Israeli Holocaust memory and the Cold war

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On the 18 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 a 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 commemorating the Holocaust was a travesty while the Israeli government supports 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:

Western Germany, he claimed, is a continuum of both pre-Nazi and Nazi Germany and as such is endangering Jews in the Diaspora today. “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 does not explain what is that 'regime that gave birth to Nazism' but from the context, it is clear that he is talking about capitalism in general and about German capitalism specifically.

“Yad Vashem should remind us that for us, Jewish socialists, Nazism is the mortal/arch enemy and we have a holly obligation to work towards vanquishing the regime that gave birth to this horror.” Hinting at the reparations agreement that was seen by the Israeli left as legitimizing Western 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" was looming 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..." Therefore, he claimed, "we must stand in the forefront of the fighters for peace." (i.e. the soviet side).

Hazan's words were just the opening salvo in a fervent attack by the parties standing to the left of his. Adolf Berman of the Left Faction[[2]](#footnote-2) linked the Warsaw ghetto revolt directly into the East-West politics of the time using current soviet terminology. Berman was active in rescuing Jews from the Ghetto and was involved with the revolt – although he did not fight in it. He claimed that the ghetto revolt was led by young socialist Jews that “saw their struggle for the national honor a link in the general anti-fascist struggle of humanity”. They did not take 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 a Israel linked to imperialism, to the black forces of international reaction, to war mongers and to Foster Dulleses (in the plural)."[[4]](#footnote-4) 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 what 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 to 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 with 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 Western 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 had 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 taught that the Jewish people's fate is intertwined with the Soviet Union and the anti-Fascist camp and therefore today "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?" thus aiding American preparations 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 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-5)

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 were aired at the Knesset in 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 back to a focus on Holocaust commemoration and away from political or sectarian lines. Yet, this debate shows how, for many Israelis, especially those relating to the socialist-Zionist and communist parties left of the (Zionist-Socialist) government, the memory of the Holocaust and its lesson were intertwined with the current cold-war debates.

This paper will 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 were the majority, certainly of the leadership and elites at the time) experienced Holocaust related loss. The destruction of most of European Jewry was a searing trauma and the debates it engendered were forceful and divisive even without bringing the cold war in. Yet, the debates on the Holocaust took place in the post war years with the alignment of the world on an east-west axis and with apprehensions of a impending third world war. Questions of reparations from Germany, diplomatic relations, arm sales and purchase to and from Western Germany interconnected the Holocaust and its memory on one hand and the cold-war issues on the other. While there is extensive writing on Israel and the cold war, most works on Israeli Holocaust memory, did not address this issue. The aim of this paper is to bring together the 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 first have to look at two core issues: The Israeli state policies vis a vis the evolving cold war and the emerging Western 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 the Zionist institutions since 1945. The 29 November 1947 UN resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish and an Arab state in Palestine that was supported both by the US and the USSR gave hope that the new Jewish state could be spared the need to declare itself in one of the camps and would be able to commit to a policy of Non-alignment.[[6]](#footnote-6) There were reasons to believe that the new state could garner support from both blocks. The Soviet Union allowed Czechoslovakia to sell weapons to Israel during the 1948 war at the time when the western powers officially adhered to a weapons embargo. Some Jews in Eastern bloc countries were allowed to immigrate to Israel (though Soviet Jews were not).[[7]](#footnote-7) The Western bloc housed the vibrant Jewish communities supporting and donating to Israel and these communities by themselves and through lobbying with their respective governments could enable the young state a viable future. The goodwill from the two blocs gave rise to a hope that in the future too; Israel will be able to gain the support 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 Block.” It was not only for the future of the state of Israel. It was about the wellbeing, future and identification of the big communities of Diaspora Jews. Choosing a side will endanger the future of Jews on the other side and will harm their chances to immigrate to Israel. Since Jewish communities tend to identify with their states, it is obvious, for example, that “if we choose full identification with the west against the Soviet Union – they (Soviet Jews) will feel that we’ve forsaken them”.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The issue of Soviet Jews and their future made a priority of courting the goodwill of the Soviet Union. Zionist leaders, mostly from Eastern Europe themselves, saw Soviet Jewry, numbering circa 2,000,000, as the last big reservoir of Immigrants likely to immigrate to the Jewish state. The immigration of Soviet Jews was critical to the future of the Jewish state – no one expected large scale Aliyah from Western countries. There was also a feeling of responsibility to the future of these Jews. It was obvious that decades of communist education and oppression in the USSR will cause loss of Jewish identity, assimilation and extinction. The escalating anti-Jewish policies of the Stalinist regime added a worry for the physical future of Soviet Jewry. Heller claims that these sensibilities, albeit naïve, informed the Israeli foreign policy of non-alignment. Israeli representatives raised the issue of free immigration of Soviet Jewry repeatedly in talks with their Soviet counterparts to no avail.[[9]](#footnote-9) The USSR was willing, at times, to allow exodus of Jews from the countries in its sphere of influence but was apprehensive that an Israel oriented Zionist approach might create a Jewish nationalist awakening in the Soviet Union itself. It therefore refused any discussion of Soviet Jews immigration to Israel. The escalating cold war, the superpower competition for influence in the Middle East, the pro-Western choices of the Israeli government, Soviet anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism born out in anti-Jewish policies, the Prague Trials and the Doctors’ plot, all made to a growing rift between the USSR and Israel – a rift that was playing out in Holocaust discourse in Israel. Moreover, since Zionism was banned in the eastern bloc, the Zionist movement became ‘a Western organization’[[10]](#footnote-10) and while this helped raise Western support to Israel it also drew fire from the Eastern Block.

Israel’s ruling party, *Mapai* (Workers party of Eretz Israel) Led by David ben Gurion, Israel’s first Prime minister. It was a Socialist party committed to the Zionist idea of establishing a Jewish state and balanced the two ideals under the motto ‘Mi’maamad Le’am’ from a Class to a Nation. Like many western Social-Democrat parties in the west, it had a clear non-communist, or even anti-communist stand. Non-alignment, therefore, in the Israeli case was actually pro-west: financial support came from the US, the active Jewish communities were there and there was identification with the ideals of Freedom and democracy in their western context. [[11]](#footnote-11) Yet, it was the Korean War that was the tipping point that forced Israel to choose sides openly.[[12]](#footnote-12) 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 will not be seen as an American Imperialist venture but rather as an International effort against aggression and Israel could gain credit with the US administration and public. Foreign minister Sharett, objected fiercely because it would be a total break with the Soviet Union and also provoke an ‘fire’ in the IDF.[[13]](#footnote-13) He suggested sending a group of medical personal instead.[[14]](#footnote-14) This stand was accepted by the Government but Ben Gurion kept sending unofficial messages to the US and other western countries stating Israel’s support to 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-15)

By early 1952, the government was more outspoken on the issue that was becoming clear dividing line between the Mapai and the parties on its left. On 3 January 1952, in the middle of the Knesset sessions 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 chose 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-16) 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 U.S.A. is literally a question of life and death for the state of Israel and for its population”.

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

**‘Mother Russia’**

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

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

They strongly identified with the USSR and its ideals. It was, in the words of, Yaakov Hazan, their “Second Homeland, the Socialist one”.[[19]](#footnote-19) They saw it as the ‘worker’s paradise’ and the Eastern bloc as the ‘Peace Camp’. They shared its commitment to socialism and to distributive justice, and even outdid its commitment to communal lifestyle in the Kibbutzim they established. But they also remembered the repression of their movements and their members in the USSR and in any area it occupied. The 1952 Prague show trials that accused the leadership 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 of early cold war was 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-20) Germany (or Germanys) and relations with it were naturally central to the interplay between Israeli and Jewish Holocaust memory and Israeli diplomacy and politics.

In 1959 Following a government crisis and breakup caused by opposition to Israeli arms sales to Germany Ben Gurion described Western Germany as ‘The other Germany’ – much different from Nazi Germany.[[21]](#footnote-21) Following his first summit with 1960 meeting with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer he reiterated this 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-22) There had to be some years of reparations and normalization in Israeli-German relations in order for such a statement to be heard, writes Yehiam Weitz, “in 1952 (time of the reparations debate), no one would have dared describe Germany this way”.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Actually, the term was used much earlier. In 1950, the Communist Israeli paper that announced to its readers, that “The other Germany has Risen”.[[24]](#footnote-24) Following the elections in Eastern 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 stands in sharp contrast with “the Nazi state” established in West Germany by “Wall street supporters”. Of course, explained the paper to its readers, Thanks are due to the Soviet Union that brought about the transformation of East Germany into a peace-loving state that no longer threatens the Jews. The transformation of Germany is a victory for the “Peace Camp that is the camp of life to our people”.

It is obvious that in the inner Israeli discussions both camps had their ‘Germany of Today’. That ‘other Germany’ was either the Eastern or Western one – according to one’s politics.

*Mapam* held a staunch, uncompromising position on any rapprochement with Germany but only with Western Germany. Its delegates attended socialist international events in Eastern Germany. In 1952, for example, the Mapam central committee debated the participation of the Israeli peace Committee, of which they were a founding body, in the World Peace Council Congress.[[25]](#footnote-25) They have just been notified that the congress was moved from Helsinki to Berlin. It was obvious that they will attend this event but there was some unease about attending an event in Germany and there was a suggestion to send only the organization’s secretary and not members of its leadership “because of our attitude towards Germany”. It was a brief discussion and the consensus 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 Eastern Germany was further debated in the following meeting.[[26]](#footnote-26) In their eyes, thanks to Soviet policy there is was no danger in East German rearmament since that policy aims for a “an independent, democratic, united and peace-loving Germany”. East Germany “should be given credit” for going in this direction – unlike West Germany.

Looking at the discussion in the Mapam leadership we learn that there is also a functional-inner political reason to attend the Berlin conference – the power play in the Israeli left vis a vis the Soviet union and its international organizations. Who really represents 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-eastern Germany policies of the *Hashomer Hatzair* faction of *Mapam* were not acceptable to their party partners of *Ahdut Ha‘avoda* and their leader, Yitzhak Tabenkin, who were uncompromising to both Germanys. He was against any alignment with the big blocks anyway, claiming that this will cause mistrust of Israel among the emerging countries. *Ahdut Ha‘avoda* fiercely opposed the participation in the Berlin event and publically condemned it. This issue caused rising tensions in the party and contributed to its eventual breakup.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The ability of the Israeli left to maintain active positive approach and relations with Eastern Germany while attacking Western 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 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*, in the Knesset reperations 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-28)

The question of the ‘other Germany’ was indicative of the cold war divide in the Israeli public and in Israeli politics. More than being 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 cold war divided world. This issue was played out in the reparations debate.

**The Reparations Debate**

The Knesset debate over Yad Vashem that opened this paper was in a way a replay of several such vehement discussions in 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 conducted between the two governments. The resulting agreement was debated and accepted by the Knesset in January 1952. The debates over the agreement were very fierce and spilled over to the streets: demonstrations, mass rallies and a riot outside the Knesset during the vote.

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

The government was frank about the cold war context of the reparations agreement and explained to the Knesset that Germany is on its way to political and military rehabilitation that will 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-29)

For the parties on the Israeli the cold war implication of the agreement were apparent: Yaakov Riftin of *Mapam* criticized all those people who would not 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 was of course 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 the Knesset “rejects 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 for him that signing such an agreement will seal Israel’s (and West Germany’s) place in the western block.

“Since the Ben Gurion Government is willing to bring the State of Israel, its Strategic positions and its economical 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 inro an aggressive middle eastern 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-30)

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

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

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

Israel was facing a security predicament. Western countries, except France, were not willing to sell it weapons. It they perceived that this may turn the Arab Middle Eastern countries towards the Soviet bloc and might engender soviet involvement in the region. Moreover, Middle Eastern oil was crucial for western economy and the western powers did not want to antagonize the Arab countries against the west. Israeli retaliation raids across the border and the Suez war in 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 on their side were rebuilding their army and were interested in buying Israeli produced weapons. The Germans were also interested in information on Israeli tactics during the Suez war – especially tank force and air cooperation, and information on the soviet weapons captured by the Israeli army. [[33]](#footnote-33) It is apparent that the German Government “besides continuing to feel some responsibility towards the Jewish state, also had a political interest in its survival and was prepared to aid it” beyond the reparations agreement.[[34]](#footnote-34) The first talks on the matter were held clandestinely in 1954 and while Germany at the time was not allowed to produce armaments, two patrol boats were already built in Germany for Israel in 1955.[[35]](#footnote-35) In 1959 the Germans started providing Israel with military equipment to the sum of 20,000,000 DM by 1961. [[36]](#footnote-36)

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

*Ahdut Ha‘avoda* that was now in the government coalition led the opposition to the arms sale to Germany with the result of Ben Gurion bringing down the government. In the Knesset discussion they were joined by other opposition parties. [[39]](#footnote-39)

It is interesting to note that the uproar was over the sale of weapons to Germany, that had visibility and symbolic potency, and not about receiving German weapons. This was a guarded state secret and, probably, the Knesset members and most of the government ministers were not aware of it.

**Cold war in Holocaust Commemoration**

The cold war was very apparent also at Holocaust Commemorations. These ceremonies were, in the early 1950s, the ‘memory site’ articulating the very fresh Holocaust memory and its legacy as it 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. There, the ghetto revolt was in the forefront. It is meaningful that the two main ceremonies were held in Kibbutzim, one was the Yad Mordechai Kibbutz (named after Mordechai Anielewicz, commander of the Fighting Jewish Organization in the Warsaw ghetto revolt) and the other’s name spoke for itself: the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz. Politically, these kibbutzim were affiliated to the two movements comprising the Mapam party – now in the opposition.

The major Holocaust commemoration event was the Ghetto Fighters House, established by the members of 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 a venue for Holocaust Commemoration 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 agenda of the party on the east-west divide and on Israeli-German relationship.[[40]](#footnote-40)

“Nazism was did not come down from the misty clouds, it was born out of 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”. He started off with the Holocaust and the Second World War: “We will always remember the mighty army of the Soviet Union”, he said, “that saw Nazism as the enemy of its homeland”. But 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 western 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 WW2 – Hitlerism appears in its new form”. A full overview of the Cold war agenda and its relation to the Holocaust was given 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.” He Juxtaposed leniency towards Nazis in Western Germany with a far harsher attitude of Eastern Germany, “it is symbolic that at the same day that twenty Nazis were freed from (West) German jails, six Nazis were hanged by eastern Germany. He explained therefore, that “we did not hesitate to an agreement with the Democratic Germany of Wilhelm Pick (Eastern Germany’s first President) that did not espouse the Nazi (West German, BC) system of no justice and no responsibility.” He also raised the issue of (West) German rearmament and spoke against “attempts to conceal the aspirations for remilitarization 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 then this day of memorial and respect for the heroes of the ghetto!”

The Ghetto fighters House commemoration ceremonies remained a site of constant attacks on the Israeli government’s alignment with the West and West Germany during the cold war. This resulted in government ministers staying away from the ceremonies. Following the 1953 ceremony at ghetto fighter’s house , in an op ed protesting this, Tuvia Buzikovski one of the Warsaw ghetto fighters, took to task the government and its ministers who ignored the ceremony and other memorial events as well. It seems that he was quite blind to the discomfort they saved themselves from.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Holocaust Commemoration ceremonies of the other branch of *Mapam*, *Hashomer Hatzair*, served also 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 at 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 war cold war politics. As shown by Pieter Lagrou, the commemoration of Nazi crimes became a major battleground between eastern and western blocks and in inner 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-42) The debates in Israel and the acrimonious Holocaust commemoration ceremonies should be seen also in this context.

**Conclusion: Discord and memory**

What was the cause for this interconnectedness of the agendas of Holocaust memory and the cold war? The answer, it seems, lays in the existential realities of Israelis and their young state.

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 immigration of Holocaust survivors from Europe and of Jews coming in from Muslim countries. But they had not yet reached peace and quiet, the country was regularly threatened by its neighbors with a ‘Second round’ – a war that would be won by the Arabs this time. Egypt and Jordan also 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, as most citizens of the globe, also lived through the tensions and tribulation of the early cold war and the threat, as it was seen then, of a third world war. It is hard to understand today the stress of those years but it was palpable to those living during the time. Choices had to be made, and at times, they clashed with emotions and long held beliefs.

Reality brought together the discussions over Holocaust memory and the cold war. Not theoretically but over very tangible issues. 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: Supporters and opponents of the reparations agreement alike knew that it will enable Western Germany to show that she has made up for its past crimes and open her way into the United nations and the Western block and eventually NATO. Yet, for Ben Gurion and his government it was obvious that the Western powers will rehabilitate West Germany anyway and then Israel will have no leverage at all. It was imperative to act now to receive reparations that were crucial to the state’s survival. Receiving military materiel from the Germans at a time when Israel was threatened on all fronts was no less crucial. The discussion was couched on the side of the opponents across the political board in terms of honor and dignity in the context of the Holocaust, but it was also about the identity of the young state and of its best interests in a cold war world.[[43]](#footnote-43) Taking reparations will cement Israel’s affiliation to the western block, already stated by its stand on the Korean War. This was abhorrent to the left ideologically since it could not envisage Israel as a part of a capitalist and war-mongering block. It was also detrimental to the future of the young state since it was obvious that in a confrontation between the blocks the ‘peace camp’ and the USSR will win and the Red army will arrive in the Middle East.

The tensions were much more stormily debated, as I have shown, in the Israeli left who intuitively saw itself a belonging to the Socialist/communist camp and had a long held staunch pro-USSR position. This explains its representatives’ overt weaponization of the Holocaust in the political debate. Using the Holocaust was bringing to the debate the most potent argument possible and forcing through their arguments. Evoking martyrdom and resistance aimed to score points for the movements who saw resistance to the Nazis by their members a proof of the rightness of their cause. They were losing the political debate with Israel leaning more and more to the West on one hand, and the USSR adopting an active anti-Israeli policy on the other. This is not to say that this was manipulative propaganda on their side. They were certainly sincere in making the connection between Holocaust memory, reparations from Germany and its re-arming, and other cold war issues, but they managed to alienate themselves by overusing it.

I teach a course on Israeli Holocaust memory and discuss these issues for years with young Israeli students. We read together the Knesset protocols mentioned in this paper and they just can’t understand what ‘all this politics’ is doing in a Holocaust related debate. The Holocaust is still potent in the 2020s but the cold war is so far off in the 2020s that adults too don’t see any connection. It this for this reason that I have written this paper.

1. 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 over 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 in Germany and between West Germany and the allies on the establishment of such a force. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Foster Dulles, 1888 - 1959, U.S. 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-arming of Germany and the attempts to establish a pro-Western Middle Eastern pact. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid pp.1344-1345 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Uri Bialer, *Between East and West: Israel's Foreign Policy Orientation 1948-1956*, Cambridge University Press, 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. G. Gorodetsky, J. Freundlich, D. Yaroshevky, Y. Ro’I, Stegny et.al., *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 1941-1953* (2 vols.)(Cass, London, 2000) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid pp. 363 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Yoseph Heller, *Israel and the Cold War from the War of Independence to the Six Day war*. (Jerusalem, Ben Gurion research Institute, 210) pp. 47-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Moshe Sharett, *The state of Israel between left and right* a lecture in a seminar 22 April 1950. In Yaakov and Rina Sharett (eds.), *Speaking Out: The collected speeches of Israel’s first Foreign Minister 1950*, (Heb), Moshe Sharett Heritage Society, Tel Aviv 2016. 349-395. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In 1949 a 100,000,000$ loan was granted by the USA to Israel. Bialer East West p. 208 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gangzheng She , “Ben-Gurion, the Korean War, and the Change in Israeli Foreign Policy”, *Israelis* Vol 7 2015, pp 205-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Yoseph Heller, *Israel and the Cold War from the War of Independence to the Six Day war*. (Jerusalem, Ben Gurion research Institute, 210) pp. 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gabriel Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett, Biography of a Political Moderate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 549 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sheffer 557 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In Bialer p. 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Bailer, east west 226 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Established in 1948 . [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Knesset Plenary Records Vol 1 1949, p. 125., Knesset session 12, 10 March 1949. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Avi Shlaim, The Partition of Germany and the Origins of the Cold War, *Review of International Studies* Vol. 11, No. 2 (April, 1985), pp. 123-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Roni Stauber, “Realpolitik and the Burden of the Past: Israeli Diplomacy and the 'Other Germany'”, Israel Studies Volume 8, Number 3, Fall 2003, pp. 100-122 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Davar*, 14.3.1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Yehiam Weitz, “A review of Idith Zartal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, Hebrew edition 2002, in *Iunim B’itkumat Israel* Vol 13 2003 pp. 443-448. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Yaakov Zilber, “The Other Germany has Risen”, *Kol Haam* (The People’s Voice), 4 October 1950 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The World Peace Movement was organized by Moscow an International movement calling for disarmament and world peace and was one of the propaganda tools used by the Soviets in the cold war. The general nature of the organization (and the downplaying of soviet leadership) made it acceptable for many public figures and organizations in the west. See : Laird, R. F., 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, Vol. 31, no 6 (1982), pp 43-56.* On the Israeli case see Tamar Herman, “The Rise and Decline of the Israeli Peace Committee – 1950-1956”. *Zionism*, 17 (Winter 1993) [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The various proposals for a party ‘declaration on Germany’ are not given in the protocol that brings only the discussions on them. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The issue was debated in an emergency meeting called by *Ahdut Ha‘avoda*. See : ” The inner strife in Mapam”, *Shearim* 10 December 1951. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The Knesset Plenary Records, Knesset session 14-15 4-5 November 1951 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The Knesset Plenary Records, Knesset session 77, 6 May 1952 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid **The Knesset Plenary Records, Knesset session 14-15 4-5 November 1951** [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See: Angelika Timm, “Jewish Claims against East Germany: Moral Obligations and Pragmatic Policy” (Budapest: CEU Press, 1997), [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See: Lorena De Vita,”Overlapping Rivalries - The two Germanys, Israel and the Cold War”. *Cold War History*, 17 (4), (pp. 351-366),” [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. George Lavy, *Germany and Israel: Moral Debt and National Interest*, Routledge 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Lavy, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For more on this issue see Peter F. Müller and Michael Mueller, *Gegen Freund und Feind. Der BND: Geheime Politik und schmutzige Geschäfte*, Rowohlt Verlag, Hamburg, 2002, pages 485-504. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Inge Deutschkron, *Israel und die Deutschen: Das schwierige Verhältnis*, Cologne 1983 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For a description of these two scandals, see Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, Henry Holt and company, New York 2000, Pp. 302-305, 311-320. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
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-38)
39. It is claimed 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 from the Ghetto fighters. He saw them as exemplary heroes, even tried to bring them as political figures and members of Knesset. Therefore, he failed obliged 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) [Hebrew] p. 262 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. All quotes from this event are from Ghetto Fighters House Archive (GFHA) 2276. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Tuvia Buzikovski , “Holocaust Memory and the Israeli Government”, *Mishmar* 27 April 1953. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Neima Barzel, “Dignity, Hatred and Memory: Reparations from Germany: The Debates in the 1950s”, *Yad Vashem Studies* 24 1994, pp. 247-280 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)