

States make buses, and buses makes States: Israeli Public Transportation as Nation-State Builders

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Abstract:

Egged is the largest public transportation company within the 1948 territories of Israel, and their green buses are a common sight on every road in every city in Israel. To this day Egged remains a centralized institution with government support and near sacrosanct status in Israeli popular culture. The Egged History Center (EHC) and its museum (EHCM) serve as the site of departure for this research. Through visual and discourse analysis of the Egged History Center and museum, I argue that the buses on display at the EHCM reinforce the ties of Egged buses to militarization, security, and the creation of national identity. The buses are in fact tools of state-building and nation-building both through their explicit participation as vehicles of the security apparatus as well as their role in reinforcing national narratives. Rather than being a banal object of modernity, buses are in fact at the heart of contemporary contentious politics.

Keywords: public transportation, nationalism, state-building, museums, Egged, Israel

Egged is the largest public transportation company within the 1948 territories of Israel, and their green buses are a common sight on every road in every city in Israel. Egged buses are ubiquitous, not only on the streets, but also in historical political narratives regarding the founding of the State of Israel. The Egged bus company, so dubbed by the national poet Bialik (*Egged*, meaning “united”), emerged as a consolidation of four separate bus companies in 1933 and remained a nationalized worker’s cooperative until 2019 (Egged 2019, Russel 1995: 134). To this day Egged remains a centralized institution with government support and near sacrosanct status in Israeli popular culture. The Egged History Center and its museum serves as the site of departure for this research.

The Egged History Center Museum of Public Transit (EHCM) displays sixty-two buses, “lovingly restored,” from pre-WWI through the twenty-first century (Egged n.d.a.). The vehicles sit outside in an unassuming parking lot in a peripheral suburb of Tel Aviv called Holon—a town known for its industrial production and working-class neighborhoods rather than tourist attractions. In this out of the way bus depot in Holon, we find a careful creation of state-building through national narratives and history of the State of Israel.

What can we learn about the historical foundations of the State of Israel through public transportation? What role (if any) do buses and public transportation play the establishment of the State of Israel? What meaning do everyday citizens attribute to buses and public transit—both historically and contemporaneously? Finally, does a perspective that centers quotidian action and objects help us to understand politics?

Through visual and discourse¹ analysis of the Egged History Center’s digital collections, including its virtual museum tour,² I trace how two themes emerge: 1) the central role of buses and public transit in the Israeli security apparatus—both buses and bus drivers, and 2) the creation of a national identity connected to buses. Together these elements show how the role of infrastructure

¹ All Hebrew translations of text and discourse are my own

² Due to COVID-19, I was limited to accessing the history center and museum online. Future work will include an in-person visit and supplement this research with ethnographic observations.

both reinforces and builds historical national narratives, and how the presumed banality of public transportation creates an important realm of politics that impacts the everyday lives of people in the region today

I. Politics of Public Transit and Museums

This work is shaped by the politics of museums as sites of nationalist construction—such as that of Benedict Anderson (2006), Ariel Azoulay (2019), Tony Bennett (1995), and Wendy Brown (2006)—as well as politics of public transportation (Anand et al. 2018, Carse 2016).

If we explore the political nature of both public transit and museums, it becomes clear that “...the meaning of the past does not reside in the past but belongs in the present” (Tilley 1994: 73). Public

transit systems, like all infrastructure projects, are embedded in modernization and colonial projects throughout the world (Mitchell 2014, Carse 2016) and are thus inherently political (Larkin 2013, Wilson 2016, Winner 1980). Infrastructure, both material and intangible, shapes the way that people navigate their lives and often is a display of state capacity as promised services become sites of power consolidation and a channel of territorial expansion (Anand et al. 2018). This is especially apparent in contested territories (Abu-Ayyash 1976, Bollens 2000, Faludi 1997, Weizman 2007, Yiftachael 1998). Scholars have studied how public transit interfaces with class (Rogalsky 2010, Weston 2008), race (Parks 2016), gender (Lubitow et al. 2017, Williams 2009), and (dis)ability (Couser 2005) as well as how public transportation intertwines with colonial projects of modernization (Griffin 2020, Porter 2010).

What makes the ECHM surprising is the way in which a banal display of buses becomes a site of explicit nationalism. This is unexpected as we are more accustomed to museums that include art, artifacts, collections of objects and memorials that do the work of building national narratives than a museum of transit (Anderson 2006). Transportation museums generally focus on a narrative of technological innovation and industry through the ages (Divall & Scott 2001). Museums are well known sites for preserving history and nation building. Most often they are places that gather and collect artifacts to preserve and foster a collective memory, narrative, or commemorate and memorialize certain traumatic events (Brown 2006). They become sites of colonial power exerted upon material culture (Azoulay 2019, Barringer et al. 1998). Therefore “...museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political” (Anderson 2006: 178). Museums that recount Israeli and Palestinian history, contested as it is, become powerful sites to relive collective trauma and reinforce narratives of victimhood and battles for legitimacy and recognition (De Cesari 2019, Trevisan et al. 2013).

Together, these conversations help us to see how a collective narrative emerges that centers public transportation as a key actor in the creation of the State of Israel. This is confirmed by scholars who highlight the presumed banality of less visible everyday items and patterns of behavior construct national-identities and foster nationalist ideologies (Billing 1995). This approach emphasizes why investigating the ways that nationhood is “expressed, enacted, and



understood in everyday life” (Brubaker et al. 2008: xiii) is key to understanding local processes of meaning-making.

What can we learn about the historical foundations of the State of Israel through public transportation? What role (if any) do buses and public transportation play the establishment of the State of Israel? What meaning do everyday citizens attribute to buses and public transit—both historically and contemporaneously? Finally, does this perspective that centers quotidian action and objects help us to understand politics? We can use visual and discourse analysis of the online museum to answer these questions.

II. Museum as Text: Methods

Methods: Visual and Discourse Analysis

The EHCM invites groups to visit the museum, walk past the buses, and read the yellow placards that tell the story of each bus. The details include the date of construction, the bus’s nickname, registration number, make and model, and any significant details attributed to that bus. Each bus has a story. In this section, I propose that we read this museum as text (Barthes 1972, Taylor 2004), and through discourse and visual analysis unpack the role of public transit as nation-builders in twentieth century Israel. This work is further supplemented by the Egged History Center’s online photo galleries and published articles.

The History Center has images in an online gallery of all the buses, and as an observer we can trace the shifting colors, designs, and international producers of each bus. Initially there is an emphasis on dark, olive green that is reminiscent of army camouflage. Post-1948, the buses are white with sky blue accents and stripes—evocative of the Israeli flag. What does this basic visual analysis tell us? Already we are exposed to a military, diplomatic, and national history simply through the coloring of the vehicles over ninety years.

Applying discourse analysis to each bus’s placard alerts us to nicknames and key historical details. There are buses specifically used for school tour groups (one is nicknamed *moledet* [homeland]), transporting of soldiers and army supplies (*coachi* [my strength]), a military ambulance during the 1967 and 1973 wars (“City”) and tourists (“foreign made”). A bus imported from Greece is gendered and called the *Yavaniyya* [Greek woman] as well as one from Holland, *Hollandit* [Dutch woman] and simple feminine names like “Zelda.” Others have monikers such as ‘the bathtub,’ ‘panther,’ ‘the tiger,’ ‘jumbo.’ The colloquial tenderness evoked by nicknames also clues us in to the relationships between drivers and *their* buses—something that also emerges in the archival articles, and interviews with bus drivers on the online history website. These observations allude to the leverage that visual and discourse analysis offers and is the foundation for the next three sections that explore how exactly buses contribute to the project of state-building from 1948-present day Israel.

III. Creating the Security Apparatus: vehicles and drivers

States Make War (and Buses)

Reappropriating Tilly’s famous adage that “states make war and war makes states” (1985) allows us to use an interesting lens when considering the way that the EHCM centers buses within wars. This shows us how buses and public transportation are an important tool for state-building—a phenomena that is not unique to Israel but rather has been used historically for colonial enterprises (Carse 2016).

Beginning with the 1948 War, known to Israelis as the War of Independence and to Palestinians as the *Nakba*, which is “considered *the* seminal event in the history of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict” (Gelvin 2005:127), buses are present. According to the museum, and to historians associated with Egged, the 1948 War began with an attack on a bus on November 30, 1947, the day after the UN adopted the Partition Plan for Palestine (UN 181). This is corroborated by revisionist historian Benny Morris who writes,

“On the morning of November 30 a band of Arabs ambushed a bus near Kfar Syrkin, killing five Jews and wounding several others. Twenty-five minutes later they let loose at a second bus, killing two more people. ...These were the first casualties of the first Arab-Israeli war” (Morris 1999: 190).

In a documentary for the Israeli History channel, previous CEO of Egged Yoska Harrari said that the War for Independence began “at the very moment” that the buses were attacked (Arutz Ha’Historia 2016). The narrative put forward by the bus company, the museum, and its drivers takes this moment as its starting point and places buses and bus drivers within the very history of the establishment of the State of Israel. Egged archivist Zvi Weinstock writes, “It is difficult today to describe the state of the State of Israel without these transport cooperatives [that were eventually merged into Egged]” (Weinstock n.d.a).

The overlaps with the history of the beginning of the State of Israel is not an implicit connection; the museum’s welcome website claims that at the museum visitors can “get to know story of Egged close-up and it’s overlaps with the history of the growth of the State of Israel” (Egged n.d.e.). If we read these points at the museum as a timeline in conjunction with military events in the national narrative of the State of Israel—specifically major wars in the Arab-Israeli conflict—these vehicles are being used to construct a narrative of victory with Egged and its buses in the middle of the fighting. The history of wars continues with the selected buses on display at the museum including:

1. “White Super bus” that was attacked in Rosh Pina and smuggled into Lebanon in 1948
2. “Leyland 1956 bus” that brought supplies to troops during the 1967 war
3. “RT Mark 2-1958 bus” manufactured specifically to celebrate 10 years of Israeli independence.
4. “Leyland 1973 bus” that was converted to be used as an ambulance for soldiers during the 1973 war with Egypt.
5. “1940 Fargo bus,” which had previously been in the British Army, that the Israeli army took as ‘war booty’ from Jordan during the Six Day War in 1967
6. “RT-Mark 2 bus” used to supply parcels to troops during the Six Day War
7. “Leyland 1969 bus” used to carry soldiers during Yom Kippur War in 1973
8. “*Coachi* [my strength] bus” used “for carrying soldiers during Yom Kippur and Shalom Ha-Galil wars”
9. Mercedes model 0-303 called “Megunenet” [the protected], which was used as an armored vehicle on the Gush Katif routes and Israeli settlements in Gaza beginning in 1992
10. And finally, the RT Mark 2- 1968, the first air-conditioned bus used for tourists. Nicknamed “The Camel.” (Egged, n.d.c)

Essentially, the buses enabled the success of early wars by transporting soldiers and supplies, shepherding medical aid to frontlines of the wars, and generally serving a key role in the security

apparatus of the nascent state. Harrari observes “The army depended on Egged ...the Six Day War was fought from the windows of Egged buses” (Arutz Ha’Historia 2016).

“Bus drivers are the frontline soldiers against our enemies”

The museum and online history center tell the story of the ‘unknown bus drivers’ and situates them as heroes as well as key actors in the security apparatus of the State of Israel; the “Egged drivers stand at the frontlines with...[the] soldiers and all the citizens of the State of Israel” (Arutz Ha’Historia 2016). The website archives include interviews with bus drivers who were present during historic events. It is important to therefore understand how the bus drivers become central actors in the security forces for Egged and for Israel. The interviews, and accompanying articles, often describe close personal relationships between drivers and ‘their’ buses as well as their memories of dangerous trips on their routes and the many attacks by Palestinians and Palestinian-Israeli citizens that targeted the buses from the 1930s up until the end of the second Intifada in 2005.



Many of the online archival interviews and articles emphasize how when attacked, bus drivers often “continued to drive until...shot” (n.d.c). They often stayed with their buses until the last possible moment and are often attributed with going above and beyond to save the lives of passengers or other bus drivers. Bus drivers were even dubbed “kamikaze drivers” due to the precarious nature of driving buses (Egged n.d.f). Yitzhak Hadar, a bus driver during the 1967 war, shares an experience:

“When I arrived, I was told [to wait] while the soldier checked the road... After a few minutes we heard gunshots and explosions from the village of Yazur. Soldiers, they told us that they had been attacked... I asked the bus passengers to get off, and I stayed with four young IDF soldiers” (Weinstock n.d.a).

Rafi Amitai, another driver interviewed, shares that while driving an armored bus through the occupied Palestinian territories in the late 1990s he “had hundreds of Molotov cocktails and many more cases of stone-throwing. I experienced gunfire on my bus.” Amitai has no nostalgia for driving the armored buses but is grateful “to those buses that have more than once saved [my] life and the lives of [my] passengers” (n.d.f). Many armored buses are still in use today, although the majority are now owned and operated by Kavim—a private company that has routes throughout the occupied Palestinian territories.

These interviews show us how the bus drivers were at the center of the “action” throughout the entire history of Israel. Through these interviews, and the careful curation of the archival articles on the history center’s website, they become military heroes.

IV) National Identity

Collective Trauma on Display

Beyond centering buses and bus drivers into the Israeli historical and national narrative, the museum emphasizes Israeli collective memory and trauma. Buses occupy a traumatic place in contemporary collective Israeli memory, namely that of the suicide bombing attacks during the second Intifada that targeted Israeli civilians and buses (Gidron et al. 1990). The Gideon Mizrachi remarks, “Even when there weren’t wars, buses were the targets of attacks” and an even more forceful statement that “Our enemies always sought to strike at our public transit” (Artuz Ha’Historia 2016). The ECHM underlines this element of the narrative from the very first moment of the museum experience.

Right before the entrance gates, next to the manicured hedges and the fluttering yellow flags with the Egged logo, is a metal husk of a bus. The entire structure is the same monotone matte brown color. The roof has gashes in it the size of skylights, it is distorted, bent at the seam. An outline of doors and windows remain, but the glass is long gone. The sides of the bus are pockmarked, they look ripped open. This bus is roped off by yellow posts, it is the only bus on the entire lot that demands respectful distance from the visitors. From the online perspective of the tour, it is unclear what the story behind this bus is. In front of the bus is a series of yellow placards. They are reminiscent of the bus-stop signs along the roads throughout the country. This bus-stop sign is different however: twenty-seven signs memorialize the dates of “Notable Attacks” from November 30, 1947- April 5, 2002. The placement of this bus, before the audience engages with any of the other elements of the museum, sets a somber tone for the rest of the visit. It is an open-air gravesite. This is a powerful element of the museum that aligns with other sites of national memory and commemoration of collective trauma (Giesen et al. 2004). It transforms the museum from a site of tourism and information into a memorial. It becomes impossible to ignore the political legacy and history of public transit taken from this vantage point.



VI) Conclusion

“For children [a visit to the museum] is an experience, for adults it is nostalgic”- (Egged n.d.e.)

Public transit serves as an important site of departure as we consider how “to recognize those signs of nationalism [and power] which are so familiar that they are easily overlooked” (Billig 1995) as the vehicles are intimately involved, by design and by accident, with violence. The buses on display at the ECHM reinforce the ties of Egged buses to militarization, security, and the creation of national identity. The buses are in fact tools of state-building and nation-building both through their explicit participation as vehicles of the security apparatus as well as their role in reinforcing national narratives. Rather than being a banal object of modernity, buses are in fact at the heart of contemporary contentious politics.

In a region such as the Middle East, and in the contested territory of Palestine and Israel, studying public transit infrastructure is an important way to unravel threads of colonial power and matrices of domination. Buses, clearly, are both a material and political symbol: for Israelis they serve as national heroes and actors in the Arab Israeli wars. For Palestinians they become a “target” for Palestinian resistance since 1947 (see Griffin 2015 and 2020); buses and public transit are a site of political domination and oppression, a clear tool for territorial expansion and annexation of Palestinian land from 1948 until the present.

By considering the ways that the history of buses is used to construct meaning-making processes for Israelis, new questions emerge regarding contemporary manipulation of these narratives that engender buses as a key vehicle for connection and disconnection that controls (im)mobilities in the region. Understanding the historical narratives surrounding contemporary public transportation systems in Israel and Palestine is therefore key to understanding everyday politics in the region.

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