Portrait of Israel shows both good, 'seamy' sides

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After a visit in 1898, German Emperor William II concluded that it was "a terrible country, without water and without shade." Within a half century, however, a lot would change in the land called Israel - and Palestine.

The establishment of a prosperous and powerful Jewish State was a miracle, Martin Van Crevel, an emeritus professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and an expert on military history, reminds us. A proud patriot and a political centrist, Van Crevel provides a lucid, learned, lively, candid and, at times, critical portrait of the nation, from its Zionist origins to the present day. No other country, he claims, "has confronted greater obstacles or made greater progress in overcoming them."

He doesn’t hesitate, however, to describe the "seamy sides" of Israeli policy, including the "problematic questions" of "defensible borders," settlements in occupied territories and discrimination against Israeli Arabs. Or to accuse left-wingers and right-wingers of putting ideology above everything else and responding to bloodshed "with crocodile tears."

Van Crevel’s assessments of Israel’s politicians, in both the Labor and Likud parties, are smart and tart. Menachim Begin, he writes, was a "demagogue, first and foremost," an ideologue "in love with his own voice." Yitzhak Rabin was "something of a slow thinker." Ehud Barak gave the impression "that he did not know what he was doing even when he was doing nothing." And Benjamin Netanyahu, who, as Finance Minister in 2003, "probably saved Israel from economic collapse," is best known to his fellow citizens for his ostentatious lifestyle; his wife, a former stewardess, "who is intensely disliked;" and the "difficulty he has in separating truth from fiction."

Complementing the insightful, (and, for some, familiar) accounts of Israel’s politics and its wars is a fresh and fascinating examination of the nation’s social, cultural and religious practices.

Van Crevel documents the crucial role of foreign capital in the nation’s economic development. Contributions by American Jews are well-known, of course, but Holocaust reparations paid by the German government, he reveals, financed 9 percent of all imports and 17 percent of the balance of payments deficits between 1953 and 1964.

They also helped pay for an extraordinary educational infrastructure. Illiteracy, which remains rampant in the region, was virtually eliminated early on in Israel. Between 1981 and 2005, Israel led the world in the number of papers published per one thousand in population in computer science, economics, business administration and mathematics. It’s in the top five in biology, chemistry, material science, space science, clinical medicine and the social sciences.

Van Crevel is anything but Pollyannaish about Israel’s future, especially if it refuses to dismantle the settlements. But at its best, he demonstrates, Israel is dynamic, diverse and democratic. Israeli Arabs have a higher standard of living than their brethren throughout the Middle East - and Israel is the only country in the region where their votes (women included) can make a difference.

For many reasons, Van Crevel acknowledges, "it might have been better for Israel if it had been established on some island not too far from the equator."

He’s not alone, however, in rejoicing that it wasn’t.

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