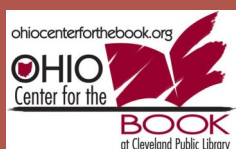


This toolkit is one of the many resources offered by *Get Graphic!* with the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library.

We aim to promote the study of comics in spaces from public libraries to academic institutions and all outside and between.

Toolkit created by the Ohio Center for the Book Scholar-in-Residence, Valentino L. Zullo, Ph.D.



# Get Graphic! Toolkit

## *Palestine*

### by Joe Sacco

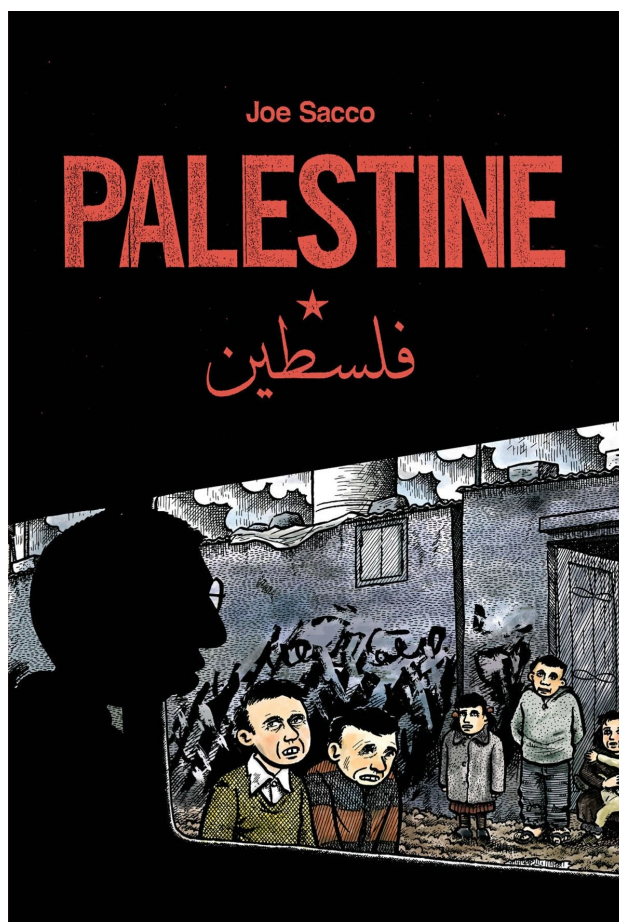
## About the Comic

*Palestine* is a work of comics journalism by Joe Sacco documenting his time in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from December 1991 to January 1992. Sacco focuses on the Palestinian people, bearing witness to their experiences in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Sacco enters as a Westerner with no relationship to either Palestine or Israel with hopes to learn more about the conflict.

Sacco's story is different from many non-fiction comics in that portions of it are memoir-like, but his purpose is journalistic as he documents the events that he witnesses in order to inform readers about the

pain of the Palestinian people. While much of the story that Sacco tells takes place during his visit in the early 90s, he supplements the story with history and context of the conflict and of the Middle East.

Where Sacco succeeds, as with all of his comics journalism, is by slowing down time and focusing on the lived experience of human beings through the cartoon documentary he creates.



# Who is Joe Sacco?

Joe Sacco is a Maltese-born American journalist and cartoonist. He is best known for his work in comics journalism, specifically, his books about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (*Palestine* (1996) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009)) and his works documenting the Bosnian War (*Safe Area Goražde* (2000) and *The Fixer* (2003)). *Paying the Land* (2020) documents the lives of the Dene, a Canadian indigenous nation. Sacco's work documents the experiences of individuals all over the world, asking us to bear witness to their stories and demonstrating the activist power of the form. Turning his long-form journalism into comics makes his stories easily accessible. Today Sacco is recognized as one of the great comics artists, pushing journalism forward through comics.



Figure 1 *Palestine*, p. 148.

## Context: The Israel-Palestine Conflict

The Israel-Palestine conflict began in 1948 with the establishment of Israel as a state following the Jewish migration to the area during and after the Holocaust. While the conflict might be traced back to an earlier point, the creation of Israel as a state marks an important turning point in the history of the conflict. After the mass exodus of Jewish people from Europe following the genocide of the Holocaust, many began settling in the area that was then known as the British Mandate for Palestine. The United Nations declared Israel the Jewish State in 1948 and created a separate state of Palestine. Jerusalem was a city shared by both states.

Following the declaration of the state, there were several wars including the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the Six Day War from June 5 to 10, 1967. Since then, there has been little warfare between Israel and outside countries, but the fighting between Israel and Palestine continued. Over the last century many attempts have been made to finalize a two-state solution, including the Second Camp David Accords involving the Clinton administration, which aimed to establish the two states alongside one another but ultimately did not succeed. While much has transpired since Sacco visited Palestine in the early 90s, his story is still relevant today and offers much insight into a history of conflict that too often is believed to have been “going on forever” but has a distinct beginning and, hopefully, an end in sight.

# Questions for Discussion

1. Sacco utilizes the form of the comic in unique ways to convey his experience in Palestine. For example, he opens the first page with what feels like an overwhelming and disorganized amount of text boxes (Fig. 2). How does Sacco utilize the comics form itself to convey the feeling of being disoriented to the reader? How else does he use the comics form to convey feeling?
2. Comics journalism documents events often without trying to pursue objectivity but rather to embrace the personal perspective as we see through the eyes and hand-drawn images of the individual (Fig. 1). How does this form of journalism ask us to think about documenting truth? How does the perspective of the outsider affect this view of documented events?
3. The comics form is known for its ability to slow down time, to focus on the details, and to ask the reader to linger over images (Fig. 3). How does Sacco use the comics form to ask us to pay attention to details and to the pain of the people and world he draws? How does this differ from the experience of film, for example?
4. Unlike other journalists who likely do not draw themselves into the landscape, how does the inclusion of Sacco's presence affect our reading? And how do you as a reader feel about Sacco by the end? How does our experience of Sacco, the character, affect the reading?
5. The comics form succeeds in bearing witness to trauma and violence. The form has also been historically derided for unnecessarily displaying violence. How do books like *Palestine*, which depicts pain and suffering, help bear witness to these stories in a way that is palatable to mass audiences? How should we understand stories like this in the context of the history of violence in comics? What does it mean to witness violence as a drawn image attempting to document to cultivate empathy?
6. By the end of the book, what do you understand about the Palestine-Israel conflict? How does Sacco's use of comics journalism illuminate the story for you as a reader? Has it affected your thoughts on the subject matter?
7. In chapter 4, Sacco multiplies the panels on each page and uses black coloring to close off the panels. In doing so, he makes the panels smaller and darker, capturing the slowing down of time for this prisoner and to demonstrate how the imaginative capacity of the person (presumably to escape) has also become less and less. How does Sacco use the frame of the comic to capture feelings in this scene? How does he use frames in other scenes to convey ideas?
8. As Sacco's story ends, he depicts a bus driver turning his bus around, recognizing he can neither continue on the path that he is going nor return. How should we understand this ending, and what resolution does Sacco suggest for the conflict?

# Interviews & Additional Questions

If you want to take this book discussion a step further, you can pair the book with one of the recommended interviews and suggested supplemental questions.

Rachel Cooke, "Eyeless in Gaza," *The Guardian*, November 21, 2009

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/nov/22/joe-sacco-interview-rachel-cooke>

- Reflecting on the art and his choice to block out his eyes with opaque glasses, Sacco responds, "some people have told me that hiding my eyes makes it easier for them to put themselves in my shoes, so I've kind of stuck with it. I'm a nondescript figure; on some level, I'm a cipher. The thing is: I don't want to emote too much when I draw myself. The stories are about other people, not me. I'd rather emphasize their feelings. If I do show mine – let's say I'm shaking [with fear] more than the people I'm with – it's only ever to throw their situation into starker relief."
- Sacco utilizes the strength of the comics form in these moments, distilling ideas down to their most basic elements. In this case, the "nondescript figure" who serves as a guide through the conflict. How does Sacco's use of hiding his eyes and other elements like this act as a means of connection for the reader?

Laila El-Haddad, *Al Jazeera*, "Interview: Joe Sacco," January 18, 2010

<https://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2010/01/201011783113578937.html>

- As he discusses his documentary comic, Sacco notes that he does not shy away from telling the story as it he witnesses it. In other words he does not create propaganda. Rather, as he states, "What I would point out is that I don't sugarcoat the Palestinians. I don't sugarcoat their anger, their vitriol. I don't sugarcoat acts they commit that as far as I'm concerned don't help their cause. I lay it out. But what's important to me is to get the context of the situation. What's important to me is to tell the Palestinian viewpoint because it's not told well. ... Maybe we see Palestinian talking heads on TV. But what about the people on the street? What are they feeling? And its then you see their humor; you see their humanity; you see them being angry and you begin to understand why."
- How does Sacco "lay it out" and in doing so give us a real picture of the pain and the reaction to the suffering of the Palestinian people?



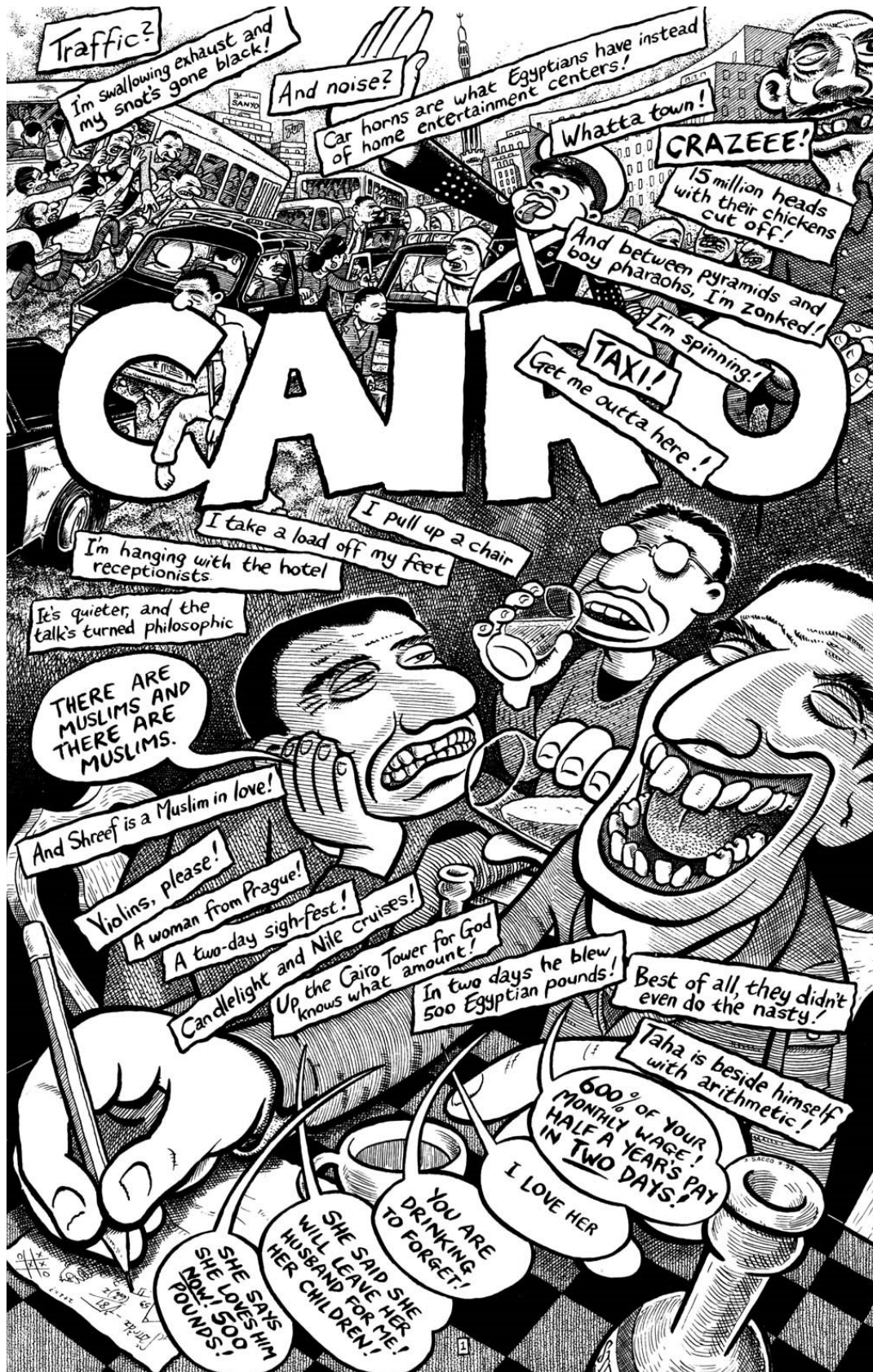


Figure 4 Palestine, p. 1.

# Scholarship & Additional Questions

If you want to advance your discussion further, consider pairing the comic with one of the following scholarly articles and supplemental questions.

- Rebecca Scherr, "Shaking Hands with Other People's Pain: Joe Sacco's *Palestine*," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 46, no. 1 (2013): 19-36.
  - Scherr discusses the ways that Sacco is not so much invested in documenting truth as a typical journalist would. Rather, she believes that "Sacco's form of truth-telling happens in the exchange between reader and text and is based on a kind of emotional and corporeal form of evidence that occurs through a haptic, visceral engagement with the pain of others. While this is not the kind of evidence that can stand in a court of law, it acts as a forceful form of evidence in the court of public opinion, which has its own power to enact change in the world" (p. 20).
  - How does Sacco use the comics form to convey feeling and to change the minds of others that may not otherwise be persuaded or feel empathetic through other media forms?
- James Hodapp, "The postcolonial Joe Sacco," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 6, no. 4 (2015): 319-30.
  - Hodapp considers Joe Sacco as a postcolonial author, discussing how "Sacco works towards an ethic infused with humanitarianism brought about by close contact with Palestinians. His Palestine comics are intimate and eschew the images of rock-throwing youths targeting Israeli soldiers (though he addresses that phenomenon) and suicide bombers, opting instead for images of wrongly-killed children and their grieving mothers. Sacco is able to achieve this intimacy because he shifts the usual contact zones the western reader has with Palestinians. The term 'contact zone' was coined by the postcolonial scholar Mary Louise Pratt as 'peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish on-going relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.'" (p. 326).
  - How does the concept of the *contact zone* help us to understand what Sacco achieves here? How should we define the ethic of his comic?
- Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
  - Chute is particularly interested here in the ways that the comics form can slow down time and ask us to think about events in new ways. She writes, "Sacco's investment in slowing readers down and asking them to grapple with producing meaning is a deliberate technique positioned both against the global news media's propensity to offer quickly consumed visual spectacles against and against the restless acceleration of information that is characteristic of so many of today's reporting outlets." (p. 202).
  - How does the comics form reclaim these stories and how do they offer reparative experiences in contrast to our current model of consuming stories so rapidly through social media and television?



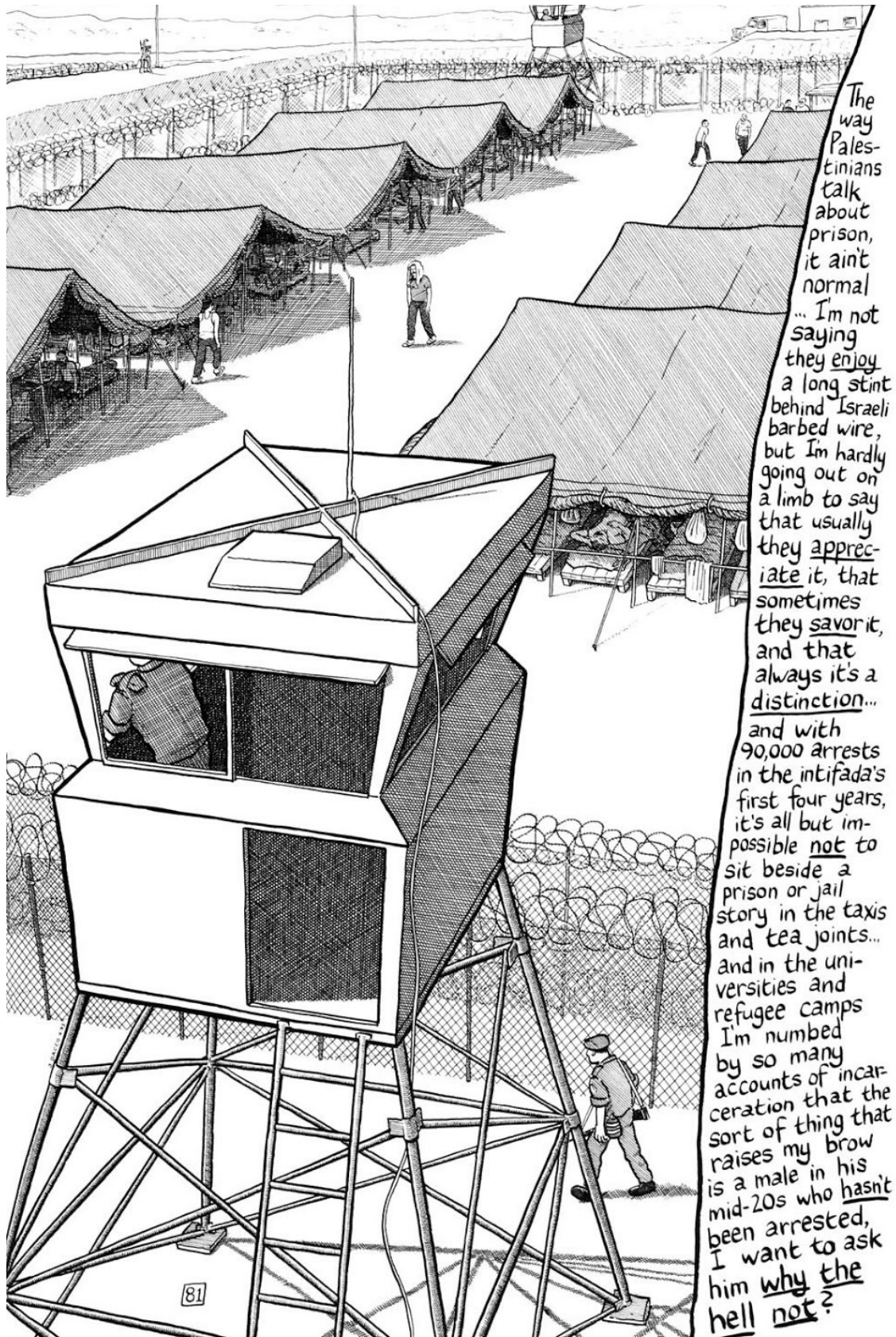


Figure 3 *Palestine*, p. 112.

# Further Supplemental Materials

**Additional resources to supplement this toolkit:**

- Mediamouse, “**Interview with Joe Sacco: Graphic Journalism and Palestine.**”  
(<https://youtu.be/OcdlqdcDbMQ>)
- NYU Journalism ARCHIVES, “**Primary Sources with Joe Sacco - Why Palestine?**”  
(<https://youtu.be/Yeb2lXYenA>)
- France 24 English, “**Comic Book Writer Joe Sacco on Redefining War Reporting.**”  
(<https://youtu.be/fozov3SwamY>)
- UM Stamps, “**Joe Sacco: Galvanizing Social Justice Through Comics.**”  
(<https://youtu.be/RkEBTCVnRpA>)

## Further Reading

**If you are interested in other works by Joe Sacco:**

- *Paying the Land* (Metropolitan Books, 2020)
- *The Great War: July 1, 1916: The First Day of the Battle of the Somme* (W. W. Norton, 2013)
- *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992-1995* (Fantagraphics, 2000)

**If you are interested in other works of comics journalism and documentary comics:**

- *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* by Derf Backderf (Abrams ComicArts, 2020)
- *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* by Sarah Glidden (Drawn & Quarterly, 2016)
- *The Ukrainian and Russian Notebooks: Life and Death Under Soviet Rule* by Igor (Simon and Schuster, 2016)

**If you are interested in other books that document the Israel-Palestine conflict:**

- *Footnotes in Gaza* by Joe Sacco (Metropolitan Books, 2010)
- *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City* by Guy Delisle (Drawn & Quarterly, 2012)
- *Exit Wounds* by Rutu Modan (Drawn & Quarterly, 2008)