

The Strange Erasure of Arab Town

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The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973); Jul 23, 1967; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877 - 1988)

pg. B4

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TEL AVIV—Imwas, an Arab village of about 2500 inhabitants in what was Jordanian-occupied Palestine, was totally destroyed by the Israeli army in the six-day war, reduced to a rubble of mud brick and chunks of cement.

No wall stands higher than two or three feet. The destruction extends over an area equal to half a dozen city blocks.

Stories of what brought about the "Imwas affair" have been circulating by word of mouth ever since, and the argument is likely to continue for a long time because the truth is far from evident.

The question is why it was destroyed—whether wantonly, as pro-Arab sources allege, or necessarily, as a consequence of the fierce fighting there, as Israeli military sources assert.

Why it was destroyed is interesting because, except for the town of Qalqilya, also on the Israel-Jordan border, whose partial destruction was almost certainly the result of a heavy battle, Imwas is the only other settlement

to have been even seriously damaged in the war, much less destroyed.

That remarkable aspect of the war is worth detailing to put the Imwas affair into perspective. No modern war fought so furiously by the armed forces was so astonishingly sparing of civilian casualties or was followed by such an absence of brutality to the vanquished population.

Although roads are littered with the burned-out hulks of tanks and armored vehicles, it is difficult to find any damage in the cities and villages. Hebron, Bethlehem and Jenin are untouched; there are only scratches in Nablus; in Gaza City the radar station is destroyed and almost nothing else.

No Israeli soldier seems to have set foot inside any West Bank refugee camp. Looting was minimal and rape nonexistent. In dozens of trips to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, neither I nor any reporter of my acquaintance heard a specific incident of brutality alleged by Arabs.

The essence of the matter is perhaps best illuminated by an account of Sen. Albert Gore (D-Tenn.), who recently vis-

ited Jordan and spoke with top officials. He remarked to a cabinet minister of the absence of any assertions by the Arabs of instances of brutality or atrocity.

"Oh, not so," the minister replied. "Only today, a lady from East Jerusalem came to my office and related that after the fighting ended there, an Israeli soldier sidled up to her and whispered: 'How about coming with me and I'll show you the sights of Tel Aviv?'"

Why, Then, Imwas?

WHILE, THEN, the leveling of Imwas? As the crow flies and as the old road once ran, Imwas lies about halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. It was the main settlement of the so-called Latrun Salient, a ballooning little bulge in the border which Jordanian troops held at the time of the armistice ending the 1948 war of independence.

For several miles along the border and around the salient, the armistice agreements decreed a demilitarized zone, which soon lapsed into a no man's

land where the fields were left empty and uncultivated.

On one of the hills a few hundred yards from the settlement stands a Trappist monastery, for Imwas is deemed to be ancient Emmaus, where, according to St. Luke, Christ revealed Himself to two of the Apostles three days after the Crucifixion.

The town stands beside the old and direct road from Tel Aviv and Ramla to Jerusalem, and also athwart the road to the important West Bank city of Ramallah, north of Jerusalem.

Accordingly, when the war with Jordan began about noon on Monday, June 5, an Israeli armored force pushed quickly into the Latrun Salient and passed through Imwas, intent on following a Jordanian tank force rapidly retreating up the Ramallah road. There was a minimum of fighting in the village at that time.

But by nightfall, the Israelis, by then at or close to Ramallah, discovered what they had not known earlier: the Egyptian commando battalion that had been flown to Jordan a few days before had holed up in Imwas. Its mission was to raid Israel's main civilian airfield, Lydda, a few miles distant, and other military airfields in the area.

With a more immediate opportunity in front of them, the commandos waited until the main armored force had passed and then fell upon the supply convoys following behind. In the process, they killed about 20 Israelis and blocked the flow of supplies.

The Israelis responded by sending in tanks to clean out the Egyptian unit. A sharp night action ensued, beginning about 2 a.m. Tuesday. There were no known civilian casualties. By that time, the 2500 inhabitants of the village had abandoned it, most fleeing to Ramallah and some taking refuge in the monastery.

Differing Accounts

SO MUCH IS AGREED upon. But from that point on, the accounts differ. The Israeli military version is as follows:

The action lasted 24 hours, with tanks blasting out the dug-in commandos. A few were on top of the hills above one

side of the village, but most were in the settlement. By the time the fighting was over, the place was a ruin with no house left fit for habitation.

Accordingly, some days later, the Israelis brought in bulldozers to level the rubble and help dig out the corpses.

A full month after the action, as the first reporter permitted by the Israeli authorities into the ruins, I can testify to at least one spot where something dead still remained.

The version of the Trappist fathers at the monastery is very different. The report is given by Father Reimi (he hails from Reims), a tall and genial man with a striking physical resemblance to Gen. de Gaulle. He was acting as father superior during the war. A French artillery officer in both World Wars, he was complimentary of the Israeli shooting. Only seven shots, none seriously damaging, went into the monastery, which Father Reimi thinks was minimal under the circumstances.

But, he declared, the fighting lasted only three quarters of an hour and the Israeli fire was directed almost entirely at the Egyptian commando positions on the top of the hill, with little or nothing into the village.

At the end of the affair, he said, the houses were not damaged, as he verified by a visit Wednesday. But on Friday, Israeli military engineers returned and bulldozed down one half of Imwas, and a week or so later the rest of it.

Paying an Old Score?

IF, IN FACT, Father Reimi's account is the more nearly accurate one, the question arises of why the Israelis would level the whole townlet. There are several theories, none completely convincing.

One is that Israel was paying off an old score. During the war of independence, the most ferocious attacks on the blockade runners trying to supply besieged Jerusalem came from the Latrun area. Moreover, the first act of the Jordanians there, half an hour after the armistice agreements were signed, was to blow up the pumping station supplying water to Jerusalem—in direct violation of the agreements. Subsequently, bor-

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Father Reimi of the Trappist monastery was complimentary of the Israeli marksmanship.

der incursions and sabotage raids were mounted from there.

Yet in the last several years, those attacks ceased altogether. The border around the Latrun bulge was quiet.

Another theory is that the Israelis were punishing Imwas for harboring the Egyptian commandos. Yet the commandos had just arrived and the villagers clearly had little option.

A final theory is that the Israelis want no Arab farmers in the neighborhood to challenge the cultivation of the rich but formerly idle fields in the no man's land by members of nearby kibbutzim (collective farms). They have already put the plow to those lands.

As a resident of Jerusalem asked 2000 years ago, "What is truth?" What is truth about the Imwas affair, as well as the more general question, remains unanswered.



A part of the rubble of the Arab village of Imwas.