

# Rebuilding the Obama-Putin Trust

**Exclusive:** Heading into the last quarter of his presidency, Barack Obama must decide whether he will let the neocons keep pulling his strings or finally break loose and pursue a realistic foreign policy seeking practical solutions to world problems, including the crisis with Russia over Ukraine, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

The year 2015 will surely mark a watershed in relations between the United States and Russia, one way or the other. However, whether tensions increase to war-by-proxy in Ukraine or an even wider war or whether they subside depends mostly on President Barack Obama.

Key to answering this question is a second one: Is Obama smart enough and strong enough to rein in Secretary of State John Kerry, the neocons and “liberal interventionists” running the State Department and to stand up to the chicken hawks in Congress, most of whom feel free to flirt with war because they know nothing of it.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, by contrast, experienced the effects of war at an early age. He was born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) eight years after the vicious siege by the German army ended. Michael Walzer, in his *War Against Civilians*, notes, “More people died in the 900-day siege of Leningrad than in the infernos of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki taken together.”

Putin’s elder brother Viktor died during the siege. The experience of Putin’s youth is, of course, embedded in his consciousness. This may help to account for why he tends to be short on the kind of daredevil bluster regularly heard from senior Western officials these days many of whom are ignorant both of suffering from war and the complicated history of Ukraine.

This time last year, few Americans could point out Ukraine on a map. And malnourished as they are on “mainstream media,” most have little idea of its internal political tensions, a schism between a western Ukraine oriented toward Europe and an eastern Ukraine with strong ties to Russia.

Let’s start with a brief mention of the most salient points of this history before addressing its recent detritus – and making a few recommendations as the New Year begins. Less than three weeks after the Berlin Wall fell on Nov. 9, 1989, President George H.W. Bush invited Kremlin leader Mikhail Gorbachev to a summit in Malta where they cut an historic deal: Moscow would refrain from using force to re-impose control over Eastern Europe; Washington would not “take

advantage" of the upheaval and uncertainty there.

That deal was fleshed out just two months later, when Bush's Secretary of State James Baker persuaded Gorbachev to swallow the bitter pill of a reunited Germany in NATO in return for a promise that NATO would not "leapfrog" eastward over Germany. Former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Jack Matlock, who was witness to all this, told me in an email, "I don't see how anybody could view the subsequent expansion of NATO as anything but 'taking advantage.'"

This consummate diplomat, who took part in the critical bilateral talks in early 1990, added that the mutual pledge was not set down in writing. Nonetheless, renegeing on a promise written or not can put a significant dent in trust.

### **Why No Written Deal**

Last year I asked Matlock and also Viktor Borisovich Kuvaldin, one of Gorbachev's advisers from 1989 to 1991, why the Baker-Gorbachev understanding was not committed to paper. Matlock replied:

"There was no agreement then. Both Baker and West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher were putting forth ideas for Gorbachev to consider. He did not give an answer but just said he would think about them. ... The formal agreements had to involve others, and they did, in the two-plus-four agreement, which was concluded only in late 1990."

Fair enough.

In an email to me last fall, Kuvaldin corroborated what Matlock told me. But he led off by pointing out "the pledge of no eastward expansion of NATO was made to Gorbachev on consecutive days when he met first with Baker and then with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl [on Feb. 9 and 10, 1990]." As to why this pledge was not written down, Kuvaldin explained:

"Such a request would have sounded a little bit strange at that time. The Warsaw Pact was alive; Soviet military personnel were stationed all over central Europe; and NATO had nowhere to go. At the beginning of February 1990 hardly anybody could foresee the turn of events in the 1990s."

Again, fair enough. But when I met Kuvaldin a few months earlier in Moscow and asked him out of the blue why there is no record of the promises given to his boss Gorbachev, his reply was more spontaneous and visceral. He tilted his head, looked me straight in the eye, and said, "We trusted you."

Written down or not, it was a matter of trust and of not "taking advantage." Kuvaldin's boss Gorbachev opted to trust not only the U.S. Secretary

of State, but also the West German government in Bonn. According to a report in *Der Spiegel* quoting West German foreign ministry documents released just five years ago:

“On Feb. 10, 1990, between 4 and 6:30 p.m., Genscher spoke with [Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard] Shevardnadze. And, according to the German record of the conversation, Genscher said: ‘We are aware that NATO membership for a unified Germany raises complicated questions. For us, however, one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the east.’ And because the conversation revolved mainly around East Germany, Genscher added explicitly: ‘As far as the non-expansion of NATO is concerned, this also applies in general.’”

### **NATO’s Growth Spurt**

Some of us though a distinct minority know the rest of the story. Generally overlooked in Western media, it nevertheless sets the historical stage as background for the upheaval in Ukraine last year. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the break-up of the Warsaw Pact Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2004. Albania and Croatia joined in 2009. And the Kremlin’s leaders could do little more than look on impotently and seethe.

One can hardly fault those countries, most of which had lots of painful experience at Soviet hands. It is no mystery why they would want to crowd under the NATO umbrella against any foul weather coming from the East. But, as George Kennan and others noted at the time, it was a regrettable lack of imagination and statesmanship that no serious alternatives were devised to address the concerns of countries to the east of Germany other than membership in NATO.

The more so, inasmuch as there were so few teeth left, at the time, in the mouth of the Russian bear. And not least of all a promise is a promise.

As NATO expansion drew in countries closer to Russia’s borders, the Kremlin drew a red line when, despite very strong warnings from Moscow, an April 3, 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest declared: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.” Both countries, former Soviet states, press up upon Russia’s soft southern underbelly.

Often forgotten in the West, but not in Russia is the impulsive reaction this NATO statement gave rise to on the part of Georgia’s then-President Mikheil Saakashvili, who felt his oats even before the NATO umbrella could be opened. Less than five months after Georgia was put in queue for NATO

membership, Saakashvili ordered Georgian forces to attack the city of Tskhinvali in South Ossetia. No one should have been surprised when Russia retaliated sharply, giving Georgian forces a very bloody nose in battles that lasted just five days.

Ultimately, Saakashvili's cheerleaders of the George W. Bush administration and then-Republican presidential candidate John McCain, who had been egging Saakashvili on, were powerless to protect him. Instead of drawing appropriate lessons from this failed experiment, however, the neocons running the foreign policy of Bush and remaining inside the Obama administration set their sights on Ukraine.

### **One Regime Change Too Many**

It is becoming harder to hide the truth that Washington's ultimate objective to satisfy Ukraine's "Western aspirations" and incorporate it, ultimately, into NATO was what led the U.S. to mount the coup of Feb. 22, 2014, in Kiev. While it may be true that, as is said, revolutions "will not be televised," coups d'État can be YouTubed.

And three weeks *before* the putsch in Kiev, U.S. State Department planning to orchestrate the removal of the Ukraine's duly elected President Viktor Yanukovich and select new leaders for Ukraine was placed chapter and verse on YouTube in the form of a four-minute intercepted telephone conversation between Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and the yes-ma'am U.S. Ambassador in Kiev, Geoffrey Pyatt.

Hearing is believing. And for those in a hurry, here is a very short transcribed excerpt:

Nuland: What do you think?

Pyatt: I think we're in play. The Klitschko [Vitaly Klitschko, one of three main opposition leaders] piece is obviously the complicated electron here. ... I think that's the next phone call you want to set up, is exactly the one you made to Yats [Arseniy Yatseniuk, another opposition leader]. And I'm glad you sort of put him on the spot on where he fits in this scenario. And I'm very glad that he said what he said in response.

Nuland: Good. I don't think Klitsch should go into the government. I don't think it's necessary, I don't think it's a good idea.

Pyatt: Yeah. I guess ... just let him stay out and do his political homework and stuff. ... We want to keep the moderate democrats together. The problem is going to be Tyahnybok [Oleh Tyahnybok, the other main opposition leader, head of the

far-right Svoboda party] and his guys ...

Nuland: [Breaks in] I think Yats is the guy who's got the economic experience, the governing experience. He's the ... what he needs is Klitsch and Tyahnybok on the outside. He needs to be talking to them four times a week, you know. ...

And so, surprise, surprise: "Yats" turned out to be Nuland's guy just three weeks later, being named prime minister right after the putsch on Feb. 22. And he still is. Talk about luck!

However transparent the dark arts of the "Maidan Marionettes" (the title Russian translators gave the images accompanying their version of the conversation on YouTube), these particular heroics are rarely mentioned in "mainstream" U.S. media (MSM). Instead, pride of place is given to Moscow's "aggression" in annexing Crimea, a move that followed Crimea's voters overwhelmingly choosing to bail out on the coup-imposed regime in Kiev and seek to rejoin Russia.

### **Seeing No Nazis**

In the major U.S. media, the violent coup on Feb. 22 spearheaded by well-organized neo-Nazi militias who killed police and seized government buildings was whitewashed from what the American people got to see and hear. In the preferred U.S. narrative, Yanukovych and his officials simply decided to leave town because of the moral force from the white-hatted peaceful protesters in the Maidan.

So it came as a welcome surprise when an Establishment notable like George Friedman, during a Dec. 19 interview with the Russian magazine Kommersant, described the February overthrow of the Ukrainian government as "the most blatant coup in history." Friedman is head of STRATFOR, a think tank often described as a "shadow CIA."

However, in the mainstream U.S. media's narrative as well as others like the BBC where I have had personal experience with the ticklish issue of Ukraine the story of the Ukraine crisis starts with the annexation of Crimea, which is sometimes termed a Russian "invasion" although Russian troops were already stationed inside Crimea at the Russian naval base at Sevastopol. In the MSM, there is "just not enough time, regrettably" to mention NATO's eastward expansion or even the coup in Kiev.

The other favored part of the MSM's narrative is that Putin instigated the Ukraine crisis because he was eager to seize back land lost in the break-up of the Soviet Union. But there is not one scintilla of evidence that the Russians would have taken back Crimea, were it not for the coup engineered by Nuland and implemented by various thugs including openly fascist groups waving banners with

Nazi symbols.

Years ago, Nuland fell in with some very seedy companions. The list is long; suffice it to mention here that she served as Principal Deputy National Security Advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney's in his shadow national security council during the "dark-side" years from 2003 to 2005.

There Nuland reportedly worked on "democracy promotion" in Iraq and did such a terrific job at it that she was promoted, under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to State Department spokesperson and then to Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, giving her the Ukraine account. Nuland is also married to neocon theorist Robert Kagan, whose Project for the New American Century pushed for the invasion of Iraq as early as 1998. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Obama's True Foreign Policy 'Weakness.'](#)"]

By December 2013, Nuland was so confident of her control over U.S. policy toward Ukraine that she publicly reminded Ukrainian business leaders that, to help Ukraine achieve "its European aspirations, we have invested more than \$5 billion." She even waded into the Maidan protests to pass out cookies and urge the demonstrators on.

In keeping her in the State Department and promoting her, Obama and his two secretaries of state Hillary Clinton and John Kerry created a human bridge to the neocons' dark-side years. Nuland also seems to have infected impressionable Obama administration officials with the kind approach to reality attributed by author Ron Suskind to one senior Bush administration official: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality."

This may be the nostrum used by Nuland and Kerry to whom Obama has mostly deferred to run U.S. policy vis-à-vis Russia. Ambassador Matlock will find it small solace, but it may help him understand what seems to be going on in policy toward Ukraine.

Writing early last year on the burgeoning crisis there, Matlock said: "I cannot understand how he [Obama] could fail to recognize that confronting President Putin publicly on an issue that is so central to Russian national pride and honor, not only tends to have the opposite effect on the issue at hand, but actually strengthens tendencies in Russia that we should wish to discourage. It is as if he, along with his advisers, is living in some alternate ideological and psychological universe."

### **Putin: Little Tolerance for Other Reality**

Before finishing with a few recommendations, let's apply the proven tools of media analysis to see if we can discern how Russian President Putin is reacting

to all this. (Hint: He is not going to yield to pressure on the issue of Ukraine.)

At a press conference ten days after the coup in Kiev, Putin complained about “our Western partners” continuing to interfere in Ukraine. “I sometimes get the feeling,” he said, “that somewhere across that huge puddle, in America, people sit in a lab and conduct experiments, as if with rats, without actually understanding the consequences of what they are doing. Why do they need to do this?”

And in a speech two weeks later, Putin said:

“Our colleagues in the West have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed before us an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO’s expansion to the east, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders. It happened with the deployment of a missile defense system.

“They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner. But there is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the line. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard. Today, it is imperative to end this hysteria and refute the rhetoric of the cold war. Russia has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected.”

On Sept. 8, 2013, when Secretary Kerry swore Nuland in as Assistant Secretary of State, he gushed over “Toria’s” accomplishments, with a panegyric fully deserving of the adjective fulsome. It was a huge hint that Kerry would give her free rein in crafting policy toward Russia, Ukraine, et al.

Fortunately, Nuland was not able to sabotage the behind-the-scenes dialogue between Obama and Putin that enabled Putin to dissuade Obama from attacking Syria in September 2013 by convincing him the Syrians were about to agree to destroy all their chemical weapons. Obama had cut Kerry out of those sensitive talks, but left on his own Kerry continued to try to drum up international support for military action against Syria.

That Kerry was blindsided by the extraordinary agreement worked out by Obama and Putin with Syria, became embarrassingly obvious when Kerry, at a press conference in London on Sept. 9, 2013, dismissed any likelihood that Syria would ever agree to let its chemical arsenal be destroyed. Later that same day the agreement to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons was announced.

Sadly, to some significant degree, the U.S. mischief in Ukraine can be regarded as payback from Kerry, his Senate buddy John McCain, and of course Nuland for Russia’s dashing their hopes for a major U.S. military bombing campaign against

the Syrian government.

### **Putin: Kerry “Knows He Is Lying”**

It is rare that a head of state will call the head diplomat of a rival state a “liar.” But that’s what Putin did six days after Obama overruled Kerry and stopped the attack on Syria. On Sept. 5, 2013, as Obama arrived in St. Petersburg for the G-20 summit, Putin referred openly to Kerry’s congressional testimony on Syria a few days earlier in which Kerry greatly exaggerated the strength of the “moderate” rebels in Syria.

Kerry had also repeated highly dubious claim (made 35 times at an Aug. 30 State Department press conference) that the Assad government was behind the chemical attacks near Damascus on Aug. 21, that he had thus had crossed the “red line” Obama had set, and that Syria needed to be admonished by military attack.

About Kerry, Putin took the gloves off: “This was very unpleasant and surprising for me. We talk to them [the Americans], and we assume they are decent people, but he is lying and he knows that he is lying. This is sad.”

Putin’s stern words about Kerry and the behind-the-scenes Obama-Putin collaboration that defused the Syrian crisis of 2013 appear to have awakened the neocons to the need to shatter that cooperation and the Ukraine coup became the perfect device to do so.

### **New Year’s Resolutions**

Five things for Obama to do for a fresh start to the New Year:

1 Fire Kerry and Nuland.

2 Read the New York Times op-ed by Putin on Sept. 11, 2013, just after cooperation with Obama had yielded the extraordinary result of the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons.

3 Stop the foolish talk about the U.S. being “the one indispensable nation.” (The President said this so many times last year that some suspect he is beginning to believe his own rhetoric. This is how Putin chose to address this feel-good, but noxious, triumphalism in ending his op-ed:

“It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord’s blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.”

4 Lean on the Quislings in Kiev to stop their foolishness. One golden opportunity to do that would be to participate in the international summit called for by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko on Jan. 15 in Kazakhstan, where Putin and the leaders of Germany and France are also expected to take part.

5 Finally, pick a different ending this year for your speeches. How about: "God bless the United States of America and the rest of the world, too."

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## Israeli Founder Contesting Founding Myths

The Torah (or Old Testament) is a master work of literature and faith, but it tells many mythological tales that have little or no basis in real history, as Uri Avnery, one of Israel's founders, has had the courage to declare, with an introduction from retired U.S. diplomat William R. Polk.

**William R. Polk:** The speech below is from the great Israeli commentator Uri Avnery, a former Irgun terrorist who fought for the creation of Israel; he also was a member of the Israeli parliament. What he has to say is not exactly new. Much of it has been pointed out by many of us historians for a long time and by other Israeli scholars.

The political effects of the myth on the creation of Israel are laid out by Shlomo Sand in his *The Invention of the Jewish People* and *On the Nation and the Jewish People*. But since neither the reality nor the critique of the myth is known to many, even practicing Jews, and what we know to be factual is firmly disbelieved by many, even practicing Christians, and because, like many religious myths, it can be lethal, the story deserves attention.

We are having enough trouble trying to make peace without being blindsided by myths. So I welcome having the myths treated as they should be treated, as myths, openly by a hero of the Israeli nation. Only if much of the imagination about the past and much of the basis of current ideology can be cleared away do we have a chance.

## **Uri Avnery's keynote speech at Israel's Kinneret College conference on "the Rock of our Existence the connection between Archeology and Ideology":**

First of all, let me thank you for inviting me to address this important conference. I am neither a professor nor a doctor. Indeed, the highest academic title I ever achieved was SEC (Seventh Elementary Class). But like many members of my generation, from early youth I took a profound interest in archeology. I shall try to explain why.

When asking themselves about my connection with archeology, some of you will think about Moshe Dayan. After the June 1967 war, Dayan was a national even international idol. He was also known for his obsession with archeology.

My magazine, "Haolam Hazeh," investigated his activities and found that they were highly destructive. He started digging alone and collecting artifacts all over the country. Since the primary aim of archeology is not simply to discover artifacts but also to date them, and thus to put together a picture of the consecutive history of the site, Dayan's uncontrolled digging created havoc. The fact that he used army resources only worsened matters.

Then we discovered that not only did Dayan expropriate the artifacts which he found (which by law belonged to the state) and stock them at his home, but he had also become an international dealer, getting rich by selling articles "from the personal collection of Moshe Dayan."

Publishing these facts and speaking about them in the Knesset bestowed on me a singular distinction. At the time, a public opinion institute identified every year the "most hated person" in Israel. That year, I attained that honor.

However, the important question does not concern Dayan's morals but a much more profound matter: Why were Dayan and so many of us at the time concerned with archeology, a science considered by many people as a rather dreary business? It held for us a profound fascination.

That Zionist generation was the first one born in the country (though I myself was born in Germany). For their parents, Palestine was an abstract homeland, a land they had dreamed about in the synagogues of Poland and Ukraine. For their native-born sons and daughters it was a natural homeland. They were yearning for roots. They trekked to every corner, spent nights around a campfire, came to know every hill and valley.

For them, the Talmud and all the religious texts were a bore. The Talmud and other scriptures had sustained the Jews in the Diaspora for centuries, but evoked no interest here. The new generation embraced the Hebrew Bible with unbounded enthusiasm, not as a religious book (almost all of us were atheists)

but as an unequalled masterpiece of Hebrew literature.

Since they were also the first generation for whom the rejuvenated Hebrew was their mother tongue, they fell in love with the lively, concrete Biblical Hebrew language. The much more sophisticated, abstract language of the Talmud and other later books repelled them.

The Biblical events had taken place in the country they knew. The Biblical battles had been fought in the valleys they knew, the kings had been crowned and buried in the localities they knew intimately.

They had looked at night at the stars of Megiddo, where the Egyptians had fought the first recorded battle in history (and where, according to the Christian New Testament, the last battle the battle of Armageddon will take place). They stood on Mount Carmel, where the prophet Elias had slaughtered the priests of Baal. They had visited Hebron, where Abraham had been buried by his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, fathers of the Arabs and the Jews.

This passionate attachment to the country was by no means preordained. Indeed, Palestine played no role in the birth of modern political Zionism. As I have mentioned before, the founding father, Theodor Herzl, did not think about Palestine when he invented what became known as Zionism. He hated Palestine and its climate. Especially he hated Jerusalem, which to him was a foul and dirty town.

In the first draft of his idea, which was addressed to the Rothschild family, the land of his dream was Patagonia, in Argentina. There, in recent times, a genocide had taken place, and the land was almost empty. It was only the sentiments of the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe that compelled Herzl to redirect his efforts towards Palestine. In his founding book, *Der Judenstaat* ("the Jewish State"), the relevant chapter is less than a page long and entitled "Palestine or Argentina." The Arab population is not mentioned at all.

Once the Zionist movement directed its thoughts towards Palestine, the ancient history of this country became a hot issue. The Zionist claim to Palestine was solely based on the Biblical history of the Exodus, the conquest of Canaan, the kingdoms of Saul, David and Solomon and the events of those times. Since almost all the founding fathers were avowed atheists, they could hardly base themselves on the "fact" the God had personally promised the land to the seed of Abraham.

So, with the coming of the Zionists to Palestine, a frantic archeological search started. The country was combed for real, scientific proof that the Biblical story was not just a bunch of myths, but real honest-to-God history. (Pun intended.) Christian Zionists came even earlier.

There started a veritable attack on archeological sites. The upper layers of Ottoman and Mamelukes, Arabs and Crusaders, Byzantines and Romans and Greeks and Persians were uncovered and removed in order to lay bare the ancient layer of the Children of Israel and to prove the Bible right.

Huge efforts were made. David Ben-Gurion, a self-appointed Biblical scholar, led the effort. The Chief of Staff of the army, Yigael Yadin, the son of an archeologist, and himself a professional archeologist, searched ancient sites to prove that the Conquest of Canaan really happened. Alas, no proof.

When remnants of the bones of Bar Kochba's fighters were discovered in Judean desert caves, they were buried on Ben-Gurion's orders in a big military ceremony. The uncontested fact that Bar Kochba had caused perhaps the greatest catastrophe in Jewish history was glossed over.

And the result? Incredible as it sounds, four generations of devoted archeologists, with a burning conviction and huge resources, did produce exactly: Nothing.

From the beginning of the effort to this very day, not a single piece of evidence of the ancient history was found. Not a single indication that the exodus from Egypt, the basis of Jewish history, ever happened. Nor of the 40 years of wandering in the desert. No evidence of the conquest of Canaan, as described at length in the Book of Joshua. The mighty King David, whose kingdom extended – according to the Bible – from the Sinai peninsula to the north of Syria, did not leave a trace. (Lately an inscription with the name David was discovered, but with no indication that this David was a king.)

Israel appears for the first time in sound archeological findings in Assyrian inscriptions, which describe a coalition of local kingdoms which tried to stop the Assyrian advance into Syria. Among others, King Ahab of Israel is mentioned as the chief of a considerable military contingent. Ahab, who ruled today's Samaria (in the north of the occupied West Bank) from 871 BC until 852 BC was not beloved by God, though the Bible describes him as a war hero. He marks the beginning of the entry of Israel into proven history.

All these are negative pieces of evidence suggesting that the early Biblical story is invented. Since practically no trace whatsoever of the early Biblical story has been found, does this prove that it is all fiction? Perhaps not. But real proof does exist.

Egyptology is a scientific discipline that is separate from Palestinian archeology. But Egyptology proves conclusively that the Biblical history until King Ahab is indeed fiction.

Up to now, many tens of thousands of Egyptian documents have been deciphered, and the work is still going on. After the Hyksos from Asia invaded Egypt in 1730 BC, the Pharaohs of Egypt took very great pains to watch the happenings in Palestine and Syria. Year after year, Egyptian spies, traders and soldiers reported in great detail on events in every town of Canaan. Not a single item has been found, telling of anything remotely resembling Biblical events. (A single mention of "Israel" on an Egyptian stele is believed to refer to a small territory in the south of Palestine.)

Even if one would like to believe that the Bible only exaggerates real events, the fact is that not even a tiny mention of the exodus, the conquest of Canaan or King David has been found. They just did not happen.

Is this important? Yes and no. The Bible is not real history. It is a monumental religious and literary document, that has inspired untold millions throughout the centuries. It has formed the minds of many generations of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

But history is something else. History tells us what really happened. Archeology is a tool of history, an invaluable tool for the understanding of what took place. These are two different disciplines, and never the twain shall meet.

For the religious, the Bible is a matter of belief. For non-believers, the Hebrew Bible is a great work of art, perhaps the greatest of all. Archeology is something entirely different: a matter of sober, proven facts.

Israeli schools teach the Bible as real history. This means that Israeli children learn only its chapters, true or fictitious. When I once complained about this in a Knesset speech, demanding that the full history of the country throughout the ages be taught, including the chapters of the Crusades and the Mamelukes, the then minister of education started to call me "the Mameluke."

I still believe that every child in this country, Israeli and Palestinian, should learn its full history, from the earliest days to this day, with all its layers. It is the basis of peace, the real Rock Of Our Existence.

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## Israeli Scholar Disputes Founding Myth

**From the Archive:** Twin myths undergird the claim by Israeli hardliners that they own the land of Palestine: the Biblical stories about the Exodus and the ancient kings of Israel and the claim that the Romans forced the Diaspora of Jews to Europe, a fiction that a brave Israeli scholar exploded, as Morgan Strong

reported in 2009.

By Morgan Strong (Originally published April 12, 2009)

The founding narrative of the modern State of Israel was born from the words of Moses in the Old Testament, that God ordered the Jewish people to conquer the land of Israel and that it was to be theirs for all time (a promise supposedly given originally to Abraham).

Then, there was the story of the Diaspora that after Jewish uprisings against the Romans in the First and Second centuries A.D., the Jews were exiled from the land of Israel and dispersed throughout the Western world. They often were isolated from European populations, suffered persecution, and ultimately were marked for extermination in the Nazi Holocaust.

Finally after centuries of praying for a return to Israel, the Jews achieved this goal by defeating the Arab armies in Palestine and establishing Israel in 1948. This narrative spanning more than three millennia is the singular, elemental and sustaining claim of the State of Israel as a Jewish nation.

But a 2008 book by Israeli scholar Shlomo Sand challenges this narrative, claiming that beyond the religious question of whether God really spoke to Abraham and Moses the Roman-era Diaspora did not happen at all or at least not as commonly understood.

In *When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?*, Dr. Sand, an expert on European history at the University of Tel Aviv, says the Diaspora was largely a myth that the Jews were never exiled *en masse* from the Holy Land and that many European Jewish populations converted to the faith centuries later. (Sand's book was published in English as *The Invention of the Jewish People.*)

Thus, Sand argues, many of today's Israelis who emigrated from Europe after World War II have little or no genealogical connection to the land. According to Sand's historical analysis, they are descendents of European converts, principally from the Kingdom of the Khazars in eastern Russia, who embraced Judaism in the Eighth Century, A.D.

The descendants of the Khazars then were driven from their native lands by invasion and conquest and through this migration created the Jewish populations of Eastern Europe, Sands writes. Similarly, he argues that the Jews of Spain came from the conversion of Berber tribes from northern Africa that later migrated into Europe.

## **The Zionist Narrative**

Sand, himself a European Jew born in 1946 to Holocaust survivors in Austria, argues that until little more than a century ago, Jews thought of themselves as Jews because they shared a common religion, not because they possessed a direct lineage to the ancient tribes of Israel.

However, at the turn of the 20th Century, Sand asserts, Zionist Jews began assembling a national history to justify creation of a Jewish state by inventing the idea that Jews existed as a people separate from their religion and that they had primogeniture over the territory that had become known as Palestine.

The Zionists also invented the idea that Jews living in exile were obligated to return to the Promised Land, a concept that had been foreign to Judaism, Sand states.

Like almost everything in the Middle East, this scholarship is fraught with powerful religious, historical and political implications. If Sand's thesis is correct, it would suggest that many of the Palestinian Arabs have a far more substantial claim to the lands of Israel than do many European Jews who arrived there asserting a God-given claim.

Indeed, Sand theorizes that many Jews, who remained in Judea after Roman legions crushed the last uprising in 136 A.D., eventually converted to Christianity or Islam, meaning that the Palestinians who have been crowded into Gaza or concentrated in the West Bank might be direct descendants of Jews from the Roman era.

Despite the political implications of Sand's book, it has not faced what might be expected: a withering assault from right-wing Israelis. The criticism has focused mostly on Sand's credentials as an expert on European history, not ancient Middle Eastern history, a point that Sand readily acknowledges.

One critic, Israel Bartal, dean of humanities at the Hebrew University, attacked Sand's credentials and called Sand's thesis "baseless," but disagreed mostly over Sand's assertion that the Diaspora story was created as an intentional myth by Zionists seeking to fabricate a direct genealogical connection between many of the world's Jews and Israel.

"Although the myth of an exile from the Jewish homeland (Palestine) does exist in popular Israeli culture, it is negligible in serious Jewish historical discussions," Bartal wrote in the newspaper Haaretz. "Important groups in the Jewish national movement expressed reservations regarding this myth or denied it completely.

"The kind of political intervention Sand is talking about, namely, a deliberate program designed to make Israelis forget the true biological origins of the Jews

of Poland and Russia or a directive for the promotion of the story of the Jews' exile from their homeland is pure fantasy."

In other words, Bartal, like some other critics, is not so much disputing Sand's historical claims about the Diaspora or the origins of Eastern European Jews, as he is contesting Sand's notion that Zionists concocted a false history for a cynical political purpose.

But there can be no doubt that the story of the Diaspora has played a key role in the founding of Israel and that the appeal of this powerful narrative has helped the Jewish state generate sympathy around the world, especially in the United States.

"After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people remained faithful to it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom," reads the preamble to the Israeli Declaration of Independence.

### **Reality from Mythology**

In January 2009, as the Israeli army bombarded Palestinians in Gaza in retaliation for rockets fired into southern Israel, the world got an ugly glimpse of what can result when historical myths are allowed to drive wedges between people who otherwise might have a great deal in common.

After the conflict ended with some 1,400 Palestinians dead, including many children and other non-combatants the Israeli government investigated alleged war crimes by its army and heard testimony from Israeli troops that extremist Rabbis had proclaimed the invasion a holy war.

The troops said the Rabbis brought them booklets and articles declaring: "We are the Jewish people. We came to this land by a miracle. God brought us back to this land, and now we need to fight to expel the non-Jews who are interfering with our conquest of this holy land."

In his book and in an interview with Haaretz about his book Sand challenged this core myth. In the interview, he said:

"I started looking in research studies about the exile from the land a constitutive event in Jewish history, almost like the Holocaust. But to my astonishment I discovered that it has no literature. The reason is that no one exiled the people of the country.

"The Romans did not exile peoples and they could not have done so even if they had wanted to. They did not have trains and trucks to deport entire populations.

That kind of logistics did not exist until the 20th Century. From this, in effect, the whole book was born: in the realization that Judaic society was not dispersed and was not exiled.”

**The True Descendants** Asked if he was saying that the true descendants of the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah are the Palestinians, Sand responded:

“No population remains pure over a period of thousands of years. But the chances that the Palestinians are descendants of the ancient Judaic people are much greater than the chances that you or I are its descendents.

“The first Zionists, up until the Arab Revolt [1936-1939], knew that there had been no exiling, and that the Palestinians were descended from the inhabitants of the land. They knew that farmers don’t leave until they are expelled.

“Even Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, the second president of the State of Israel, wrote in 1929 that, ‘the vast majority of the peasant farmers do not have their origins in the Arab conquerors, but rather, before then, in the Jewish farmers who were numerous and a majority in the building of the land.’”

Sand argues further that the Jewish people never existed as a “nation race” but were rather an ethnic mix of disparate peoples who adopted the Jewish religion over a great period of time. Sand dismisses the Zionist argument that the Jews were an isolated and seminal ethnic group that was targeted for dispersal by the Romans.

Although ruthless in putting down challenges to their rule, the Romans allowed subjects in their occupied territories a great many freedoms, including freedom to practice religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly.

Thousands of Jews served in the Roman legions, and there was a sizable Jewish community in Rome itself. Three Jewish descendants of Herod the Great, the Jewish Emperor of Jerusalem, served in the Roman Senate.

Jewish dietary laws were respected under Roman law, as well as the right not to work on the Sabbath. Jewish slaves 1,000 carried to Italy by Emperor Titus after crushing the first Jewish rebellion in 70 A.D. were bought and set free by Jewish families already long settled into Roman society.

After the final Jewish rebellion, the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132-136 A.D., historians say the Romans placed restrictions on Jews entering Jerusalem, which caused other areas, such as Galilee in northern Palestine, to become centers of Jewish learning. But there is little or no evidence of a mass forced relocation.

Sand says the Diaspora was originally a Christian myth that depicted the event

as divine punishment imposed on the Jews for having rejected the Christian gospel.

### **Genetic Evidence**

There has been no serious rebuttal to Sand's book, which has been a bestseller in Israel and Europe. But there were earlier genetic studies attempting to demonstrate an unbroken line of descent among Ashkenazi Jews in Europe from the Hebrew tribes of Israel.

In a genetic study published by the United States National Academy of Sciences, the Y chromosomes of Ashkenazi, Roman, North African, Kurdish, Near Eastern, Yemenite, and Ethiopian Jews were compared with 16 non-Jewish groups from similar geographic locations. It found that despite long-term residence in different countries and isolation from one another, most Jewish populations were not significantly different from one another at the genetic level.

Although the study also demonstrated that 20 percent of the Ashkenazim carry Eastern European gene markers consistent with the Khazars, the results seemed to show that the Ashkenazim were descended from a common Mid-Eastern population and suggested that most Jewish communities have remained relatively isolated from neighboring non-Jewish communities during and after the Diaspora.

However, a monumental genetic study entitled, "The Journey of Man," undertaken in 2002 by Dr. Spencer Wells, a geneticist from Stanford University, demonstrated that virtually all Europeans males carry the same genetic markers found within the male population of the Middle East on the Y chromosomes.

That is simply because the migration of human beings began in Africa and coursed its way through the Middle East and onward, stretching over many thousands of years. In short, we are all pretty much the same.

### **Obsessive Delusion**

Despite the lack of conclusive scientific or historical evidence, the Diaspora narrative proved to be a compelling story, much like the Biblical rendition of the Exodus from Egypt, which historians and archeologists also have questioned in recent years.

It is certainly true that all nations use myths and legend for sustenance; some tales are based on fact, others are convenient self-serving contrivances. However, when myth and legend argue for excess, when they demand a racial, ethnic or religious purity to the exclusion of others so that some prophecy can be fulfilled or some national goal achieved reason and justice can give way to extremism and cruelty.

The motive for creating the state of Israel was to provide respite for the Jews of Europe after World War II, but that worthy cause has now been contorted into an obsessive delusion about an Israeli right to mistreat and persecute Palestinians.

When right-wing Israeli Rabbis speak of driving non-Jews out of the land that God supposedly gave to the Israelites and their descendants, these Rabbis may be speaking with full faith, but faith is by definition an unshakable belief in something that taken by itself cannot be proven.

This faith or delusion also is drawing in the rest of the world. The bloody war in Iraq was an appendage to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as is the dangerous rise of Islamic fundamentalism across the region.

There is also now the irony that modern Israel was established by Jews of European origin, many of whom may be ethnically unconnected to Palestine. Another cruel aspect of this irony is that the descendants of the ancient Israelites may include many Palestinians, who are genetically indistinct from the Sephardic Jews who were, like the Palestinians, original and indigenous inhabitants of this ancient land.

Yasir Arafat told me quite often that the Israelis are really cousins of the Palestinians. He may have been wrong; they are more likely brothers and sisters.

**Morgan Strong is a former professor of Middle Eastern history, and was an advisor to CBS News "60 Minutes" on the Middle East.**

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