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Reparation was national rehabilitation

Germany and Israel's long, strange relationship

Postwar West Germany helped build the new state of Israel, and had an important and little-known role in shaping the modern Middle East. But its early efforts to make amends often revealed old sentiments.

by Daniel Marwecki

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Hush-hush: US arms supplied via Germany helped Israel win the Six Day war

Pierre Guillaud · AFP · Getty

The German parliament convened in April 2018 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of Israel's founding. In the debate, Martin Schulz said on behalf of the Social Democrats that 'by protecting Israel, we protect ourselves from the demons of the past' (1). Green party speaker Katrin Göring-Eckardt captured the gist of the whole debate in a single sentence: 'Israel's right to exist is our own.'

When German politicians talk about Israel, they are really talking about themselves. The relationship with the Jewish state assures Germany of its post-Nazi liberal identity, so we learn a lot about the German state of mind by looking at how Germany talks about Israel, but little about the actual history and content of relations between the two countries.

Both the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the state of Israel were founded after the second world war and the Shoah. The 1952 reparations agreement marks the beginning of relations between the countries. There is still the question of why they pursued such close relations so soon after so many Germans had participated in almost wiping out the Jewish people.

The official German framing of relations with Israel as grounded in 'morality' is hardly credible, since it is well documented that former Nazis continued to occupy high places in postwar Germany, and that German society was mostly in denial about the barbarism of the previous years.

'Crimes had to be expiated'

It is best to listen to Konrad Adenauer, Germany's first postwar chancellor, who in 1966 was asked in about his reparations policy on primetime German television; he was then two years into retirement. Adenauer, whose name is closely identified with the 'rebirth' of Germany after 1945, replied that the German crimes against the Jews 'had to be expiated or repaired, if we were at all to regain our international standing'. He then added that 'the power of the Jews even today, especially in America, should not be underestimated.'

German aid was a great contribution to development, and military aid also played a very large role in the security of Israel *Asher Ben-Natan*

To Adenauer, paying reparations was less a moral question than a way to rehabilitate the German name. His second reason was more surprising: it repeated the most classic trope of antisemitic prejudice, that of 'Jewish power', adding a telling 'even today'. Rehabilitation, coupled with an overblown idea of Jewish influence on western opinion, was key to Adenauer's Israel policy.

But why would Israel accept a bloodstained hand of friendship from a barely de-Nazified West Germany? A third of Israel's founding population were holocaust survivors. Most Israelis were related to or knew others who had perished, and the country was built by traumatised refugees from Europe. There was only one reason why Israel would enter into relations with Germany: material need.

Following Israel's war of independence (and the displacement of the majority of the Palestinian population), its place in the Middle East was far from secure. The early state was in economic and military dire straits.

The Reparations Agreement was the first major treaty regulating German postwar reparations. While laying the groundwork for later individual compensation, it was about reparations to the Israeli state. The FRG committed to paying 3.45bn Deutschmarks to Israel, approximately \$7.8bn in today's terms. Two thirds was paid in goods (raw materials, machinery, ships) and one third was used to buy crude oil from British companies, literally fuelling an industrialisation programme.

A 'downright salvation'

Nahum Goldmann, then president of the World Jewish Congress and chief negotiator for the Israeli side, called the agreement a 'downright salvation'. For Germany, rehabilitation came cheap. At no point did yearly expenditures under the agreement amount to more than 0.2% of gross national product; in fact reparation deliveries stimulated production in Germany's export sectors, contributing to the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle).

'Normalisation' between the countries soon moved from the economic sphere to the military. Between the aftermath of the 1956 Suez War and the decisive Arab-Israeli war of 1967, Germany, along with France, became Israel's most important military supporter. Shimon Peres, the main architect of the military relationships with both the FRG and France, said, 'The USA helped us with money, but not with weapons. France helped us with weapons, but not with money. Germany could build a bridge over the past by delivering arms, without demanding money or anything else.'

The archives of the German foreign office show that German military support of Israel began in 1957, mostly with light weapons, motor patrol boats and military training. There was a first major arms deal in 1962, when Germany began to deliver heavy artillery, planes, helicopters, boats and submarines. In 1964 the US administration pressured Bonn to add 150 Patton tanks to the delivery list on its behalf; at least until 1967, the US did not want to arm Israel directly, wishing to appear as a neutral outsider to the Arab-Israeli conflict and not arouse the anger of Arab nationalists.

Germany's support was crucial. In 1965 the first Israeli ambassador to Germany, Asher Ben-Natan, in his first conversation with the chancellor, Ludwig Erhard, said that a war in the Middle East 'would only last a few days. Israel thus [had to] always be prepared. German aid [was] a great contribution to the development of the country and military aid also [played] a very large role in the security of Israel.'

These words proved true in 1967 with the six-day Arab-Israeli war, in which German military support played its part. Two days after the war ended, the German ambassador to Israel sent home a telling telegram: 'An officer of the general staff told me that the modernised, more heavily armoured tanks delivered by us proved their worth in excellent fashion.'

The shared importance of France and Germany to Israel prior to 1967 can be seen in that war. French Mirage jets won the decisive air campaign, while the ground battle in Egypt was won with German-delivered tanks. Unsurprisingly, representatives of Arab states repeatedly complained to German diplomats that arms deliveries had greatly facilitated Israel's war effort.

Another vital German aid was a financial loan of 644.8m Deutschmarks, codenamed Operation Business Friend, which was, like the weapons, provided secretly. After diplomatic

relations were established in 1965 (see *A double-edged doctrine*, in this issue), the loan was transformed into official development aid. In 2015 Hans Rühle, an expert on nuclear proliferation who had held high positions in the German defence ministry and NATO, claimed in the conservative pro-Israel newspaper *Die Welt* that this loan was used to finance Israel's nuclear program. This is plausible given the role Germany played in Israel's consolidation, but hard to verify.

'Novel type of Israeli youth'

Relations with Israel intensified much faster than did Germany's confrontation with its past, which led to bizarre transformations of old-style antisemitism attaching to the relationship with Israel. In 1961 Gerhard von Preuschen, who headed the German observer delegation at the trial of Adolf Eichmann, wrote in his final report about 'the novel and very advantageous type of the Israeli youth. This youth exhibits almost none of the features which one used to regard as Jewish. Of great height, often blond and blue-eyed, free and self-determined in their movements with well-defined faces, the offspring of the German Jewish immigrants represent a new type of the Jew that was unknown until now.'

This statement, with its openly articulated racism, illustrates a self-regarding perception of Israel: it becomes Aryan. German-Israeli relations are rich in irony. Similar narcissism was seen in the German press, especially the publications of the Springer house, which celebrated Israel's 1967 victory as a *Blitzsieg*, complimented Israeli general Moshe Dayan by comparing him to the Wehrmacht general Erwin Rommel, and denigrated the conquered Arab armies in a way that recalled the cruel German military triumphalism of the past.

A curious chapter in this curious relationship concerns Germany's first ambassador to Israel, the former Wehrmacht general and Iron Cross holder Rolf Pauls, whose internal reports frequently linked his Israeli interlocutors with money and power. In 1965 Pauls was angry that the Israelis 'say morality, but mean money', and felt that 'Israel and the Jews wield decisive influence in the decisive global centres of public opinion making', and consequently that Germany was not in a position to stop supporting Israel. Otherwise, he feared, 'the Jews will unleash the dogs from Jerusalem to London to New York.'

Little to do with morality

In a debate that is mostly moral in nature, those critical of Germany's Israel policy often point out that while Germany assumes responsibility for Israel's security, it fails to show true concern for those who had to make room for Israel's creation. This criticism fails to take into account the fact that the German turn towards Israel had little to do with morality in the first place.

In the postwar period, when German reparations and weapon deliveries helped build the Israeli state, the FRG was aware of the existence of the Palestinian refugees. However, in a time of population transfers all over the colonised world and Europe, there was no incentive to recognise the plight of a displaced people who had no way to make their voice heard.

Internal government discussions about humanitarian aid to Palestinian refugees pointed out the need to create goodwill among Arab states, who rightly suspected that German support of Israel was more extensive than it appeared. But German officials took care that humanitarian aid to refugees did not create an impression of 'indirect responsibility' for them. While it is

true that Germany today supports Palestinian national self-determination in the form of a state within the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, this support has always come second to the relationship with Israel.

The relationship changed significantly after the 1967 war, when Germany took a back seat as the US-Israeli alliance took off. It evolved throughout the cold war, European integration and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, changing again dramatically with the end of the cold war and German unification.

Daniel Marwecki

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(1) This and all subsequent quotes are taken from the author's forthcoming book, *Germany and Israel: Whitewashing and Statebuilding*.

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A double-edged doctrine

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While West Germany (FRG) was a crucial ally of Israel, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) backed the Palestinians, a perfect symmetry that reflected more than the cold war divide. The East German regime was as fiercely anti-Zionist as its western counterpart was pro-Zionist.

The Hallstein doctrine bears much of the responsibility for the Middle East becoming a playground of the inter-German conflict. It was developed by Walter Hallstein, foreign minister to Konrad Adenauer, to uphold the territorial claim over the 'other' Germany, and postulated that West Germany would regard diplomatic recognition of East Germany as an unfriendly act that could result in sanctions or even a break in diplomatic relations. This principle gave the Arab states, led by Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser, a formidable lever: they could threaten to recognise the GDR diplomatically to counter West German support of Israel. That is why West Germany preferred to keep diplomatic relationships secret until 1965, even though the Israelis had signalled their readiness for diplomatic normalisation by 1956.

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