Israeli Holocaust Memory and the Cold War

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On the 18th of May 1953, the Israeli Knesset (parliament) debated a new law calling for the establishment of Yad Vashem – The National Holocaust and Martyrdom Remembrance Authority. What was supposed to be a celebratory event turned quickly into a discussion of Israeli policy vis-à-vis Germany and the alignment of Israel in the east-west divide of the Cold War – two discussions that were, as will be shown, closely connected in Israel.

The attack on the government came mainly from the opposition left of the government. MK Yaakov Hazan of Mapam (United Workers Party) claimed that commemorating the Holocaust would be a travesty if the Israeli government supported the West German Government. A support manifested in the reparations agreement signed between Israel and the West German government the previous year.

Several issues stood out. West Germany, Hazan claimed, was a continuum of both pre-Nazi and Nazi Germany and, as such, would continue endangering Jews in the Diaspora. “We must remember,” he said, that whatever happened there can happen today and always. As long as the Jewish diaspora exists and the regime that gave birth to Nazism exists as well.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Hazan did not explain what that “regime that gave birth to Nazism” was, but the context makes clear that he was talking about capitalism in general and about German capitalism in particular.

“Yad Vashem should remind us that for us, Jewish socialists, Nazism is the mortal/arch enemy, and we have a holy obligation to work towards vanquishing the regime that gave birth to this horror,” Hazan argued. Hinting at the reparations agreement that was seen by the Israeli left as legitimizing West Germany, he stated that “there is no bigger sin to our people then giving a helping hand to the whitewashing of Nazism in the eyes of the world and to its resurrection.” The planned Yad Vashem, he claimed, “should remind us that as Jews we should contribute to the unrelenting war against it.”

As in many debates of the period, the specter of a third world war “constantly threatening humanity” loomed over the discussion. “For our people it ominously bears the threat of destruction…the murder of millions of our brothers in the Diaspora…and the destruction of our land and our young state.” Hazan thus claimed that "we must stand in the forefront of the fighters for peace" (i.e. on the Soviet side).

Hazan's words were just the opening salvo in a fervent attack by the parties to the left of his. Adolf Berman of the Left Faction[[2]](#footnote-2) used current Soviet terminology to link the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt directly to the East-West politics of the time. Berman had been active in rescuing Jews from the ghetto and had been involved in the revolt, although he had not fought in it. He claimed that the ghetto revolt had been led by young socialist Jews who “saw their struggle for the national honor a link in the general anti-fascist struggle of humanity.” They had not taken up “the flag of the revolt, to have the Israeli government sign an agreement with the neo-Nazis… we have an obligation to fight, together with all the forces of peace in the world against the resurrection of the German-Nazi army by American imperialism.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Regarding Israel's place in the East-West alignment, he stated that “while many of the Ghetto fighters died while dreaming of Eretz Israel they did not dream of an Israel linked to imperialism, to the black forces of international reaction, to war mongers and to Foster Dulleses [in the plural].”[[4]](#footnote-5) Instead, they saw their struggle for national honor as a link in the general anti-fascist struggle and dreamt of Israel as a “bastion of progress, social justice, national revival, and peace and friendship with all nations.” There was no question as to which side the Jews and Israel should pick, the answer lay in the lessons of the Holocaust. The Western governments “deserted and left the Jews to their fate,” claimed Berman, “but no fury of hate or the cracking whip of reactionary propaganda will make the Jewish masses forget that that if any Jews survived the Holocaust it was thanks to the Soviet Union, to the Red Army, the Army of Stalingrad!”

Further on the Israeli left was the Israeli Communist party (Maki). Its representative, MK Esther Wilenska, followed up on several of the issues raised by Hazan and Berman but with even more vehemence, and with direct reference to Cold War policies and disputes. “Israel should fight against the re-awakening of the Nazi beast, against the establishment of The fascist military force of West Germany that is to be the striking force of the Third World War.” Wilenska also claimed that Jewish survivors, deserted by the West, owed their lives to the Red Army. She juxtaposed East and West in this context: “Our experience has shown that the flag of Anti-Semitism, anti-Communism, and Anti-fascism is the flag of Hitler and Mussolini, murderers of millions of our people.” The war experience also revealed that the Jewish people's fate is intertwined with the Soviet Union and the anti-fascist camp, and that today therefore “the place of the Jewish people is with the Soviet Union and the international peace camp against the Imperialist warmongers, the present day heirs of Hitler.” She asked: “How can we seriously consider the government's words on commemoration of Holocaust victims while it refuses to protest the freeing of captive Nazi war criminals by the Americans and the British” and is thus aiding the United States’ preparation for a Third World War. “Against our people's interest, against the legacy of the victims, this government supports the preparation of an [anti-Soviet] block in the Middle East by Foster Dulles and American billionaire interests.” Wilenska thus called to establish “a Yad Vashem against the reestablishment of the Nazi Army, against preparations for a Third World War, against a Middle Eastern anti-Soviet block… for Peace in world and the Middle East.”[[5]](#footnote-7)

The reactions in the Knesset to these attacks were quite low key since, as will be shown, this was far from the first time that pro-Soviet and anti-Western sentiments had been aired in the Knesset during Holocaust-related debates. Responses ranged from mentions of anti-Semitism in Soviet partisan units during the war to references to current manifestations of it, such as the “Doctors' plot.” Generally, the attempt was to wrest the discussion away from political or sectarian lines and back to a focus on Holocaust commemoration. Yet, this debate shows how, for many Israelis, especially those who could relate to the socialist-Zionist and communist parties to the left of the (Zionist-socialist) government, the memory of the Holocaust and its lesson were intertwined with the current Cold War debates.

This paper aims to show that Holocaust related discussions in the young Israeli state were permeated with Cold War concerns and cannot be fully understood without considering this. The Holocaust was a national and personal catastrophe on a massive scale. Most Israeli families of European origins (and they constituted the majority, certainly of the leadership and elites at the time) experienced Holocaust related losses. The destruction of most European Jews was a searing trauma, and the debates it engendered were forceful and divisive even without bringing in the Cold War. Yet in the postwar years, the debates on the Holocaust took place with the alignment of the world on an East-West axis and with apprehensions of an impending Third World War. Questions of reparations from Germany, diplomatic relations, arms sales and purchases to and from West Germany interconnected the Holocaust and its memory, on the one hand, and Cold War issues, on the other. While there is extensive literature on Israel and the Cold War, most works on Israeli Holocaust memory do not address this issue. The aim of this paper is to bring together these two strands of research and to provide a fuller understanding of Israeli Holocaust memory in its Cold War context.

In order to understand the interconnectedness of Holocaust memory and Cold War politics in Israel, we need first to look at two core issues: Israeli state policies vis-à-vis the evolving Cold War and an emerging West Germany, and the complicated relationship between the Israeli Zionist left and the Soviet Union.

**Where to in the East-West divide?**

The question of Israel’s position on the East-West divide and the Cold War was debated by Zionist institutions from 1945 on. The UN resolution of 29 November 1947 that called for the establishment of a Jewish and an Arab state in Palestine and was supported by the US and the USSR gave hope that the new Jewish state Would be spared the need to take sides and would be able to commit to a policy of non-alignment.[[6]](#footnote-8) There were reasons to believe that the new state could garner support from both blocks. The Soviet Union, for example, allowed Czechoslovakia to sell weapons to Israel during the 1948 War at a time when Western powers officially adhered to a weapons embargo. Some Jews in Eastern Bloc countries were allowed to emigrate to Israel, though Soviet Jews were not.[[7]](#footnote-9) The Western Bloc housed the vibrant Jewish communities that supported and donated money to Israel, and these communities could offer the young state a viable future either on their own or by lobbying their respective governments. The goodwill of the two blocs gave rise to the hope that in the future Israel would be able to gain the support of both sides. “International support requires non-alignment,” claimed Israel’s Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett in 1950; “We can’t forgo the support of either bloc.” This was not only for the sake of the state of Israel’s future, but also for the wellbeing, future, and identification of the large communities of diaspora Jews. Choosing a side would endanger the future of Jews on the other side and harm their chances of immigrating to Israel. Since Jewish communities tend to identify with their states, it is obvious, for example, that “if we [chose] full identification with the West against the Soviet Union – they (Soviet Jews) will feel that we’ve forsaken them”.[[8]](#footnote-10)

The issue of Soviet Jews and their future made courting the goodwill of the Soviet Union a priority. Zionist leaders, themselves mostly from Eastern Europe, saw the Soviet Jews, with a population of circa 2,000,000, as the last large reservoir of likely immigrants to the Jewish state. The immigration of Soviet Jews was critical to the future of the Jewish state as no one expected large-scale Aliyah from Western countries. There was also a feeling of responsibility for the future of these Jews. It was obvious that decades of communist education and oppression in the USSR would cause a loss of Jewish identity through assimilation and extinction. The escalating anti-Jewish policies of the Stalinist regime led to anxiety over the physical future of Soviet Jewry. Heller claims that such sensibilities, albeit naïve, informed the Israeli foreign policy of non-alignment. Israeli representatives repeatedly raised the issue of the free immigration of Soviet Jewry in talks with their Soviet counterparts but to no avail.[[9]](#footnote-11) The USSR was willing, at times, to allow for an exodus of Jews from the countries in its sphere of influence, but feared that an Israel oriented Zionist approach might spark a Jewish nationalist awakening in the Soviet Union. It therefore refused to engage in any discussion on the immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel. The escalating Cold War, the competition among superpowers for influence in the Middle East, the pro-Western choices made by the Israeli government, Soviet anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism borne out by anti-Jewish policies, the Prague Trials, and the Doctors’ plot, all made for a growing rift between the USSR and Israel – a rift that was being played out in the Holocaust discourse in Israel. Moreover, since Zionism was banned in the eastern bloc, the Zionist movement became seen as “a Western organization”;[[10]](#footnote-12) while this helped raise Western support for Israel, it also drew fire from the Eastern bloc.

Israel’s ruling party, Mapai (Workers Party of Eretz Israel), led by David ben Gurion, Israel’s first Prime minister, was a Socialist party committed to the Zionist idea of establishing a Jewish state. It balanced the two ideals under the motto “*Mi’maamad Le’am*” from a class to a nation. Like many Western Social-Democrat parties, it had a clear non-communist, even anti-communist stand. In the Israeli case, therefore, non-alignment was actually pro-West: financial support came from the US, the active Jewish communities were based there, and there was identification with the ideals of Freedom and democracy in their western context. [[11]](#footnote-13) Yet it was the Korean War that was the tipping point that forced Israel to choose sides openly.[[12]](#footnote-14) Israel supported the UN, and Ben Gurion even wanted to send a contingent of Israeli troops to participate in the war as a part of the UN Forces. It was important to the US that the war was seen not as an American imperialist venture but rather as an international effort against aggression. By sending troops, Israel could thus gain credit from the US administration and public. Foreign Minister Sharett objected fiercely because this marked a total break with the Soviet Union and also provoked a “fire” in the IDF.[[13]](#footnote-15) He suggested sending a group of medical personnel instead.[[14]](#footnote-16) This idea was accepted by the Government, but Ben Gurion kept sending unofficial messages to the US and other Western countries stating Israel’s support of the West: “Although in times of peace we try to maintain political independence [non-alignment], in the event of a world war we stand one hundred percent with the West.”[[15]](#footnote-17)

By early 1952, the government was more outspoken on the issue that was becoming a clear dividing line between the Mapai and the parties on its left. On 3 January 1952, in the middle of a Knesset session on the reparations agreement, Sharett addressed an ideological forum of the Ahdut Ha‘avoda movement, one of the components of Mapam. Israel had to make a choice, he said, and it had chosen the West: "As a result of the universal ideological struggle, which also affects us and which is a battle for the soul of our youth and the mind of the nation itself, neutrality has become impossible; non-alignment is out of the question."[[16]](#footnote-18) Considering American financial aid that was crucial to Israel (and the lack of such aid from the USSR), he claimed that “our attachment to the USA is literally a question of life and death for the state of Israel and for its population.”

It is important to note that as far as security and diplomacy were concerned, Israel’s support of the Western bloc was a story of unrequited love. The Western powers were not forthcoming to Israeli requests to join NATO and certainly not any Middle Eastern equivalent such as the SACME, the Supreme Allied Command Middle East, or other initiatives.[[17]](#footnote-19) Israel was a liability in attempts to gain the support of the Arab states for a pro-Western alliance. The state department saw Israeli intransigence regarding the return of Palestinian refugees as an unwanted impediment to its Middle East policies. Offers by Israel to enable the US to use Israel for stockpiling strategic supplies were rejected, as were requests to purchase arms from both the US and Britain. They wanted Israel to publically commit itself to the Western camp, something that Israel was reluctant to do due to its aforementioned policies towards the USSR. Even West Germany, with whom Israel signed the reparations agreement, refused Israel's request for diplomatic ties until 1964 as it saw it as detrimental to its efforts to get the backing and recognition of Arab states.

**“Mother Russia”**

Left of Mapai and its pro-Western attitude stood Mapam (United Workers Party).[[18]](#footnote-20) Left to the latter lay its "Left Faction," which broke away from it in 1953 and in 1954 joined *Maki* (the Israeli Communist Party), the non-Zionist left extreme on the Israeli political spectrum. While it was obvious that Maki’s policies would be pro-USSR, Mapam’s policies are of special interest here. Staunchly Zionist and, with 19 out of 120 MKs, the second largest party in the first Knesset, but not included Ben Gurion’s government, it was looking to a policy that would reconcile its Zionist ideology with support and admiration of the Soviet Union and a commitment to Holocaust memory.

The Ahdut Ha‘avoda/Hakkibutz Hameuchad (United labor/United Kibbutz) and Hakibbutz Haartzi/Hashomer Hatzair (National Kibbutz/Young Guard) movements that established *Mapam*, had their roots in the revolutionary leftist movements of Tsarist Russia. After the communist revolution and its opposition to Jewish nationalism and Zionism, their focus moved to other Eastern European countries and to the building of the Jewish national home in *Eretz Israel*. These were radical activist Zionist-socialist movements, leading the way to the establishment of Kibbutzim and the formation of Jewish defense organizations.

Both movements strongly identified with the USSR and its ideals. The latter was, in the words of, Yaakov Hazan, their “Second Homeland, the Socialist one.”[[19]](#footnote-21) They saw it as the “worker’s paradise” and the Eastern bloc as the “Peace Camp.” They shared the USSR’s commitment to socialism and distributive justice, and even outdid its commitment to a communal lifestyle in the Kibbutzim that they established. But they also remembered the repression of both their movements and their members in the USSR and the areas it occupied. The 1952 Prague show trials, which accused the leaders of the Czech Communist Party of espionage for the West and of a Zionist conspiracy, challenged the basic pro-Soviet stand of *Mapam*. The anti-Semitic/anti-Zionist sentiment that infused the trial and the indictment of a senior *Mapam* party member, Moshe Oren, as a Western spy, further distanced *Mapam* from the Soviet Union, though not from its ideals.

**Everyone has his “Other Germany”**

At the nexus of Holocaust memory and the early Cold War lay the question of Germany. Of all the causes and problems explaining the Cold War, "None was more central or pervasive then the German problem. It was central to the outbreak of the Cold War, central to its continuation and central to its decline," wrote Avi Shlaim.[[20]](#footnote-22) Germany (or Germanys) and relations with it were naturally central to the interplay between Israeli and Jewish Holocaust memory as well as Israeli diplomacy and politics.

In 1959, following a government crisis and breakup caused by opposition to Israeli arms sales to Germany, Ben Gurion described West Germany as “The other Germany,” one that was much different from Nazi Germany.[[21]](#footnote-23) After his first summit in 1960 and meeting with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer he reiterated his position: “I said in the Knesset, the parliament of Israel, last summer, that the Germany of today is not the Germany of yesterday. After having met the chancellor, I am sure that judgment was correct.”[[22]](#footnote-24) Some years of reparations and normalization in Israeli-German relations had to pass in order for such a statement to be heard, wrote Yehiam Weitz, “In 1952 [the time of the reparations debate], no one would have dared describe Germany this way.”[[23]](#footnote-25)

Actually, the term had been used much earlier. In 1950, a Communist Israeli paper announced to its reader, that “The other Germany has risen.”[[24]](#footnote-26) Following the elections in East Germany, the paper called for “joy and satisfaction” that should be felt “by every progressive, anti-fascist, and peace lover, and especially every Jew that remembers what is the significance of an imperialist war-mongering Germany to the Jewish people.” East Germany, it claimed, stood in sharp contrast to “the Nazi state” established in West Germany by “Wall Street supporters.” Of course, the paper explained to its readers, thanks were due to the Soviet Union that brought about the transformation of East Germany into a peace-loving state that no longer threatened the Jews. The transformation of Germany had been a victory for the “Peace Camp that is the camp of life to our people.”

It is obvious that in internal Israeli discussions both camps had a “Germany of today.” This “other Germany,” however, was either the East or West one, based on one’s politics.

*Mapam* held a staunch, uncompromising position on any rapprochement with Germany, but that meant only West Germany. Its delegates, in fact, attended socialist international events in Eastern Germany. In 1952, for example, its central committee debated the participation of the Israeli peace Committee—of which it was a founding body—in the World Peace Council Congress.[[25]](#footnote-27) This happened right after Mapam was notified that the congress had been moved from Helsinki to Berlin. It was obvious that the organization would attend this event, but there was some unease about attending an event in Germany, which led to the suggestion that only its secretary and not members of its leadership be sent “because of our attitude towards Germany.” There was a brief discussion, and the consensus reached was that members of the presidium should attend. “I welcome the decision to hold the peace congress in Berlin,” said Yaacov Riftin, “Berlin is a symbol of opposition to world war; the historical front of the Jewish people is that of preventing war”.

The issue of East Germany was further debated at the following meeting.[[26]](#footnote-28) According to Mapam, thanks to Soviet policy there was no danger of East German rearmament since that policy aimed at a “an independent, democratic, united and peace-loving Germany.” Unlike West Germany, East Germany “should be given credit” for going in that direction.

From the discussion within the Mapam leadership, we learn that there was also a functional internal political reason for attending the Berlin conference: the power play between the Israeli left and the Soviet Union and its international organizations. Who really represented the Israeli “progressive,” pro-USSR public – the anti-Zionist communist party or the Zionist *Mapam*? We can’t have someone else (the communists) representing Israel there.”

It must be said that the pro-East German policies of the *Hashomer Hatzair* faction of *Mapam* were not acceptable to their party partners in *Ahdut Ha‘avoda* and its leader, Yitzhak Tabenkin, who refused to compromise with either Germany. Tabenkin was against any alignment with the big bloc, claiming that it would cause a mistrust of Israel among emerging countries. *Ahdut Ha‘avoda* fiercely opposed any participation in the Berlin event and publically condemned it. This issue led to rising tensions within the party and contributed to its eventual breakup.[[27]](#footnote-29)

The ability of the Israeli left to maintain an active, positive approach to and relations with East Germany while attacking West Germany with Holocaust-related rhetoric, naturally drew the fire of the government coalition. “We just heard that a Delegation of *Mapam* is going to Berlin to attend the Communist International. And they will go to Berlin and not to Bonn – to the city whence sat Hitler, Himmler and the other murderers, the city from where emanated the extermination decree against the Jewish people,” argued MK Yoanah Kese of Mappai during the Knesset reparations debate. “Is it allowed to visit the Germans in the East? Are their hands not full of Jewish blood? Is it because Stalin authorized it (made it Kosher) these Germans are better?”

For us [the government camp] there is no difference between the Germans of the west and the east – but you gentlemen, I’m very suspicious of you – because you attack us so much and claim we’re willing to compromise with Nazis – that you will run to compromise with the German people if it will be in the Soviet sphere of influence. [[28]](#footnote-30)

The question of the “other Germany” was indicative of the Cold War divide within the Israeli public and Israeli politics. More than a question of the reality in Germany, it was one of political expediency of Cold War politics and the survival of the Israeli state in a world divided by them. The issue was also played out in the reparations debate.

**The reparations debate**

The Knesset debate over Yad Vashem with which this paper opened was a replay in a way of several such vehement discussions of the preceding years, most notably that over the reparations agreement with Germany. On 12 March 1951, Foreign Minister Moshe Sharet notified the Knesset of Israel’s demands from West Germany and that talks on a reparations agreement were being conducted between the two governments. The agreement that resulted was debated and accepted by the Knesset in January 1952. The debates were very fierce and spilled over into the streets through demonstrations, mass rallies, and a riot outside the Knesset during the actual vote.

It is important to note that opposition to both the reparations agreement and relations with Germany cut across parties and communities and was not necessarily Cold War related. Opposition in the Knesset came also from the center and the right and not only from the pro-USSR left. Menahem Begin, head of the Herut Party that lay on the right of the Israeli political spectrum, led an active campaign against the reparations agreement, which culminated in his followers rioting outside the Knesset building during the debate. Even *Mapai*, the ruling party, allowed a group of Holocaust survivors to voice their opposition to the agreement during the party's central debate on the issue. While they found some support in the Party's leadership, Ben Gurion was adamant that the survival of Israel entailed accepting reparations that it was rightly due. The public debates over the agreement are well documented and researched. Our interest here lies in the Cold War angle.

The government was frank about the Cold War context of the reparations agreement and explained to the Knesset that Germany was on its way to political and military rehabilitation that would not be contingent on compensation of the Jewish people. “Both the Russians and the West are courting Germany like a young bride,” said MK Meir Argov, head of the Foreign Affairs and Security Knesset Committee, “They are offering her everything…weapons, an army, unification, you think that if we would not agree to reparations there would be no rehabilitation of Germany?...this is a childish claim.”[[29]](#footnote-31)

For the parties on the Israeli the Cold War implication of the agreement were apparent. Yaakov Riftin of *Mapam* criticized all those people who refused to understand “that the inclusion of West Germany in a European army and NATO is a danger to world peace, to humanity and to the Jewish people.” The other option, of course, was the Soviet stance that called for “a united Germany that will not join any military alliance.“

The communists were, as always, the most radical and blunt. MK Shmuel Mikonis suggested that the Knesset reject “any negotiation with the Neo-Nazi Bon government that is rebuilding the Nazi Army with the Hitlerite Generals and frees war criminals…in order to prepare a new act of aggression that will endanger Jews and others…The Jewish people will never be in the same camp with the Nazis.” It was obvious to him that signing such an agreement would seal Israel’s (and West Germany’s) place in the Western bloc.

Since the Ben Gurion Government is willing to bring the state of Israel, its strategic positions, and its economic and military potential to the service of the Atlantic pact in order to prepare a new world war against the peace-loving nations headed by the Soviet Union, since it agrees to bring Israel into an aggressive Middle East pact, since… it accepts the establishment of the Nazi army by the aggressor Atlantic pact … putting it in the same camp as the Nazis , we suggest a vote of no confidence.[[30]](#footnote-32)

The reparations debate challenged the pro-East German position of the left opposition. West Germany accepted its responsibility for Nazi crimes and, in the reparations agreement, showed its commitment to the survivors/victims of Nazi Germany. The East German regime, on the other hand, refused to discuss reparations since it denied any continuity between itself and the Nazi regime. This, of course, led to much criticism in Israel and abroad.[[31]](#footnote-33) *Mapam* leaders debated whether they should call on it to pay reparations. Some *Mapam* leaders thought so, even if only to mollify opposition at home. Others objected, saying this would fuel Ben Gurion’s criticism of East Germany and their contact with it. They did, however, suggest working on this issue with the East Germans behind the scenes.[[32]](#footnote-34) The question of reparations thus became ancillary to the Cold War debate.

**Weapons sale and purchase – the German connection**

The issue of German military aid to Israel and Israeli arms sales to Germany was a political “hot potato” in early Israeli politics that twice brought about the fall of the Israeli government.

At the time, Israel was facing a security predicament. Western countries, save France, were not willing to sell it weapons as they perceived that this might turn the Arab countries of the Middle East towards the Soviet bloc and engender soviet involvement in the region. Moreover, since Middle East oil was crucial to the Western economy, Western powers did not want to antagonize Arab countries against the West. Israeli retaliation raids across the border and the Suez War of 1956 further alienated the United States government to Israeli arm purchases demands. Since Soviet bloc countries were providing weapons to Egypt and other Arab states, Ben Gurion decided to approach the West German government on the matter. The West Germans, in turn, were rebuilding their army and were interested in buying Israeli produced weapons. The Germans were also interested in information about the tactics used by Israel during the Suez war, especially in terms of tank force and air cooperation, as well as on the Soviet weapons captured by the Israeli army. [[33]](#footnote-35) It is apparent that “besides continuing to feel some responsibility towards the Jewish state, [the German Government] also had a political interest in its survival and was prepared to aid it” beyond the reparations agreement.[[34]](#footnote-36) The first talks on the matter were held clandestinely in 1954. Although at the time Germany was not yet allowed to produce armaments, it built two patrol boats for Israel in 1955.[[35]](#footnote-37) In 1959, the Germans started providing Israel with military equipment, which, by 1961, amounted to 20,000,000 DM. [[36]](#footnote-38)

The second arms scandal erupted in June 1959, when the West German daily, *Der Spiegel*, published an exposé claiming that Israel was selling weapons to Germany – specifically mortar shells and Uzi submachine guns.[[37]](#footnote-39) Wide opposition in the Knesset and the press relied also on the Knesset resolution, passed on 16 November 1954, opposing the rearmament of both Germanys.[[38]](#footnote-40)

*Ahdut Ha‘avoda,* which was now in the government coalition, led the opposition to the sale of arms to Germany, which led to Ben Gurion dissolution of the government. It was joined by the other opposition parties during the Knesset discussion. [[39]](#footnote-41)

It is interesting to note that the uproar occurred over the sale of weapons to Germany – an exchange with greater visibility and symbolic potency – and not over Israel’s reception of German weapons. The latter was a guarded state secret, and probably one of which Knesset members and most of the government ministers were unaware.

**Cold War in Holocaust commemoration**

The Cold War was also very apparent at Holocaust commemorations. In the early 1950s, these ceremonies served as “memory sites” that articulated the very fresh memory of the Holocaust and its legacy as it was seen at the time. Since Yad Vashem was not yet established and there were no state organized ceremonies, the focus was on the memorial ceremonies organized by the Zionist left. In these, the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt was in the forefront. It is meaningful that the two main ceremonies were held in Kibbutzim – one at the Yad Mordechai Kibbutz (named after Mordechai Anielewicz, commander of the Fighting Jewish Organization during the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt), and other at a Kibbutz whose name spoke for itself: the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz. Politically, these kibbutzim were affiliated with the two movements – now in the opposition – that comprised the Mapam party.

The major Holocaust commemoration event was the Ghetto Fighters House, established by the members of the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz. This group of young survivors led by Ghetto Revolt leaders Zvi “Antek” Zukerman and Zivya Lubetkin committed itself to Holocaust commemoration and established a small museum and venue for holding its events. The kibbutz was affiliated with the Kibbutz Hameuchad – the United Kibbutz and its political party Ahdut- Ha‘ avoda (United Labor). The Holocaust memorial events in the Kibbutz were an opportunity to lay down the party’s agenda on the East-West divide and the Israeli-German relationship.[[40]](#footnote-42)

“Nazism did not come down from the misty clouds, it was born out of an exploitive system,” claimed MK Israel Galili, one of the leaders of *Ahdut Ha‘avoda*, “We can’t trust bourgeoisie humanism and democracy in a society of oppression.” Galili started off with the Holocaust and the Second World War: “We will always remember the mighty army of the Soviet Union that saw Nazism as the enemy of its homeland,” he said, but then moved on to current affairs: “We must understand that somewhere, Nazism is brought back to life and it might, once again, attack the world… If we will not destroy the satanic proponents and arms of Fascism they might destroy humanity.”

Other speakers attacked West Germany directly, Stephen Grayek, who fought in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, claimed that “we will not forget or forgive Nazi and barbaric Germany. Today, six years after World War Two, Hitlerism appears in its new form.” A full overview of the Cold War agenda and its relation to the Holocaust was provided by Dr. A. Gorka the general counsel of Poland in Jerusalem. “We can’t honor the eighth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising without underscoring that to the ghetto’s side stood all the progressive elements of the Polish people…we can sadly say that the reactionary elements of the Anglo-Saxon world did not want to show the real faces of those reactionary Nazis whom they saw, already during the war, as potential allies.” Gorka juxtaposed the lenience shown to Nazis in West Germany with East Germany’s far harsher attitude towards them: “It is symbolic that on the same day that twenty Nazis were freed from (West) German jails, six Nazis were hanged by East Germany.” As he explained, “We did not hesitate to an agreement with the Democratic Germany of Wilhelm Pick (East Germany’s first President) that did not espouse the Nazi (West German, BC) system of no justice and no responsibility.” Gorka also raised the issue of (West) German rearmament and spoke against “attempts to conceal the aspirations for the remilitarization of Germany and the reestablishment of its army.” He saw it as directly connected to the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz of today: “Out of the hearts of Poles and Jews, one cry is coming out: we don't want a new Nazi army…There is no better time or place for a protest against the reestablishment of the Nazi Army than this day of memorial and respect for the heroes of the ghetto!”

The commemoration ceremonies at the Ghetto Fighters House remained a site of constant attacks on the Israeli government’s alignment with both the West and West Germany during the Cold War, which resulted in the government ministers’ avoidance of the ceremonies. In an op-ed protesting this after a ceremony at the Ghetto Fighters’ House in 1953, Tuvia Buzikovski, one of the Warsaw ghetto fighters, took the government and those of its ministers who had ignored the ceremony as well as other memorial events to task. It seems that he was quite blind to the discomfort from which they had saved themselves.[[41]](#footnote-43)

Holocaust Commemoration ceremonies organized by the other branch of Mapam, Hashomer Hatzair, also served as a platform for Cold War politics. “The Ghetto fighters commanded us not to forgive and not to forget…Our people’s tragedy came from the hands of the opponents of humanity, progress and socialism,” declared Yaakov Amit in 1952 during the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt commemoration ceremony at Kibbutz Yad Mordechai: “There can be no reconciliation with the keepers of the flame of Fascism… as long as there exists that regime, sharpening its sword and training the Nazi beast for a new attack – we are in danger.”

While commemoration events in Israel stressed the specific nature of the Holocaust and resistance, they were not unique in using commemorations as a platform for Cold War politics. As shown by Pieter Lagrou, the commemoration of Nazi crimes became a major battleground between Eastern and Western blocs as well as in internal left-right politics in Western European countries. Initiatives to compare the Soviet concentration camp system to the Nazi one were countered by others stressing the fascist nature of the West German Government and the nascent NATO. Commemoration events in Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and other camps served as a platform for attacking the West to the detriment of non-communist delegations. Likewise, rival survivor organizations such as the Warsaw based FIR (Fédération Internationale des Résistants) and the UNADIF (Union Nationale des Associations de Déportés, Internés et Familles de Disparus) aligned themselves according to the East-West divide. [[42]](#footnote-44) The debates in Israel and the acrimonious Holocaust commemoration ceremonies should also be seen in this context.

**Conclusion: Discord and memory**

What was the reason behind this interconnectedness of the agendas of Holocaust memory and the Cold War? The answer, it seems, lay in the existential realities of Israelis and their young state.

The Israelis of the 1950s were living through monumental times. They had won the 1948 War, established a state, and more than doubled their number through the immigration of Holocaust survivors from Europe and Jews coming in from Muslim countries. But they had not yet reached peace and quiet; the country was regularly threatened with a “second round” by its neighbors, a war that this time around would be won by the Arabs. In addition, Egypt and Jordan enabled terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians from their borders. The massive immigration strained the young state both financially and socially. Looming over all this was the Holocaust. Its scars were raw and running deep and manifested themselves in personal and public consciousness. As we have shown, they also permeated public discourse and decision making.

Simultaneously, Israelis, like most citizens of the globe, also lived through the tensions and tribulation of the early Cold War and the threat, as it was then seen, of a Third World War. Today it is hard to understand the stress of those years, but it was palpable to those living during that time. Choices had to be made and, at times, they clashed with emotions and long held beliefs.

Reality brought together discussions on Holocaust memory and the Cold War, not those on theoretical issues, but rather those on very tangible ones. Ideological and political leaders and the regular public had to reconcile the two and it was not easy. At the heart of the discussion was the question: What is Israel’s best interest?

The reparation debate is a good example. Both supporters and opponents of the reparations agreement knew that it would enable West Germany to show that it had made up for its past crimes and would open her way into the United Nations, the Western bloc, and eventually NATO. Yet for Ben Gurion and his government, it was obvious that the Western powers would rehabilitate West Germany anyway, and then Israel would have no leverage at all. It was imperative for it to act now to receive reparations that were crucial to the state’s survival. Receiving military material from the Germans at a time when Israel was threatened on all fronts was no less crucial. The discussion was couched in terms of honor and dignity within the context of the Holocaust on the side of the opponents across the political board, but it was also about the identity of the young state and its best interests in a Cold War world.[[43]](#footnote-45) Accepting reparations would cement Israel’s affiliation to the Western bloc, as already conveyed by its stand on the Korean War. This was ideologically abhorrent to the left since it could not envisage Israel as a part of a capitalist and war-mongering bloc. It was also detrimental to the future of the young state since it was obvious that in a confrontation between the blocs, the “peace camp” and the USSR would win and the Red Army would arrive in the Middle East.

The tensions were far more vehemently debated, as I have shown, on the Israeli left, which intuitively saw itself as belonging to the socialist/communist camp as it had long held a staunch pro-USSR position. This explains its representatives’ overt weaponization of the Holocaust in the political debate. By using the Holocaust, they brought to the debate the most potent argument possible and pushed through their arguments. Evoking martyrdom and resistance, they aimed to score points for the movements that saw resistance to the Nazis as proof of the rightness of their cause. These were losing the political debate as Israel leaned more and more to the West on the one hand, and the USSR adopted an active anti-Israeli policy, on the other. This is not to say that it was manipulative propaganda on their side. They were certainly sincere in making the connection between Holocaust memory, reparations from Germany and its rearmament, and other Cold War issues, but they managed to alienate themselves by overusing it.

I teach a course on Israeli Holocaust memory and have discussed these issues for years with young Israeli students. Together we read the Knesset protocols mentioned in this paper and they simply cannot understand what “all these politics” are doing in a Holocaust-related debate. The Holocaust is still potent in the 2020s, but the Cold War is so far away that even adults do not see any connection. It this for this reason that I have written this paper.

1. See the Knesset Plenary Records, Knesset session 229-230 for the discussion in full. Quotes from Hazan, Berman and Wilenska are from pages 1331**-** 1339. All plenary records of the Knesset can be found online <https://main.knesset.gov.il/Activity/plenum/Pages/Sessions.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The left faction broke off from Mapam due to its stronger identification with the USSR. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While the new German army, the Bundswehr, was established only in 1955, the early 1950s were a period of open discussion on the establishment of such a force within Germany and between West Germany and the Allies. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Foster Dulles, 1888 - 1959, US Secretary of State (1953–59) under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. He was the architect of major US policies during the Cold War, including the re-armament of Germany and the attempts to establish a pro-Western Middle East pact. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Knesset Plenary Records, 1344-1345. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
6. See Uri Bialer, *Between East and West: Israel's Foreign Policy Orientation 1948-1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
7. G. Gorodetsky, J. Freundlich, D. Yaroshevky, Y. Ro’I, Stegny et.al., *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 1941-1953*, 2 vols. ( London: Cass, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
8. Gorodetsky et al., *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations*, 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
9. Yoseph Heller, *Israel and the Cold War from the War of Independence to the Six Day War* (Jerusalem: Ben Gurion Research Institute, 210), 47-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
10. Moshe Sharett, “The State of Israel between left and right,” seminar lecture delivered on 22 April 1950. In Yaakov and Rina Sharett (eds.), *Speaking Out: The Collected Speeches of Israel’s First Foreign Minister 1950*, (Heb), (Tel Aviv: Moshe Sharett Heritage Society, 2016), 349-395. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
11. In 1949, a $100,000,000 loan was granted by the US to Israel. Bialer, *Between East and West*, 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
12. Gangzheng She, “Ben-Gurion, the Korean War, and the Change in Israeli Foreign Policy,” *Israelis* 7 (2015): 205-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
13. Yoseph Heller, *Israel and the Cold War*, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
14. Gabriel Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett, Biography of a Political Moderate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 549. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
15. Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett*, 557. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
16. Bialer, *Between East and West,* 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
17. Bialer, *Between East and West*, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
18. Established in 1948 . [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
19. The Knesset Plenary Records, vol. 1 (1949), 125: Knesset session 12, 10 March 1949. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
20. Avi Shlaim, “The Partition of Germany and the Origins of the Cold War,” *Review of International Studies* 11, No. 2 (April, 1985): 123-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
21. Roni Stauber, “Realpolitik and the Burden of the Past: Israeli Diplomacy and the 'Other Germany',” *Israel Studies* 8, No 3 (Fall 2003): 100-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
22. *Davar*, 14.3.1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
23. Yehiam Weitz, “A Review of Idith Zartal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, Hebrew edition 2002,” *Iunim B’itkumat Israel* 13 (2003): 443-448. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
24. Yaakov Zilber, “The Other Germany has Risen,” *Kol Haam* (The People’s Voice) 4 October 4, 1950. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
25. The World Peace Movement was organized by Moscow as an international movement calling for disarmament and world peace and was one of the propaganda tools used by the Soviets during the Cold War. The general nature of the organization (and its downplaying of Soviet leadership) made it acceptable to many public figures and organizations in the West; see R. F. Laird and Erik P. Hoffmann, *Soviet Foreign Policy in a Changing World* (New York: Aldine, 1986); J.A.V. Vermaat, “Moscow Fronts and the European Peace Movement,” *Problems of Communism* 31, No. 6 (1982): 43-56. On the Israeli case, see Tamar Herman, “The Rise and Decline of the Israeli Peace Committee – 1950-1956,” *Zionism* 17 (Winter 1993), in Hebrew. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
26. The various proposals for a party “declaration on Germany” are not given in the protocol, which includes only the discussions on them. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
27. The issue was debated during an emergency meeting called by Ahdut Ha‘avoda; see “The Inner Strife in Mapam,” *Shearim,* December 10, 1951. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
28. The Knesset Plenary Records, Knesset sessions 14-15, November 4-51, 951. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
29. The Knesset Plenary Records, Knesset session 77, May 6, 1952. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
30. The Knesset Plenary Records, Knesset session 14-15, November 4-5, 1951. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
31. See: Angelika Timm, *Jewish Claims against East Germany: Moral Obligations and Pragmatic Policy* (Budapest: CEU Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
32. See: Lorena De Vita, ”Overlapping Rivalries: The Two Germanys, Israel and the Cold War,” *Cold War History* 17, No. 4 (YEAR NEEDED!): 351-366. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
33. George Lavy, *Germany and Israel: Moral Debt and National Interest* (CITY NEEDED: Routledge, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
34. Lavy, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
35. For more on this issue, see Peter F. Müller and Michael Mueller, *Gegen Freund und Feind. Der BND: Geheime Politik und schmutzige Geschäfte* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 2002), 485-504. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
36. Inge Deutschkron, *Israel und die Deutschen: Das schwierige Verhältnis*, Cologne: PUBLISHER, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
37. For a description of these two scandals, see Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000), 302-305, 311-320. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
38. “The Knesset declares its deep anxiety of the rearmament of West and east Germany... The Knesset decides that Israeli Arms sales to Germany will stop and no more Israeli arms will be sold to Germany.” [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
39. It is said that the their staunch opposition was due to Tabenkin’s (their leader) admiration and sense of responsibility to the Ghetto fighters Antek Zukerman and Zivya Luvatkin. Tabenkin saw them as exemplary heroes and even tried to bring them in as political figures and members of Knesset. Therefore, he felt obligated to follow their uncompromising stand against any contact with Germany and Germans. Uri Izhar *Between Vision and Power: The History of Ahdut- Ha‘avoda- Poalei- Zion Party* (Tel Aviv: Yad Tabenkin, 2002), 262, in Hebrew. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
40. All quotes from this event are from the Ghetto Fighters House Archive (GFHA) 2276. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
41. Tuvia Buzikovski, “Holocaust Memory and the Israeli Government,” *Mishmar,* April 27 1953. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
42. Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
43. Neima Barzel, “Dignity, Hatred and Memory: Reparations from Germany: The Debates in the 1950s,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 24 (1994): 247-280. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)