. In the mornings, Palestinians wake and listen for traffic, a sign that the Israeli military has lifted its injunction against going outside. Sometimes, the traffic is wrong and gunshots ring out. Then: silence once more.

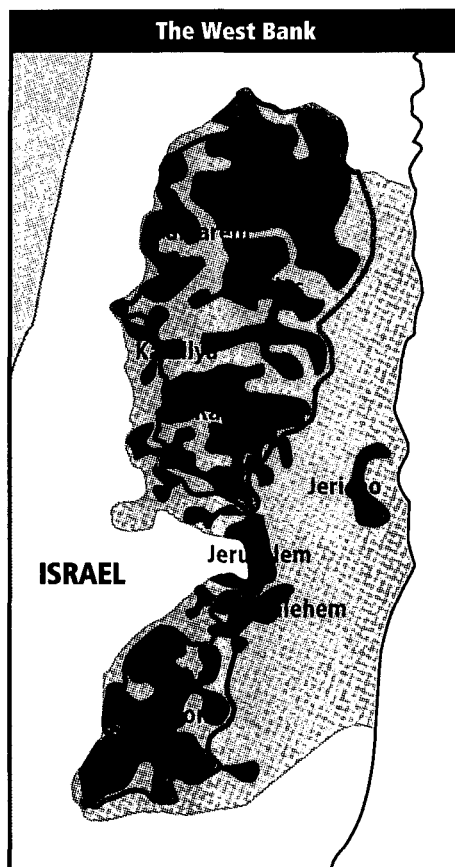
The despair is palpable. "It is very bad," says Rima Tarazi of the General Union of Palestinian Women. "If you are going to ask me now what I see for the next year, I don't know. I can't tell you anything."

But what Palestinians express as hopelessness, the Israeli government sees as a big victory. Armed Palestinian attacks have slowed—but not ceased—as the Israeli army is once again patrolling Palestinian towns. What is rarely talked about is the accompanying loss: prospects for viable Palestinian statehood.

"I think Israel believes that it has defeated the Palestinians," says Jeff Halper of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. "It is finished. The war is over. What that means then is that Israel doesn't have to negotiate anymore with the Palestinians. Israel is now free to pretty much impose whatever it wants."

In recent weeks, walls have been built, plans approved and settlements institutionalized that literally reshape the West Bank. In the northern half of the West Bank, construction is well underway on a fence dividing Israel proper from the areas it occupied in 1967. Or almost. Palestinians say that the 110-kilometer fence, first approved in 2001, actually dips beyond the 1967 borders, completing the de facto annexation of 69 square kilometers of the West Bank, including 11 villages of some 40,000 Palestinians. Another 2,500 acres of West Bank land has been confiscated from Palestinian landowners for the building of a second wall stretching north from southern Tulkarem.

Amid the recent violence, the Israeli government has approved settlement plans previously considered too controversial. The final door has nearly closed on Palestinian access to East Jerusalem, annexed by Israel in 1980. In June, Israel's zoning commission approved the Eastern Gate plan, a settlement complex that cartographer Jan de Jong predicted in 1998 would "determine the chances of



GRAPHIC: NATHAN STRAIT; DATA: FMEP

East Jerusalem forever." The new scheme and accompanying roads would make it possible for Israel to add 800,000 Israeli settlers to the area, while preventing Palestinian growth in the city. Currently, there are some 200,000 Israelis in East Jerusalem settlements, competing with 200,000 Palestinians.

While Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer made world headlines last month for dismantling several outposts put up by Israeli settlers in the West Bank without government approval, settlement watchdog groups say the move was just a smokescreen. The 90 outposts were reduced by 11, but the rest gained de facto government support. It is no accident that these sparsely manned outposts lay just on the seams of Palestinian populated areas. "What is actually happening is a slow process of legitimizing these settlements," says Dror Etkes of Peace Now.

The northern West Bank will be split from the Ramallah area by an extensive bloc of settlements connected to Israel. The Ramallah area will then be cut off

from the southern West Bank by an enlarged Jerusalem controlled by Israel. Another small canton will be made up of Palestinian communities in East Jerusalem, while walled Gaza remains largely intact. "That will be the independent state," Halper predicts of Gaza. "And then the Palestinians in the other four cantons will either get autonomy, or—if there is a lot of pressure—Israel will give them Palestinian citizenship. It doesn't really matter because Israel has encircled them and still has control."

The new map looks uncannily like a 1997 "peace plan" fronted by Sharon as a cabinet minister. At the time, the idea of annexing 65 percent of the West Bank and 30 percent of the Palestinians living there was laughed at. But Israelis today are convinced that by turning down the proposals offered at Camp David before the current hostilities, Palestinians rejected peace. "There is an agreement [in this Israeli government] that there should be a Bantustan," Halper says. "The Israelis don't use the word Bantustan, but that is what it is."

Halper is not the only one to draw comparisons with apartheid. "I've been very deeply distressed in my visit to the Holy Land," Archbishop Desmond Tutu told a Boston conference in April. "It reminded me so much of what happened to us black people in South Africa."

For their part, Palestinians view this new map with an uncharacteristic pessimism. There seems to be little that Palestinians can do to halt the process underway in the West Bank. "Maybe this is my idealism speaking," Halper persists hopefully, "but it is hard for me to believe that in the 21st century, in the light of day, with CNN and everything else, a new apartheid situation could actually emerge."

Still, even he admits that he has no idea what might stop it. ■

Red Ink

By Matthew Price

The 1961 publication of Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left* marked a scholarly watershed. One of the first academics to treat left-wing writing as a distinct strand of American litera-

Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left

By Alan M. Wald

The University of North Carolina Press
412 pages, \$19.95

ture, Aaron has said his work "helped to loosen the social and political constraints that for 20 years had inhibited the writing of a frank and objective history of ... literary communism." Much of the previous work on radical writing was hopelessly partisan; but as the torrid ideological passions of the '30s waned, it had become possible to write that "frank and objective history." A judicious scholar, Aaron was just the man for the job.

Writers on the Left endures as a classic, but it is a book not without flaws. For one, it largely centers on a New York boys club. The fellow-traveling novelist Josephine Herbst, who only merited a brief mention in Aaron's account, harumphed, "[Aaron's] heroes were the entrepreneurs of writing, the head boys who have been mostly responsible for the re-hashes, [who] were all stuck in the claustrophobia of New York City." (Then again, in the '30s, "New York became the most interesting part of the Soviet Union," said Lionel Abel.) Aaron paid little attention to regional figures, nor did he much consider the achievements of black artists or women.

For some years now, Alan Wald—in many ways Aaron's heir but unlike his precursor, a man of the left—has been reconsidering the tradition Aaron sketched, to think anew notions of art and Marxist belief. From his deep

immersion in the lost word of radical writers of Depression-era America comes Wald's absorbing new chronicle, *Exiles from a Future Time*, the first volume of a projected trilogy on literary radicalism.

The sheer range of Wald's research is often astonishing. He opens a vista onto a motley collection of now forgotten writers, some party men and women, some not, who wrestled with the oft-conflicting impulses of artistic freedom and political commitment. Though Wald often falls prey to the cant of contemporary academia (he can be a dreadful stylist), and despite the somewhat baffling organization of the book—it is more a collection of linked essays than a narrative—the color and zip of the figures he writes about more than compensate for Wald's failings as a writer.

The chief delight of *Exiles from a Future Time* is the abundance of characters—a few of them downright wacky—who people Wald's pages. There is Guy Endore, novelist and screenwriter, a "life-long mystic sympathetic to theosophy";



the "Apollinaire of the proletariat," Sol Funaroff, a poet and radical who penned the lines that give the book its title ("I am that exile / from a future time, / from shores of freedom / I may never know");

and his poetic contemporary, Alfred Hayes, "the Byron of the Poolhalls" who was "addicted to pinball machines" and preferred the company of cabbies to intellectuals.

But no book on American literary radicalism would be complete without a chapter on Mike Gold, a "kind of cheeky Crazy Kat bouncing off the crania of his adversaries," as one friend described him. Gold wrote one of the most famous works of the time, *Jews without Money* (1930), a seminal "proletarian" novel, set in the slums of New York's Lower East Side, a work later championed by Alfred

**"I am that exile
from a future time,
from shores of freedom
I may never know."**

Kazin and Irving Howe. Gold was a prolific contributor to the *Daily Worker* and editor of *New Masses* (which Wald writes about at length) in the late '20s, and quite a waggish poetaster: "Poetry is the cruelest bunk, / A trade union is better than all your dreams."

While Wald gives Gold due attention, he goes far beyond Aaron in scope, especially in the range of journals and magazines he covers, from *The Anvil* to *Dynamo*. Though New York looms large in the book—how could it not?—Wald is strong on regional figures, especially writers from the south. Perhaps most interesting is Donald Lee West, who in his long varied career served, among other things, as a minister and footloose labor organizer, and generally "lived a rough tumble life, sporadically fleeing from vigilantes in the middle of the night, occasionally carrying a pistol for self protection, and losing almost every job he managed to secure."

Wald devotes a section to black writers, a chapter illuminating in its exploration of the tensions between race and class ideology. Women also occupy a central place in Wald's book, particularly the writers Meridel Le Sueur, Joy Davidman and Muriel Rukeyser. Indeed, Wald is so intent on mentioning as many writers as possible, at times *Exiles*