

HOLOCAUST AND NAKBA IN PHILOSOPHY

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*Nakba is ignored in Western philosophy encyclopedias, and the notion of genocide is rarely explained.
In turn, there is much talk about the Holocaust.*

Today, accusations of *genocide* are often heard. “Genocide” is a term generalized from a historical event called the “Holocaust”.

The *Holocaust* was the systematic, state-sponsored killing of six million Jewish men, women and children and millions of others by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during the Second World War (1939–1945).

Genocide is the deliberate and systematic extermination of a group of people because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion or race.

We can read that the concept of genocide was defined by [Raphael Lemkin](#) in 1944.

In the context of the renewed war between Israel and the Palestinians, the term “Holocaust” has recently come up again.

In particular, the attack committed by Palestinian fighters (Hamas) in Israel on 07 October 2023 has been compared to the Holocaust. Many Jews in Israel also believe that the Palestinians want to inflict a new holocaust on them.

In this context, however, the name “Nakba” came up, which is often used by Palestinians but less familiar to Europeans.

Palestinians believe that Israel is now, after 07 October, making them a new nakba in the Gaza Strip.

About the *Nakba*, *Wikipedia* writes:

The Nakba (Arabic: النكبة, romanized: an-Nakbah, lit. ‘the “disaster”, “catastrophe”, or “cataclysm”’), also known as the Palestinian Catastrophe, was the destruction of the Palestinian society and homeland in 1948, and the permanent displacement of a majority of the Palestinian Arabs. The term is used to describe both the events of 1948 and the ongoing occupation of the Palestinians in the Palestinian territories (the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip), as well as

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their persecution and displacement in the Palestinian territories and in Palestinian refugee camps throughout the region.

The foundational events of the Nakba took place during and shortly after the 1948 Palestine war, including 78% of Mandatory Palestine being declared as Israel, the expulsion and flight of 700,000 Palestinians, the related depopulation and destruction of over 500 Palestinian villages by Israeli armed forces and subsequent geographical erasure, the denial of the Palestinian right of return, the creation of permanent Palestinian refugees, and the “shattering of Palestinian society”. The expulsion of the Palestinians has since been described by some historians, such as Benny Morris and Ilan Pappé, and Nakba researchers, such as Salman Abu Sitta, as an ethnic cleansing.

When it comes to describing such great calamities that have befallen a nation, several concepts come into play, forming a tightly intertwined cluster: genocide, ethnic cleansing, forced deportation, apartheid, populicide, mass murder, war crimes, crimes against humanity, Etc.

In the present essay, it shall not be assumed that Nakba was (or was not) genocide or ethnic cleansing, Etc. Neither shall we try to prove or refute such claims.

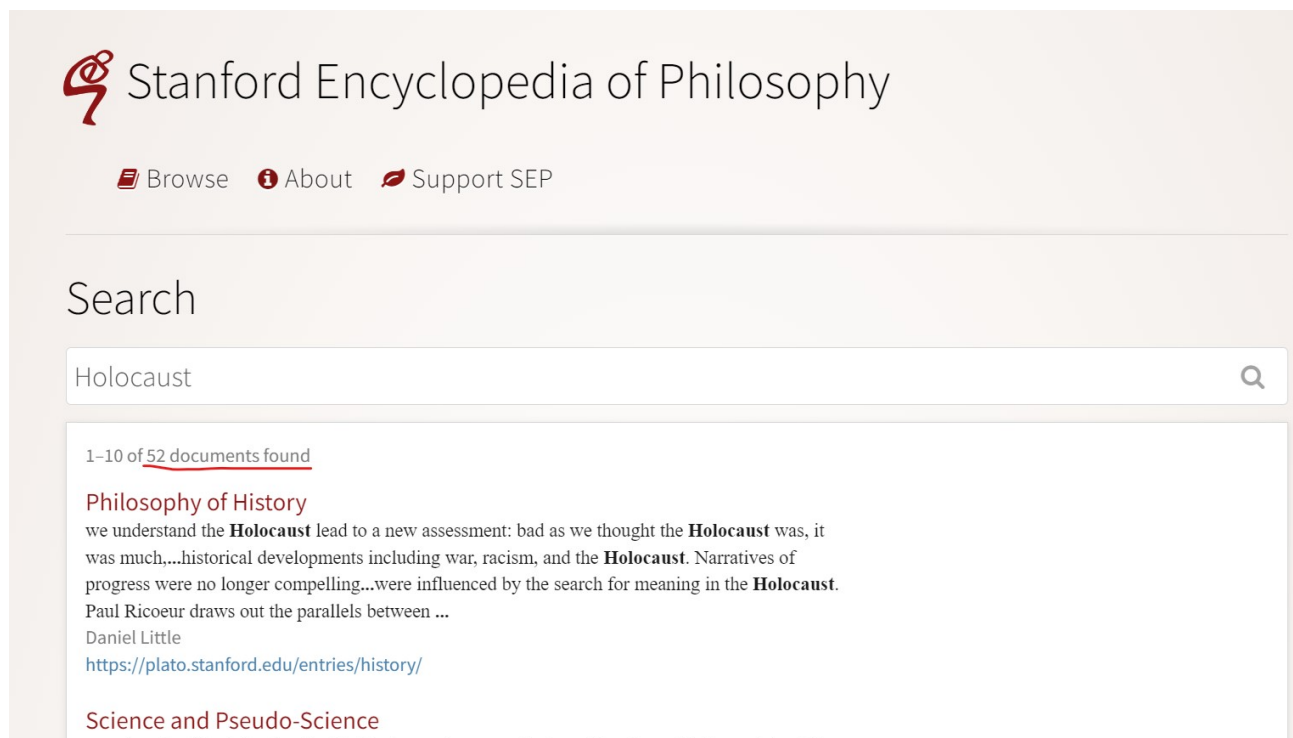
For this essay, it is sufficient to note that it is a reasonable initial working hypothesis that Nakba was genocide or something similar. However, the only assumption we indeed need is the fact that Nakba was a great calamity and that many people (even if not in the West) and several experts believe that Nakba was genocide or something close to it.

The Holocaust and the Nakba in Philosophy Encyclopedias

Since the term “genocide” has a role in political philosophy, but this term is generalized from the event “Holocaust”, to which the event “Nakba” seems to resemble, I started to examine whether the latter two expressions appear in encyclopedias of philosophy (this essay is limited to examining encyclopedias).

My dismay was great.

In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the phrase [“Holocaust”](#) appears 52 times.

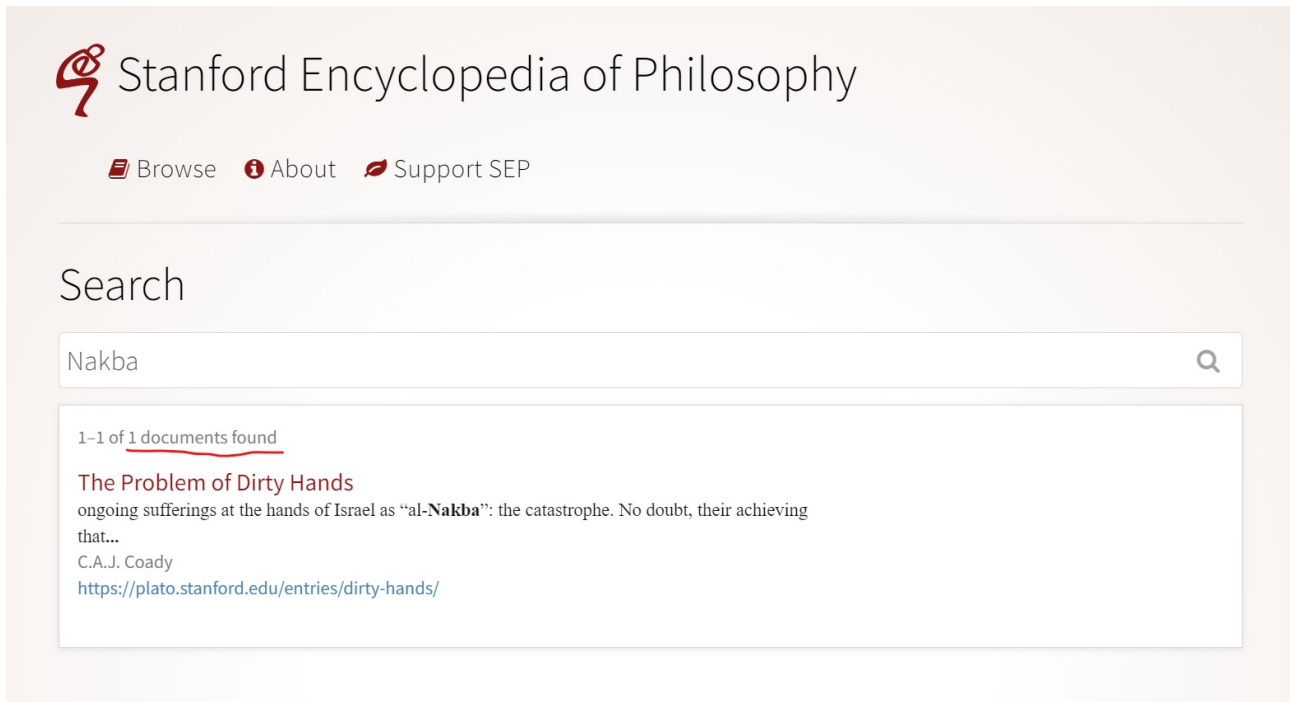


The screenshot shows the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy website. At the top left is the logo, a stylized red 'S' with a white 'P' inside. To its right is the text 'Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy'. Below the logo are three navigation links: 'Browse' with a book icon, 'About' with an information icon, and 'Support SEP' with a leaf icon. A search bar is located below the navigation links, containing the text 'Holocaust' and a magnifying glass icon. Below the search bar, the text '1-10 of 52 documents found' is displayed. The first search result is titled 'Philosophy of History' in red. The text of the result reads: 'we understand the **Holocaust** lead to a new assessment: bad as we thought the **Holocaust** was, it was much,...historical developments including war, racism, and the **Holocaust**. Narratives of progress were no longer compelling...were influenced by the search for meaning in the **Holocaust**. Paul Ricoeur draws out the parallels between ... Daniel Little <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/history/>'. Below this result, the text 'Science and Pseudo-Science' is visible in red.

“The Holocaust” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Holocaust and Nakba in Philosophy

On the other hand, the phrase [“Nakba”](#) appears only once.



The screenshot shows the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) website. At the top left is the SEP logo, a stylized red 'S' with a red 'E' inside. To its right is the text 'Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy'. Below the logo are three navigation links: 'Browse' with a red book icon, 'About' with a red information icon, and 'Support SEP' with a red leaf icon. A horizontal line separates the navigation from the search area. The search area has the word 'Search' in a large font. Below it is a search input field containing the text 'Nakba' and a magnifying glass icon on the right. Below the search field is a results box. At the top of the results box, it says '1-1 of 1 documents found' with a red underline under '1'. Below this is the title 'The Problem of Dirty Hands' in bold. The first line of the abstract reads 'ongoing sufferings at the hands of Israel as “al-Nakba”: the catastrophe. No doubt, their achieving that...'. Below the abstract is the author's name 'C.A.J. Coady' and a blue hyperlink 'https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dirty-hands/'.

“Nakba” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

The phrase "[Holocaust](#)" appears 69 times in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

About 69 results (0.31 seconds)

Solipsism and the Problem of Other Minds | Internet Encyclopedia of ...

iep.utm.edu › solipsis

" However, the sole survivor of a nuclear **holocaust** ... Such a context exists for the hypothetical last survivor of a nuclear **holocaust**, but not for the solipsist ...

Empathy and Sympathy in Ethics | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

iep.utm.edu › empathy-sympathy-in-ethics

The roles of Friedrich Nietzsche, the **Holocaust**, and the "Other," especially in Emmanuel Levinas, are distinguishing marks of the ethical approach on the ...

Sartre's Political Philosophy | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

iep.utm.edu › sartre-p



The most famous example is Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, a blistering criticism of French complicity in the **Holocaust** which also put forth the general ...

Open Theism | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

iep.utm.edu › o-theism

For assuming that the **holocaust** was still avoidable in 1935, and assuming that God has not yet "looked" beyond 1935, He does not yet know what will occur in the ...

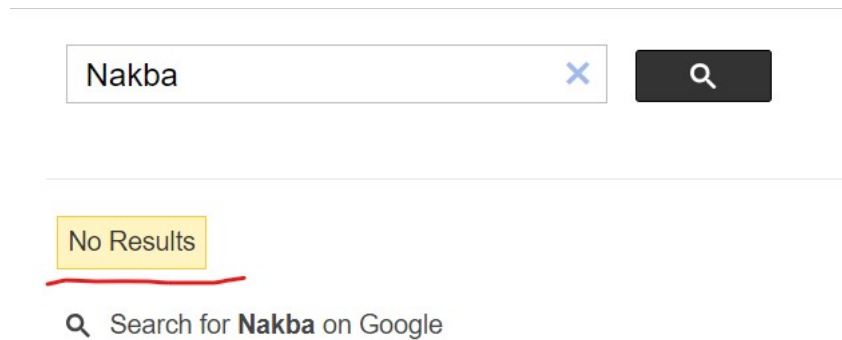
Blanchot, Maurice | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

iep.utm.edu › maurice-blanchot

At the heart of Blanchot's text is the notion of the disaster itself. Not merely synonymous with

"The Holocaust" in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

On the other hand, the expression [“Nakba”](#) does not appear.



“Nakba” in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

I conclude from this that Western philosophy is Jewish–centric on the question of genocide.

Even if this does not affect the definition of the term, it certainly affects the worldview of students and practitioners of Western philosophy.

The choice of paradigmatic examples used to illustrate the concept shapes the dispositions of when to use the concept and when not to.

For example, it is refrained from forming the sentence.

“The Nakba was genocide,”

or the sentence

“Today, in 2023, Israel is carrying out genocide in the Gaza Strip.”

It is useless to object here that during the Holocaust, a massive number (six million) of people were killed. Suppose that a nation of “only” one million people were exterminated. It is not a philosophy that would miss it.

It is also useless to argue that Nakba was not *genocide*. If Nakba is missing from these encyclopedias, it is also missing in the context of ethnic cleansing, forced deportation, Etc.

Finally, it is beside the point to argue from the truth, justification, or refutation. Nakba is a good candidate for genocide, ethnic cleansing, Etc. Nevertheless, it is ignored.

Nakba is out of the *discourse*. Western philosophy cultivates the unconscious disposition that sentences like “Nakba was genocide,” are category mistakes that do not belong to epistemic evaluation.

Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy Ignores the Concept of Genocide

In the solid, printed, multi-volume edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Ed. Edward Craig, London and New York: Routledge, 1998), there is no such expression as “Nakba” at all — neither in the headings nor in the text.

What is astonishing, however, is that this encyclopedia of philosophy does not include the keyword “genocide”. The word “genocide” appears here and there in the text in various articles, but the term is not explained.

However, there is a five-page chapter in this encyclopedia entitled “Holocaust, the” by Steven T. Katz, who has published a book on modern Jewish thought.

In this article, it is reported that the most important philosophical authors on the Holocaust are Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim and Arthur A. Cohen.

The notion of genocide is not introduced in this article, although the phrase “genocidal” does appear in an undefined form in one sentence.

I find the “philosophy” of this encyclopedia rather strange: it fails to generalise the term “genocide” from the event called “Holocaust”. This is so even though after the Holocaust during the Second World War, [the concept of “genocide” as a crime](#) was written into international law as early as 1946!

However, the review of Jewish philosophers’ treatment of the Holocaust in the article gives the impression that these authors’ vision of the Holocaust is Jewish-centric. The debate is primarily about what conclusion the Jews should draw from the Holocaust rather than what conclusion humanity as a whole should draw.

Essentially, from the event called “the Holocaust”, the concept “holocaust” is derived, which covers all conceivable massacres of Jews as the victims. However, it gives the impression that the existence of other nations and the genocides perpetrated against them are ignored.

This encyclopedia article states, among other things, that in Arthur A. Cohen’s approach, the Holocaust is “unique”.

From this and some other sentences in this article, the hypothesis arises that some Jewish philosophers consider Jews to be a chosen people, which is why the Holocaust as an event is not addressed as an instance of genocide. This is a kind of “national solipsism”.

Such a hypothesis would require more thorough and detailed testing, which cannot be undertaken without being an expert in Jewish philosophy (however, see the paragraph below).

Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics on Judaism

The Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics (Ed. Ruth Chadwick, Amsterdam, Etc.: Academic Press, 2nd ed., 2012) does not use the term “Nakba”.

There is no chapter on the Holocaust, but the phrase does appear in the text.

There is also no chapter on genocide, but the phrase occurs quite frequently in the text and is given a brief definition on p. 665. Furthermore, we learn from this encyclopedia that in Germany and several other countries, “Holocaust denial” is prohibited by law, but nowhere is it explained in what sense “denial” is prohibited.

Not once in this encyclopedia does the term “genocide” appear in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in such a way that the Palestinians stand out as victims of genocide.

However, in the chapter “Judaism”, in the subsection “Power, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel”, we learn that the event Holocaust radicalized the views of some Jewish thinkers to the point that they came to believe that:

... today it is incumbent upon Jews to take on themselves the responsibility for their own survival. This will sometimes involve killing innocent people, if they are close to the enemy, or acting disproportionately when retaliating for some injury done to the State of Israel. This is justified in terms of the necessity to avoid innocent Jews being killed as occurred on such a large scale in the Holocaust. (p. 790)

It is unfortunate, but this ideology can lead to terrorism and genocide.

And what happens when one faces a strong opponent who thinks the same way?

Perhaps, then, it is a regression into something akin to a “state of nature” between countries or nations.

Perhaps this is where the dog is buried.

The Holocaust and the Nakba in General Encyclopedias

It was only later that it occurred to me to check how the words “Holocaust” and “Nakba” fare in general encyclopedias that are not specifically encyclopedias of philosophy.

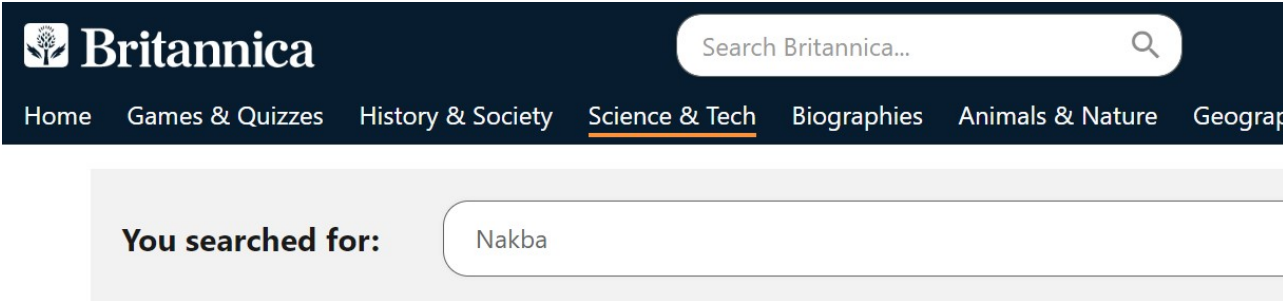
Of course, the quickest way is to consult online encyclopedias.

As the United Kingdom was the initiator of the establishment of the State of Israel, I had a premonition that in British encyclopedias, the term “Nakba” is rarely used and/or poorly explained, and without criticizing Israel.

In any case, *Encyclopedia Britannica* met these expectations.

The phrase [“Holocaust”](#) appears in countless articles.

The word [“Nakba”](#) also appears in two articles.



The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the Encyclopedia Britannica website. The search bar contains the text "Search Britannica...". Below the search bar, the navigation menu includes "Home", "Games & Quizzes", "History & Society", "Science & Tech" (which is underlined), "Biographies", "Animals & Nature", and "Geography". Below the navigation bar, a search results section is visible. It starts with "You searched for:" followed by a search box containing the word "Nakba".

Deir Yassin (Palestine)

Deir Yassin, Arabic Dayr Yasin, Palestinian Arab village that was located just west of Jerusalem. On April 9, 1948, on the eve of the Arab-Israeli ...

Arab-Israeli wars

Arab-Israeli wars, series of military conflicts between Israeli forces and various Arab forces, most notably in 1948-49, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, and 2006. This article ...

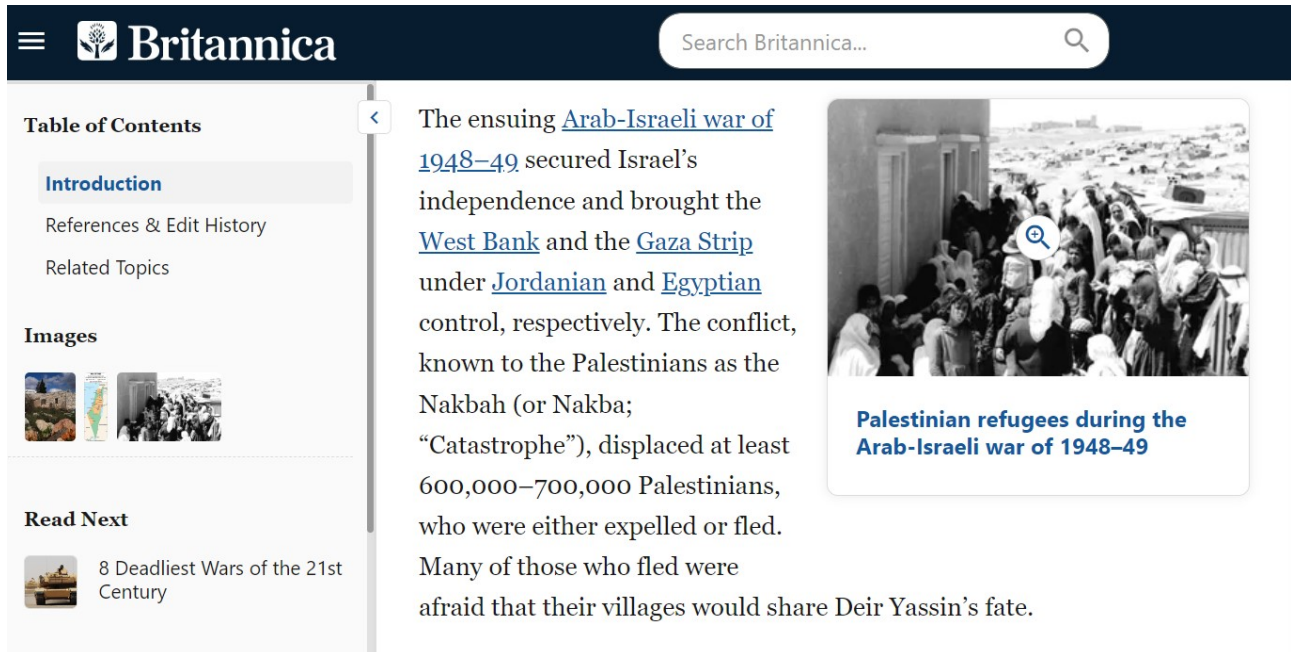
“Nakba” in the Encyclopedia Britannica

One of these articles states laconically that the Arabs are thus calling the harmful consequences of the first Israeli/Arab war (1948–1949) on the local Arab population.

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The second article, entitled “[Deir Yassin](#)”, goes into a little more detail about Nakba. We learn that between 600 000 and 700 000 Palestinians were displaced by Israel’s war of independence:

The conflict, known to the Palestinians as the Nakbah (or Nakba; “Catastrophe”), displaced at least 600,000–700,000 Palestinians, who were either expelled or fled.



The screenshot shows the Britannica website interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the text "Search Britannica...". Below the search bar, the article title "The ensuing [Arab-Israeli war of 1948–49](#) secured Israel's independence and brought the [West Bank](#) and the [Gaza Strip](#) under [Jordanian](#) and [Egyptian](#) control, respectively. The conflict, known to the Palestinians as the Nakbah (or Nakba; “Catastrophe”), displaced at least 600,000–700,000 Palestinians, who were either expelled or fled. Many of those who fled were afraid that their villages would share Deir Yassin's fate." is displayed. To the right of the text is a photograph of a large group of people, identified as "Palestinian refugees during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948–49". On the left side of the page, there is a "Table of Contents" section with links to "Introduction", "References & Edit History", and "Related Topics". Below this is an "Images" section with three small thumbnail images. At the bottom left, there is a "Read Next" section with a link to "8 Deadliest Wars of the 21st Century".

“Nakba” in the Encyclopedia Britannica

However, the article “[NAKBA, AL-](#)” in the online encyclopedia “[Encyclopedia.com](#)” has more information about Nakba.

Among other things, I found the following information in this article:

An immediate cause of the disaster [Nakba] was Palestinian and Arab rejection of the 29 November 1947 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 (the partition resolution), which awarded the Zionists (who were one-third of the population and owned about 7% of the land) roughly 55 percent of Palestine.

Another immediate contributory cause of alNakba was a Zionist (later Israeli) policy of cleansing, a term used at the time, along with transfer. Many Zionist leaders believed, even before 1948, that in order to establish an ethnically Jewish state, and for the Palestinians to avoid becoming a fifth column within that state, it would be necessary to remove them.

A more specific, but not philosophical, encyclopedia is the *Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought* (Ed. Gregory Claeys, Los Angeles, Etc.: SAGE, 2013).

In the latter, the expression “Nakba” does not appear. There is no chapter on the Holocaust, but the term appears frequently in the text. There is a chapter on “Genocide”, and this term also appears frequently in the text. In addition to the Holocaust, the encyclopedia also deals with several other genocides but never mentions Palestine or the Palestinians as victims or potential victims.

My new, complementary hypothesis is now that not only Western philosophy encyclopedias but Western discourse in general have emphasized the Holocaust and attempted to conceal the Nakba, which began only a few years after the Holocaust ended.

On Holocaust Denial

“Holocaust denial” is forbidden in Germany and, unbeknownst to me, in some other European countries, although it is not at all clear to me what does and does not count as “denial”.

We also learn from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that “Holocaust denial” is a “pseudoscience”. [Sven Ove Hansson](#):

The term “denial” was first used about the pseudo–scientific claim that the Nazi holocaust never took place.

5. Two forms of pseudo-science

Some forms of pseudoscience have as their main objective the promotion of a particular theory of their own, whereas others are driven by a desire to fight down some scientific theory or branch of science. The former type of pseudoscience has been called *pseudo-theory promotion*, and the latter *science denial(ism)* (Hansson 2017). Pseudo-theory promotion is exemplified by homeopathy, astrology, and ancient astronaut theories. The term “denial” was first used about the pseudo-scientific claim that the Nazi holocaust never took place. The phrase “holocaust denial” was in use already in the early 1980s (Gleberzon 1983). The term “climate change denial” became common around 2005 (e.g. Williams 2005). Other forms of science denial are relativity theory denial, tobacco disease denial, hiv denialism, and vaccination denialism.

A pseudoscientific claim according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Well, that is a completely absurd position because a proposition that a particular event did not actually happen need not claim to be a scientific theory. At the same time, it can be based on scientific methods. Science is fallible.

We should still stick to the common sense definition provided by Lakatos:

Pseudoscience is an activity that does not use scientific methods, is non–science, but pretends to be science.

On Universality and Symmetry

Laws and moral principles should be universal. Principles should apply equally to all.

However, obviously, the principles are applied selectively, distinguishing between “us” and “them”, “ours” and “theirs”.

However, we can expect a symmetry here, that as we ignore them, they ignore us.

We ignore their catastrophes, and they ignore our catastrophes.

Our symmetry violations and their symmetry violations are mutually symmetric.

Understandably, within the Western information bubble, the denial of the Nakba is not criminalized, and Western encyclopedias of philosophy do not write such absurdities as:

“Nakba denial is pseudoscience.”

However, there are several questions that I cannot quickly check because of my lack of knowledge of languages.

For example, it would be interesting to know whether these attitudes are symmetrical: whether there is much talk about the Nakba and little about the Holocaust in Arab philosophy or Arabic-language encyclopedias of philosophy, as well as in their general encyclopedias.

22 October – 05 December 2023, Tallinn

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Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

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