

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DISPUTES AND
COMPETING MEMORIES IN GERMANY AND ISRAEL

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ABSTRACT

During the last two decades, a surge of historical revisionism has commanded considerable attention in both academia and the public sphere, as historians have linked their understandings of the past to salient problems and identity crises of the present. Increasingly, the histories of nations have been problematized and have become the object of commemorative battles. Historiographical disputes thus reveal no less about contemporary political sensibilities than they do about a nation's history. This article situates the proliferation of historical revisionism within the context of ongoing negotiations regarding the meaning of the nation at the end of the twentieth century. Through a comparison of recent historians' disputes in Germany and Israel, I explore the relationship between revisionism and collective memory, and the ways in which both are reflective of and contribute to the reformation of national identification. While national identities are usually predicated on continuities with the past, new German and Israeli identities are being defined in opposition to the founding myths of their nation-states. Both are continuously reassessing their pasts, negotiating the balance between a commitment to universal (democratic) values and the persistence of particularistic (ethnic) traditions. To be sure, national pasts have been contested before, but until recently the primacy of the nation itself was not significantly challenged. I suggest understanding the ongoing phenomenon of national demystification in the context of changing state-society relations. States no longer enjoy the same hegemonic power over the means of collective commemoration. In contrast to the state-supportive role of historians during the formative phase of nationalism, collective memory has become an increasingly contested terrain. In both countries, revisionists from the left and right self-consciously struggle to provide historical narratives of their nation's past to suit their present political views of the future.

I. INTRODUCTION: HISTORY AND MEMORY

The new literature on collective memory has widely recognized that whoever controls images of the past shapes the present, and possibly the ideas of the future. Struggles over national identity occur as battles over which symbols and memories of the national past should constitute collective identity. An important site for the organization of collective memory is historiography. Vested with a legitimacy imparted by expertise, historians are important players who help shape collective identity by connecting past and present, providing continuities

and a memory repertoire upon which the national collectivity may draw to define itself.¹

Historiographical disputes trigger attention that often extends beyond academia. One distinctive quality of historical revisionism—beyond its potential to reassess old or new evidence—is its ability to thematize and present methodological issues as public problems which are then discussed as questions of legitimate pasts in terms of the political present. When historical revisionism resonates with the broader public it can inform paradigmatic shifts in the understanding and thus judgment of a historical phenomenon. Historical revisionism constitutes one site where the relationship between collective memory and national identity is reconfigured. Collective memory itself has become a contested terrain where groups self-consciously struggle to re-shape their national pasts to suit their present political views for the future.²

In this essay I explore some of the sociological aspects of the relationship between historiographical disputes, social memory, and the ways in which they are reflective of and contribute to broader collective identity debates. What makes these debates particularly salient and public is that they often address a general sense of identity crisis. In the following I will illustrate the connection between protracted identity crises and historiographical disputes in Germany and Israel. A comparison of German and Israeli historiographical debates is of particular interpretive significance as they share a number of temporal and topical similarities.³ Both states are new nations in the sense that they emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. More importantly, their national self-understanding is constituted through the different ways in which they have coped with the traumatic experience of the Holocaust.⁴

1. Stefan Berger, *The Search for Normality: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany since 1800* (Providence, 1997); Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston, 1990); Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York, 1992); *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton, 1994).

2. This point is made forcefully in Steven Kaplan, *Farewell Revolution: The Historians' Feud* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995) where he discusses the historians' dispute around the bicentennial celebrations of the French Revolution. Recognizing the political quality of collective memory one could also say that different groups are struggling to control the future in order to change the past.

3. These similarities have invited numerous comparisons from different perspectives. José Brunner, for examples, provides a psychoanalytic reading of revisionist debates in Germany and Israel; José Brunner, "Pride and Memory: Nationalism, Narcissism and the Historians' Debates in Germany and Israel," *History and Memory* 9 (1997), 256-300. Moshe Zimmermann offers a historical comparison in "Pulmusei HaHistorionim: HaNisayon Ha Germani we hitnasut halsraelit," *Teoria u Bikoret* 8 (1996), 91-103.

4. Tom Segev describes how the memory of the Holocaust has informed Israeli national identity in different periods; Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York, 1993); first published in Hebrew in 1991. The centrality of the Holocaust for Germany's political culture has been the subject of countless publications. To be sure, the traumatic impact of World War II is not confined to the collective memory of Jewish victims and German perpetrators alone. Other European countries have also reassessed perceptions of their national past with respect to the Second World War; see Pieter Lagrou, "Victims of Genocide and National Memory: Belgium, France and the Netherlands 1945-1965," *Past and Present* 154 (1997), 181-222.

Nation-states commonly try to present foundational myths in terms of their ancient roots, thereby sustaining a transhistorical presence that surpasses social-political division lines and provides national cohesion.⁵ However, in the German and the Israeli cases, these efforts are met by the pervasive historical presence of the Holocaust. Changing memories of this event are informing their respective collective identities. Another similarity refers to the significance both countries assign to their geopolitical location and the different ways in which a sense of being surrounded by hostile countries has been inscribed into the collective memory of these nations. Germany's *Mittellage* between West and East and a troubled history with its immediate neighbors have widely informed its self-perceptions.⁶ The political-cultural implications of the enemy concept for national self-understanding are also evident in Israel's geopolitical position and its prevailing collective memory of persecution.⁷

Furthermore, both countries are self-consciously negotiating troubled relationships with their respective collective pasts. This aspect of continuities and their discontinuation, so to speak, is of particular conceptual interest inasmuch as "memory certainly is a prerequisite of identity, which rests on an awareness of continuity through time."⁸ And questions of continuity, so fundamental for the formation of identities, loom large in both cases, as new German and Israeli identities are predicated on attempted breaks with their historical pasts. Both are continuously reassessing their pasts and the ways in which democratic (universal) values, now integral parts of their political systems, relate to more particularistic traditions. The "quest for normality" is a prominent feature of both Zionism and the Federal Republic. In both cases, this "normality" has contended with competing visions of uniqueness (that is, Jewish chosenness and Germany's preference for its own particular *Kultur* over the more universal *Zivilisation*).⁹

II. THE POLITICS OF COMPARISON: UNIQUENESS AND NATIONAL SELF-UNDERSTANDING IN GERMANY AND ISRAEL

While national identities are often problematic, the national idioms of Germany and Israel conspicuously lack consensual codification, expressing continuing

5. Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, Eng., 1992).

6. For a good analysis of the political and cultural significance of how the "other" is constitutive for the collective self, see Michael Jeismann, *Das Vaterland der Feinde: Studien zum nationalen Feindbegriff und Selbstverständnis in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1792–1918* (Stuttgart, 1992).

7. Uri Ben Eliezer, *Derekh ha-kavenet: hivatsruto shel ha-militarizm ha-Ysreeli, 1936–1956* (Tel-Aviv, 1995); Segev, *The Seventh Million*.

8. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, 123. See also Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992); *Commemorations*, ed. Gillis; David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985).

9. For a good discussion about how this balance of particularism and universalism has expressed itself historically, see Norbert Elias, *Studien über die Deutschen: Machtkämpfe und Habitusentwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 1989) for the German case; and Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots, Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, 1995) for the Israeli.

tensions between ethnic and civic understandings of nationhood.¹⁰ In its formative phase, the German concept of nation centered on the *Volk*, signifying organic relationships among a people rather than a political organization; the centrality of cultural cohesion responded to the fragmentation of the German states between 1815 and 1871. After the unification of Germany, a new, state-centered conception of nationhood was introduced. Ever since, German politics have been shaped by tensions between ethno-national and state-national conceptions—between the *Kulturnation* and the *Staatsnation*.

In Israel, a comparable tension arose with the founding of the Jewish state. Zionism's concept of Jewish nationality emerged in a broader debate about Jewish identity in the modern world. As in Germany, the concept of the nation in Zionism emerged before the actual foundation of a state. Influenced by classic Central European nationalist models, Zionist ideology selectively shaped a national myth from the materials of Jewish history, affirming the claims of an ethnos to a territory, culminating in statehood. Zionism's attempts to "nationalize" Judaism in ethnic-organicist terms produced competing claims about ethnic, religious, and civic understandings of nationhood. On the one hand, secular Jewish nationality conflicts with religious understandings. On the other, the organicist view of Jewish identity, while offering powerful legitimizing myths, creates a core tension in democratic understandings of the state of Israel.

Tensions between ethnic and civic conceptions are constitutive for the self-understanding of both countries, but are not static. Each country has passed through historical conjunctures in which these aspects of their nationhood came into conflict. Their national identities were recast as these defining tensions have persisted. In both countries the "historical turn" plays a significant role in the reassessment of the collective past and possible reconfigurations of national identification in the present.

A notable quality of these revisionist debates is that they are discussed in terms of methodological problems. A central controversy revolves around the question whether comparisons should or should not be applied explicitly. At first sight, comparison might appear as a neutral methodological device. However, methodological decisions are not confined to historiographical considerations but also set moral standards.¹¹ Debates about the uniqueness or comparability of a historical phenomenon reveal a contest over whether the nation should articulate itself

10. Both nations share a conception of citizenship which is based on notions of ethnic descent rather than the more common civic associational understanding. For a more detailed discussion about the relationship of citizenship conceptions and national self-understanding see Daniel Levy, "Coming Home?! Ethnic German Repatriates and the Transformation of National Identity in the Federal Republic of Germany," in *The Politics of Belonging: Migrants and Minorities in Contemporary Europe*, ed. Adrian Favell and Andrew Geddes (Aldershot, Eng., 1998).

11. This argument clearly extends to historical narratives in general, as Richard J. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima: History Writing and the Second World War 1945–1990* (New York, 1993) has shown in his study about different national historiographies. Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, N.H., 1997) extends this argument by showing that these historical narratives are not only embedded in national cultures but that they are also circumscribed by historiographical traditions of a given country.

through universal criteria (civic) or a particularistic vocabulary (ethnic). The major significance of comparisons in the context of revisionist debates is of a moral and political quality. “To control the terms of comparison is to control the parameters of historical—and sometimes political—discourse.”¹² Examining recent historiographical disputes in Germany and Israel reveals how the relationship between comparison and uniqueness shapes the balance of universalistic and particularistic modes of national self-understanding.

III. DESTIN(Y)ATION GERMANY

The central concept around which historiographical disputes revolve in Germany is the notion of the *Sonderweg* (special path).¹³ A brief history of the *Sonderweg* concept and its vicissitudes is instructive as it reveals how “methodological” concerns of uniqueness versus comparison, and questions of continuity versus discontinuity, are politicized under certain conditions. The *Sonderweg* concept dates back to the early nineteenth century; it was initially endowed with positive attributes that emphasized the uniqueness of the German nation. It crystallized along with the mythical conception that the German nation (*Volk*) was superior, vested with a specific spirituality that set it apart from other nations. This view supplied many of the qualities that were the attributes of an increasingly ethnocentric national self-understanding in Germany, culminating in the excesses of Nazism with which the *Sonderweg* became associated. It was this association that led to the discrediting of the *Sonderweg* perspective after World War II.

The concept resurfaced in the 1960s, but with a negative connotation. The Fischer controversy in the early 1960s helped set the stage for new historiographical approaches. At the center of the debate stood the question how Nazism was possible. Germany’s particular path to modernity was the answer to Nazi success. Fritz Fischer set out to attack the defensiveness of his colleagues who treated Nazism as an aberration of history and who refused to establish structural links to aspects of pre-Nazi Germany.¹⁴ Pointing to Germany’s goals in World War I, Fischer indicated similarities between the Nazi regime and Imperial Germany. In the atmosphere of the student revolution of the late 1960s, a whole group of young historians—many associated with the “Bielefeld School”—picked up this line of thought and started to inquire into the militaristic and non-democratic traditions of Imperial Germany and its direct relationship with the authoritarianism of the Nazi period. Fischer’s thesis shaped the understanding of a new generation of historians diversifying the historical profession in Germany,

12. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, 32.

13. Berger, *The Search for Normality*; Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*; Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*.

14. The most prominent expression of this sentiment, though by no means the only one, was a book by Friedrich Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe* [1947] (Cambridge, Mass., 1950). The notion of “catastrophe” evokes an imagery that reduces a concrete historical process and actual political decisions to a realm of inevitability rather than human responsibility.

invigorating new paradigms and contributing to the emergence of a critical historical science (*kritische Geschichtswissenschaft*).¹⁵

In the mid-1980s this new *Sonderweg* perspective came under growing assault. With consecutive electoral successes by Helmut Kohl's conservative CDU in the 1980s, the "nation" and the *Volk* regained legitimacy in public discourse. The main obstacle to the reintroduction of an organicist vocabulary was the centrality of the Holocaust. Conservative historians have objected to the perception that the Holocaust was uniquely German and unique as such.¹⁶ This view received wide public attention in 1986 when Ernst Nolte challenged this understanding of the Holocaust, arguing that Nazi policy was best understood in a comparative framework along with Stalinism.¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, in turn, publicly accused Nolte of having a reactionary political agenda.¹⁸ An academic dispute over historiography became a challenge to the centrality of the Holocaust as constitutive of Germany's identity.¹⁹

Germany's *Sonderweg* has also informed the controversy surrounding the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.²⁰ I am less interested in the historical accuracy of Goldhagen's thesis than in the initially vehement reaction to it by historians and other intellectuals, and the gradual public acceptance of Goldhagen among some circles of the German left. During the *Historikerstreit* in 1986 and its aftermath the division lines of the controversy were, for the most part, between the left and the right. In the current controversy this division is exceeded by historians' near unanimous rejection of Goldhagen's central thesis that the Holocaust was the result of a deep seated anti-Semitism whose eliminationist version was typically German.²¹ The Goldhagen controver-

15. Berger, *The Search for Normality*; J. A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion: The Fischer Controversy in German Historiography* (New York, 1975).

16. Ernst Nolte, "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will," in "*Historikerstreit*": *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich, 1987), 39-48 is probably the most recognized but not the only exponent of this view.

17. Comparisons of this sort were rather common in the postwar period in the context of the emerging Cold War. Politicians frequently compared Nazism and Stalinism, as did Nolte in his book on fascism, which won wide acclaim. Ernst Nolte, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche* (Munich, 1963).

18. Jürgen Habermas, "Ein Art Schadensabwicklung," in "*Historikerstreit*": *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse*, 62-77.

19. The *Historikerstreit* continues to be at the center of intellectual controversy, a measuring stick representing the precarious role of the Holocaust in Germany's national *Selbstverständnis* (self-understanding). The list of publications dealing with this controversy is extensive. For primary documents from the dispute see: "*Historikerstreit*": *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse*; see also Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*; Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (New York, 1989); Christhard Hoffmann, "Introduction: One Nation—Which Past? Historiography and German Identities in the 1990s," *German Politics and Society* 2 (1997), 1-7.

20. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996). Shortly after the German publication of the book, a volume with collected reactions to Goldhagen, comparable to the one that documented the *Historikerstreit* of 1986, was published: *Ein Volk von Mördern? Die Dokumentation zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse um die Rolle der Deutschen im Holocaust*, ed. Julius H. Schoeps (Hamburg, 1996).

21. To be sure, the constitutive role of the Holocaust for German national identity continues to be discussed in left-right terms. Many left and center historians, while delegitimizing Goldhagen's scholarly contribution, lauded it as a welcome corrective to those on the right who want to put an end to the Holocaust legacy, a desire that had gained particular momentum after the 50th anniversary commemorating the end of World War II.

sy probably tells us more about the frail state of the political culture in the new Germany than about the Holocaust.²²

In the context of an ongoing identity debate in Germany, one central objection to Goldhagen's thesis refers to the implied notion of "national character," a concept that many say cannot and should not be applied in scientific inquiry.²³ Many of Goldhagen's critics explicitly objected to the book on the grounds that it re-evoked notions such as "collective guilt," "national character," and "eternal German anti-Semitism," ideas from which the Federal Republic of Germany had tried to distance itself since its early days. Around the time of this controversy, Klaus Kinkel, Germany's foreign minister, speaking before the American Jewish Committee, found it necessary to emphasize that guilt was a personal concept, not collective and certainly not hereditary.²⁴

Indeed, Goldhagen's primordial conception of German anti-Semitism sets him apart from other historians who are "*Sonderwegler*" (that is, those adhering to the concept of a special path). His essentialist view of German-ness and Nazism as its final solution, so to speak, precludes any type of comparison, effectively excluding politics, economy, and other institutional factors as frames of reference. This stands in marked contrast to the continuous modifications of the *Sonderweg* ever since Fischer presented his thesis in the 1960s. While the uniqueness of the Holocaust is still widely acknowledged, there has been a de-emphasis on what was uniquely German about it. "National character" has remained conceptually excluded from the dominant *Sonderweg* approach.

The conception of German uniqueness, however, was not only challenged by intellectuals from the right. Early on, Marxist-influenced fascist theory had de-emphasized German peculiarities by situating Nazism within a broader framework of capitalist crisis.²⁵ This tendency to minimize the uniquely German element has also been apparent in the study of "everyday" history (*Alltagsgeschichte*), and a more recent paradigm that situates the Holocaust within the context of modernization theory which views it as the embodiment of modernity in general.²⁶ While the right interpreted Nazism by means of the concept of totalitarianism, the left popularized a concept of anti-fascism in their ongoing

22. At a panel discussion during Goldhagen's book promotion tour in Germany one of the panelists, Wolfgang Wippermann, remarked: "Goldhagen contributed to the political culture of our country" (*Die Zeit* 38 [September 20, 1996]). See also Wippermann's *Wessen Schuld? Vom Historikerstreit zur Goldhagenkontroverse* (Berlin, 1997).

23. As Bosworth shows in his comparative study of national historiographies, the choice of historical perspectives is not incidental but reflective of the case-specific agenda that seeks to suppress unfavorable episodes in one's national history. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima*.

24. In a detailed analysis Jeffrey Olick has shown that official Holocaust commemorations in Germany in the last fifty years have always carefully made distinctions between collective and individual guilt, and commonly adhered to the idea that while responsibility can be shared by a group, guilt cannot. See Jeffrey Keith Olick, *The Sins of the Fathers: The Third Reich and West German Legitimation* (unpublished manuscript, 1993).

25. Dan Diner, "On the Ideology of Antifascism," *New German Critique* 67 (1996), 123-132.

26. For a general example of the modernity argument, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989); for a more specific study, see Götz Aly, *Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt, 1995).

generational struggle with their parents. In this paradigmatic struggle most of the attention shifted away from the Holocaust and onto the parameters of the Cold War rhetoric, juxtaposing the virtues of the two Germanies. Thus, totalitarian approaches compared the German Democratic Republic to Nazism, and Marxist fascism theories discussed the Federal Republic in terms of a capitalist logic which conceived of West Germany as a successor state to the fascist Third Reich. This logic helped relativize the legacy of the Nazi period by bypassing the notion of uniqueness.²⁷ In this approach there was no conceptual space to discuss the mass extermination and anti-Semitism itself.²⁸ The left thus contributed to the very trivialization of the Holocaust to which it later objected so vehemently when the possibility of a comparative frame was raised by the right. The *Sonderweg* approach was also questioned by historians outside of Germany, most notably by David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley,²⁹ who questioned the *Sonderweg* thesis on the assumption that it was compared to a French and Anglo-American normative path that seemed idealized. They came to the conclusion that it is mistaken simply to assume that there was no civic society in Germany, but instead suggested the need to study German embourgeoisement on its own terms.³⁰

Goldhagen's tendency to primordialize Nazism, so to speak, shifts the historiographical attention away from politics, society, and economy and provides an essentialist interpretation of German-ness, one that seems beyond the reach of current historiographical approaches. It is precisely this essentialist view of German-ness, coupled with the assessment that today's Germany (or Germans) have changed and "are like us,"³¹ that explains the emphatic reception he has received in Germany where he was cheered during public discussions with intellectual adversaries.³² What accounts for this support and who is behind it? One could say that Goldhagen's testimony to the "liberal democratic" character of today's Germans suffices to generate sympathetic responses. However, it would be simplistic to reduce the complexities of this controversy and Goldhagen's reception to mere opportunism. It seems that he hit a nerve among those who for years have advocated Europeanism or certain versions of Habermasian post-conventional identities. The troubled sense of nationhood among this supportive group makes it especially receptive to Goldhagen's thesis that there was something particularly German about the Holocaust. It confirms their own anti-nation-

27. With the demise of the GDR, theories of totalitarianism have once again gained currency. While Nolte's attempts to draw comparisons in 1986 were met by strong opposition, recent discussions about similarities between Communism and Nazism are more reminiscent of comparisons during the Cold War in the 1950s.

28. Diner "On the Ideology of Antifascism," 123-132.

29. David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley *The Peculiarities of German History* (New York, 1984).

30. Since their political views are firmly situated on the left, their work has been appropriated by the conservative right in Germany in their search for legitimate sources to contest the notion of German uniqueness.

31. Interview with Daniel J. Goldhagen, *New York Times* (1 April 1996), section C, p. 11.

32. Given the centrality of this objection, Goldhagen's refusal to acknowledge the notion of "national character" explicitly perpetuates the preclusion of a rational debate about the concept.

al disposition.³³ The essentialist quality of German anti-Semitism as presented by Goldhagen is inextricably linked with an ethno-cultural understanding of nationhood, of which many in the new Left have rid themselves. By accepting the concept of national character and the related evils of German-ness, the left's own disdain for the ethno-cultural understanding of German nationhood assumes a redemptive quality. Thus the shift from collective responsibility to one of collective guilt and national character becomes a liberating experience. In the aftermath of World War II, the collective guilt thesis was often presented by Germans themselves as evidence for the absurdity of the charges against them. Attacks against the collective guilt thesis often permitted Germans to abdicate any responsibility for the Nazi crimes.³⁴ The retrospective reversal and acceptance of collective guilt by a generation born after the war may inadvertently serve a similar purpose of purification. The discrediting of German-ness comes as a welcome support for their own problematic relationship with German nationhood.³⁵ The public resonance of Goldhagen's book thus seems related no less to current sensibilities about national identity in the new Germany than to the study of the Holocaust.

IV. ISRAEL: FROM LIGHT TO DARK

In the late 1980s historical revisionism penetrated the public sphere in Israel, as a group of so-called "new historians" criticized a number of foundational pillars of Zionist historiography. Changing political circumstances (for instance, the decline of Labor Zionism; the Lebanon war and the *Intifadah* confirming the moral problematic of military aggression and occupation) created a climate in which alternative views became not only legitimate but pervasive in Israel's mainstream political culture.³⁶ In this atmosphere, the previously held assumption within Zionist historiography that the 1948 war and the Israeli-Arab conflict were determined by a reactive and defensive (and thus morally just) position of

33. Andreas Huyssen has criticized the German left for leaving the concept of the nation to the forces on the right, instead of trying to shape it in a less chauvinistic manner. See Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York, 1995).

34. The concept of collective guilt played a certain role right after 1945; see *West Germany under Construction: Politics, Society, and Culture in the Adenauer Era*, ed. Robert Moeller (Ann Arbor, 1997). But it was gradually suppressed and eventually gave way to a new understanding, one that emphasized Germany's collective responsibility. This stands in marked contrast to the vehement reaction of the older generation; see Rudolf Augstein's polemic, "Der Soziologe als Scharfrichter" in *Ein Volk von Mördern?*, ed. Schoeps, 106-110; and Frank Schirmacher's response for the conservative right, "Hitler's Code," in the same volume, 99-106.

35. This could explain why many of Goldhagen's early critics toned down their objections and pointed to potential contributions in his work. A generational component might also play a certain role here if we were to compare Hans Mommsen's passionate criticism with the rather moderate tones of younger historians during those panel discussions.

36. With the ascendance of the right-wing Likud under Menachem Begin, the idea of a greater Israel began to dominate the public discourse. Its ideological vanguard was the settler movement, and gradually their ethnocentric vision pervaded Israeli public discourse. Baruch Kimmerling, "Between the Primordial and the Civil Definitions of the Collective Identity: Eretz Israel or the State of Israel?," in *Comparative Social Dynamics*, ed. U. Almagor, E. Cohen, and M. Lissak (Boulder, Colo., 1985).

the Jewish leadership has been challenged by numerous historical and sociological works.³⁷ Revisionist historians attacked “Zionist historians” for ideological scholarship misrepresenting the Jewish-Arab conflict.³⁸ What started as an academic dispute about the historiography of the *Yishuv* (the Jewish settlement in Palestine under the British mandate) soon became a public debate about national identity.³⁹

Questions of uniqueness and comparability were implied in many of the debates.⁴⁰ The revisionists criticized the historical establishment for conceiving Jewish history and Zionism as unique and lamented their refusal to compare the *Yishuv* and later Israel by universal standards.⁴¹ They challenged what they conceived to be the ethnocentric and often self-righteous particularism of Zionist historiography.⁴² Instead, the “new historians” assessed the developments leading to the formation of the state in universalistic terms amenable to comparative judgments: several studies have looked at the Zionist enterprise with a critical eye, recognizing its colonial legacy,⁴³ and emphasizing the political and military interests underlying the expulsion of a great part of the Palestinian population.⁴⁴ To be sure, many similar claims had been made earlier but had remained at the margins of Israeli society.⁴⁵ But the “new historians” share the center stage of

37. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987); Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Israeli-Arab Conflict* (London, 1992); Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989); Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine* (New York, 1988).

38. Shabtai Tevet, “Charging Israel with Original Sin,” *Commentary* 88, no. 3 (1989), 24–33.

39. “Special Issue: Israeli Historiography Revisited,” *History and Memory*, ed. Gulie Ne’eman Arad (Spring/Summer 1995); Steven Heydenmann, “Revisionism and the Reconstruction of Israeli History,” in *Critical Essays on Israeli Society: Politics and Culture*, ed. Ian S. Lustick and Barry Rubin (New York, 1991), 3–26; *New Perspectives on Israeli History*, ed. Laurence Silberstein (New York, 1991).

40. Michael Barnett, “The Politics of Uniqueness: The Status of the Israeli Case,” in *Israel in Comparative Perspective: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom*, ed. Michael Barnett (Albany, 1996), 3–29.

41. Sociological studies operating within the framework of modernization theory constitute the exception. But this type of comparison is ahistorical and teleological, stipulating a normative path for industrialized countries rather than studying a case in critical comparison. A similar trend can be observed in German sociology after the war, when notions of uniqueness vanished in the paradigmatic assumptions of a modernizing logic setting Germany on a conventional developmental path and thus de-emphasizing its peculiarities.

42. Tensions between universalism and particularism also guide more recent critiques of the ethnocentric interpretations of the Holocaust in Israel. A prominent example is the work by Segev, *The Seventh Million*, which criticizes the Zionist leadership of the *Yishuv* for neglecting the fate of European Jewry in favor of concerns over Jewish settlement in Palestine. Questions over how to teach the Holocaust in schools, and voices critical of the particularistic instrumentalization of the Holocaust for national purposes, are also symptomatic of a more critical stance toward Israeli nationhood.

43. Baruch Kimmerling, *Zionism and Territory: The Socio-Territorial Dimensions of Zionist Politics* (Berkeley, 1983); Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict*.

44. Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*; Pappé, *The Making of the Israeli-Arab Conflict*; Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*; Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan*.

45. Most notably is *Mazpen*, a group of anti-Zionist intellectuals advocating a bi-national state. Many members of this group left Israel and most of their works emanated from Paris and London. It should be noted that most of the “new historians” also completed their revisionist works outside of Israel.

mainstream Israeli academia and they have received broad attention in the media, reflecting and contributing to a pluralization of views on Israel's collective self-understanding.⁴⁶ In this atmosphere, historical revisionism is part of a broader identity phenomenon in which a hegemonic Zionist historiography has given way to a self-critical pluralistic picture in which the very idea of Zionism itself is problematized. Some of the protagonists in this struggle see themselves as post-Zionists.⁴⁷ Others have emphasized the identity potential of different forms of Jewish experience.⁴⁸

The debate over Zionism is another context within which the "new historians" have criticized Zionist interpretations of the Holocaust. The attempt to present the Holocaust as proof that the only viable option for Jewish life is Zionism has met resistance by some of these scholars. As such the debate about the Holocaust is not only about its historical meaning, but about possible and legitimate sources of national identity. Similar to the debate in Germany, periods of the past are selectively evaluated for their potential as sources for collective identity, attempting to undermine the Zionist master-narrative according to which only a Jewish state provides the redemption from the exilic condition. That is to say, to what extent are the diaspora experience, Judaism, other aspects of the Jewish experience, and universalistic ideologies legitimate sources for collective identity in Israel?

V. SOME COMPARATIVE REMARKS ABOUT UNIQUENESS

The twinning of continuity and discontinuity continues to inform debates about national identity in both Israel and Germany. This explains the ongoing engagement in examining different pasts and their suitability for the present, indicating how Germans and Israelis are incessantly exploring, shaping, and renegotiating their identities. Comparing historiographical disputes in Germany and Israel tells us something about the relationship among history, collective memory, and national identity. The comparison of the two cases reveals historical revisionisms with different ideological underpinnings. In both countries methodological questions of comparability and uniqueness are closely related to moral issues of universalism and particularism.

46. Some of these revisionist views were recently expressed in a state-sponsored television documentary series celebrating Israel's fiftieth anniversary. The ensuing public controversy was yet more evidence of the pluralization of legitimate voices. The range of identity options has included pledges for a regional identity emphasizing Mediterranean traits, as well as adaptations to liberal models emphasizing individual over collectivistic forms of identity. A good example for the latter is Natan Sznajder, "Vom Wehrbürger zum Einkaufsbürger: Nationalismus und Konsum in Israel," *Soziale Welt* 49 (1998), 43-56.

47. Uri Ram distinguishes two trends: one characterizes the new historians and is commonly referred to as post-Zionism (implying a post-national identity); the other is neo-Zionism, a trend that radicalizes the particularistic features of Zionism's settler component by stressing its ethno-cultural foundations over its democratic commitment. Uri Ram, "Memory and Identity in the Sign of Post-Zionism: The Sociology of the Historians' Disputes in Israel," *Teoria u Bikoret* 8, no. 3 (1996), 9-32 (Hebrew).

48. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Exile within Sovereignty: A Critique of the "Negation of Exile" in Israeli Culture," *Teoria u Bikoret* 4 (1994), 23-56 and 5 (1995), 113-132 (Hebrew).

But their revisionisms come from opposite directions: in Germany, it is predominantly the conservative right that has sponsored revisionist thought, attempting to re-nationalize collective identity. Goldhagen's recent revision consists of re-introducing the *Sonderweg* concept and notions of "national character/culture" into the identity equation. His thesis conflicts with both neo-conservative interpretations of the Holocaust as well as with other historiographical trends emerging from the center-left. But Goldhagen's inquiry about German-ness also resonates with broader public concerns among a younger generation on the left, exacerbated by reunification after which the troubled sense of German nationhood has been exposed and reassessed. In Israel, historical revisionism emanates mostly from the left and a new generation of scholars seeking to de-emphasize nationalist elements by attacking the foundational moments in Labor Zionist historiography. This academic controversy is part of a larger attempt to redefine collective identity, advocating a post-conventional, post-national foundation, or striving to replace Israel's particularist ethnic self-understanding with a more universalistic civic understanding.

Questions of uniqueness and comparability permeate both quarrels. In Israel, notions of singularity imply a defense of the Zionist master narrative, whereas notions of equivalence lead to comparisons that are critical, challenging mythological self-perceptions. In Germany, this relationship is inverted. Those who wish to understand the Holocaust in a comparative perspective often regard the widespread claim of its singularity as constraining the return to a self-confident nation. The revisionist right seeks to reverse this by situating the German experience in a comparative framework that revives the Cold War vocabulary of totalitarianism, aiming to shift attention from the Holocaust as a unique event that led to the discrediting of the nation in Germany to one amenable to comparisons.

The relationship between past and present can vary as well; that is to say, the preference to relativize the past in terms of the present, or vice-versa, depends on the case. "New historians" in Israel relativize the past in terms of the present as they point to the ongoing injustice against Palestinians under occupation, and show that the origins of these policies can be found in the foundational period of the *Yishuv*. In Germany, both the right and the left look for sources of identification that can help shape their collective self-understanding in contradistinction to the Nazi period. For the right, the Nazi period must remain an aberration in order to salvage an essence of German-ness. For the left, universalistic concepts serve as moral correctives for ethnocentric modes of collective identification.

VI. THE "HISTORICAL TURN"

"The hunger for memory has been a remarkable cultural feature of the last decade. . . . Western societies have been living through an era of self-archeologization."⁴⁹ Along with this hunger came a surge of historical revisionism which

49. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, 149, 123.

has questioned the foundational myths of their respective nations.⁵⁰ To be sure, national pasts have been contested before, but until recently the primacy of the nation itself was not significantly challenged. It is commonly agreed that the modern nation-state has usually drawn its legitimacy by presenting the nation in its relationship to some mythical past.⁵¹ Historical myth and glorious pasts were always an indispensable part of the national vocabulary. Every society contains visions of ideal(ized) pasts. This is certainly accurate for the origins of nation-state formation in Germany, where the need for such a past was particularly acute due to the political fragmentation of its territories and the pre-political formation of nationhood. The state of Israel faced a different predicament. On the one hand, Zionism proclaimed a new answer to the “Jewish problem” and a radical departure from previous solutions (for example, assimilation, religion); on the other hand, it self-consciously appropriated religious symbolism and focused on biblical episodes where nationhood was celebrated, bracketing references to the exilic experience of the Jewish people.⁵²

By the end of the nineteenth century, the nation was the central ideological formation and the most powerful integrative force in modern societies.⁵³ The nation-state was able to impose “official nationalisms”⁵⁴ which ultimately pushed regional, local, and other identities to the margins of public rhetoric.⁵⁵ However, at the end of the twentieth century, western European nation-states no longer have the capacity to mobilize their subjects to the extent they did fifty years earlier. Changes in state–society relations have contributed to the emergence and multiplication of new voices. States no longer enjoy the same hegemonic power over the means of collective commemoration.⁵⁶

In an extensive study of how the nation has been commemorated in the history of France, Pierre Nora laments that “The ‘acceleration of history,’ then, confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory . . . and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past. . . . The gulf between the two has deepened in modern

50. The French have started to look at the collaborational nature of the Vichy regime, and American historiography has re-evaluated the Frontier Thesis, to name but two examples of the proliferation of historical revisionisms.

51. *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, Eng., 1983); Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*; Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (New York, 1986).

52. Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Religion and Politics in Israel* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984); Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*.

53. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*; Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

54. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 1991); John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (New York, 1982).

55. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, 1976).

56. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford, 1994); Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire” *Representations* 26 (1989), 1–21.

times with the growing belief in a right, a capacity, and even a duty to change.”⁵⁷ Along with this transformation, Nora also recognizes that the transmission of memory has expanded to social forces outside the realm of the state. “The coupling of state and nation was gradually replaced by the coupling of state and society.”⁵⁸ No longer is the nation-state the uncontested privileged site for the articulation of collective identity. Nora points to (and deplors) the erosion of the state’s ability to impose a unitary and unifying framework of memory. As Nancy Wood puts it, the hegemonic state is supplanted by a society in which “sectoral memories have restructured the way the relationship between past, present and future is experienced, and reshaped the forms of collectivity which now cohabit in the national space.”⁵⁹

To be sure, people and collectivities were able to exercise judgment and choice in previous eras as well, but the degree of reflexivity and introspection with which the dominance of the nation has been challenged is a distinctive feature of the last two decades.⁶⁰ The age of demystification is now part of popular culture. Mass media(ted) society is erecting and subverting its own myth almost daily. “To interrogate a tradition, venerable though it may be, is no longer to pass it on intact.”⁶¹ Rather than seeking comfort in the foundational myth of nationhood, “it is no longer genesis that we seek but instead the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer.”⁶²

Historians play a central role in supporting or objecting to how the past is presented in official memory. However, in contrast to the state-supportive role of historians during the formative phase of nationalism, collective memory is increasingly a contested terrain on which groups self-consciously struggle to shape and re-shape their national past to suit their present political views of the future.⁶³ It is this self-conscious recognition of the “strategic” character of historiography that breaks down the privileged position of official histories and creates a field of competing claims about the foundation of nationhood.

Such claims reflect new emerging understandings of collective identities toward the end of the twentieth century in general, and the role of the nation in

57. Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 8.

58. *Ibid.*, 11.

59. Nancy Wood, “Memory’s Remains: Les lieux de memoire,” *History and Memory* 6 (1994), 125.

60. Sensitivity to questions of national guilt and responsibility for their historical pasts is especially pervasive since the end of the Second World War. Due to its historical legacy and the central role of the Holocaust, Germany is a paradigmatic case for the increasing reflexivity that characterizes the national self-questioning in many European states. For a good comparative study elaborating on this shift, see Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima*. The recent admission of Vichy, both in the sense of guilt and as a legitimate topic of public discourse, and the legitimizing role of the Resistance in the rehabilitation of national pride in France, are other examples. See Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

61. Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 10.

62. *Ibid.*, 18. Steven Kaplan provides a good overview of the public controversy over the interpretation of the French Revolution and its meaning for the political culture of France. Steven Laurence Kaplan, *Farewell Revolution: The Historians’ Feud* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995).

63. For a good discussion of memories and counter-memories see Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*.

particular. Identities are predicated on continuity(ies) with a past. But the histories of nations are increasingly problematized and have become a realm of commemorative combat. Which national past(s) are suitable for present sensibilities? Whose past is it? What image of the past nation prevails in the public sphere? The “return of history” rather than its alleged end characterizes the last quarter of this century. The hegemonic role of the nation is undermined by the emergence of competing identities emphasizing universalist criteria superseding the primacy of the nation. We witness “the demise of national memories, a proliferation of sites of memory and a corresponding multiplication of conflictual social identities. . . . New Symbolic matrices evoke this more fragmented and partisan sense of belonging, founded on division among groups within the national polity as much as on adherence to more local claims of allegiance.”⁶⁴ The Israeli case reveals a contest for recognition among a multiplicity of differing Jewish and universal experiences, replacing the “Zionist master narrative.”⁶⁵ German revisionism expresses a response by those who consider the nation as the primary frame of collective identification, objecting to pervasive claims of a post-national identity. The contested nature of the nation and the multiplication of other identity options are thus reflected in the proliferation of struggles over collective memory.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let me conclude by pointing to two broader mechanisms at work here. Historians receive public attention when they link their understanding of the past with salient problems of the present. In this respect, historiographical disputes reveal no less about contemporary sensibilities and contests in a political culture than they do about the past. More specifically, the objective of historical revisionists is to debunk those mythical substructures upon which collective identities rely. By attacking these mythological foundations revisionists thematize issues that were not previously discussed, and render them intelligible for rational debate.⁶⁶ Once these debates are politicized the central question becomes which past should be admitted (in the double sense of confession and inclusion) and which should be rejected (in the double sense of suppression and exclusion).

Many of the “revisionist” claims in Germany and Israel are not novel, but they readily swept beyond academia once they resonated with the identity problems of a significant segment of the population.⁶⁷ The proliferation of historical revi-

64. Wood, “Memory’s Remains,” 125.

65. Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 12.

66. For a more theoretical discussion of how mythical claims are de-tabooized, see Jeffrey K. Olick and Daniel Levy, “Collective Memory and Cultural Constraint: Holocaust Myth and Rationality in German Politics,” *American Sociological Review* 62 (1997), 921-936.

67. From a methodological point of view there was nothing new about the “new historians” and the historical revisionism in Germany. They both continued to rely on conventional official sources and narrative form, and as such are not related to recent postmodern trends in historiography. However, both significantly informed and altered the subsequent scope of historical inquiry in their respective countries.

sionism in the last decade is in part a response to an ongoing crisis of collective identification in general, and a crisis of the nation in particular. This “identity crisis” is both the source and the solution to the problem of collective identification. The turn to history is an expression of lacking identitarian models,⁶⁸ with historians legitimizing vocabularies from the past and discrediting others. In Israel this includes collective Jewish experiences that stand outside the Zionist narrative (for instance, the recognition of diaspora cultures), or recourse to a universal rhetoric that transcends the ethno-cultural foundations of the state of Israel (most notably post-Zionism). In Germany the left has favored certain cultural aspects of the Weimar Republic, and the right seeks to rehabilitate some Bismarckian or other conservative tradition. Since reunification, the Federal Republic itself has become history in the sense that it serves as a model for collective identification for the center and the left, or as the true aberration in German history, as some on the right would have it.

In short, it is not merely the explanation of the past but its transformation into a reliable identity source for the present that is at stake in these debates. In a way, the very problematization of the “identity crisis” is also the remedy for that crisis. That is, by pointing to identity deficits, identity is elevated to a certain public awareness. Historical revisionism does not directly cause new identities, but it does generate public attention to identity deficits and suggests alternative frames of identification. Or as Walter Benjamin once said: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to learn ‘how it really was.’ It means to seize memory as it flashes brightly in a moment of danger.”⁶⁹ It is in this capacity that historical revisionism has come to serve as a crucial link between collective memory and the nation, as the crisis of collective identities continues.

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68. Kohl, a trained historian, consciously adopted the concept of *Geschichtspolitik* (politics with history) as a way to remedy what he considered to be a pervasive national identitarian deficit (*Identitätsdefizit*).

69. Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften* 12 (Frankfurt, 1985), 695.