



Reference Number: 2024/001/BSSR/LEPG

PALESTINE – ISRAEL – GERMANY

History and Politics in Moving Contradictions

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Domain: Behavioural studies, Society and Religion; Law, Economics, Politics and Governance

IUC course/conference: Social Narratives in Philosophy, Education, Sociology, Art..., 2024

Category: Position paper

Submitted: 22 August, 2024

Date of publication: 4 October 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53099/ntkd4310>

ISSN: 2787-5717

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History and Politics in Moving Contradictions

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Abstract

The relationship between the Zionist movement, which resulted in the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, and native Arabs in Palestine is conflictual and contradictory and has been so since before the current war in Gaza and Hamas's attack on Israel. This research report brings together several texts authored by critical Israeli, Palestinian and international intellectuals. These texts analyse the historical and current relationship between Palestine, Zionism, and Israel from the last third of the 19th century onward, on the one hand, and the special involvement of Germany in this constellation as a result of the Shoah, on the other. Some of these texts make a historical argument that the Shoah provided additional impetus to the Zionist nation-state idea and the international support for it. Nevertheless, Germany has a responsibility not only towards a democratic Israel, but also towards a democratic Palestinian state (particularly given the problem of the "victim of the victim"). These texts raise a valuable series of points, not least in this regard. The analysis will, however, remain incomplete until it is demonstrated why a Palestinian state was not also founded in 1948 (what were the interests on what sides, including the reactionary Arab states?). It is argued that for peace to be viable, critical intellectuals and emancipatory movements on both sides need to commit to a two-state solution supported by an international alliance.

Key words: *Middle East History, Palestine, Zionism, Israel, Germany, Wars, Peace Perspectives*

And it is always religion, and it is always morality,
and it is always patriotism that is used by all the nasty types to whitewash their attacks!
They attack us, not from sordid private interests,
not from inborn servility,
but to save the Good Lord, common decency, and the fatherland.

Heinrich Heine

On: Moshe Zimmermann and Moshe Zuckermann: *Denk ich an Deutschland... Ein Dialog in Israel*. Frankfurt am Main: Westend 2023, 303 pp., € 25 (cit. Z&Z)

Nur Masalha: *Palestine. A Four Thousand Year History*. London: ZED Books 2018, 448 pp., £25 (cit. M)

Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pappé: *On Palestine*; ed. by Frank Barat. London: Penguin 2015, 215 pp., £6.99 (cit. Ch&P)

I. Introduction

Given the prevailing irrationality of the debates among uninformed German politicians and in a media characterised as ‘self-enforced conformity’ (W. Streeck), it seems at best risky to speak in the German tongue (whatever that may mean) about the Middle East conflict - and thus about Palestine and Israel, the attack by Hamas, the act of terror or resistance (depending on the officially sanctioned language), the Gaza War, and the Israeli occupation and its reality (at least since 1967). In my view, a politics that seeks peace nevertheless requires it. This applies even more to someone who, like me, has for decades been engaged in academic research on the social history of national socialism, the German form of fascism, and on resistance in this period; someone who has been and still is friends with many Israelis (important friends in the Kibbutz movement and in academia from earlier decades who have since died), and who, over the last 15 years, has been supporting many politically critical scholars (both Jewish and Palestinian who became friends) in their studies on the *Middle-East-Program* established by the government of North-Rhine-Westphalia. I should also mention in this context that, in English academic circles I have often been regarded as an apologist for Israel because I emphasise that, owing to the Shoah, the German position was a particular one, although I make this point without minimising Israel’s terrorist occupation policy or denying the significance of Israeli

policy in the rise of Hamas.¹ In this regard it seems especially important for any evaluation of the current situation to bear in mind that there are also fascist groupings in both Israel and Palestine that each oppose the other for the sake of securing actual or potential power in their own society.²

I should also stress the significant, and challenging, English-language contributions to an assessment of the current situation that have appeared in the *London Review of Books* and that are noteworthy analytically, politically and in regard to the politics of history. Pankaj Mishra, for example, has critically reviewed new works on the approach to the Shoah within the politics and the politics of memory of the early and developed Federal Republic of Germany in an article entitled ‘Memory Failure’ (2024a).³ He has subsequently made an even more outspoken intervention in the debate on the politics of memory himself (2024b).

Another influential intellectual who has taken part in the debate on the Gaza War is Tom Stevenson, who takes a critical stance in an article dated 26 January 2024 entitled ‘Rubble from Bone’: “In the first three months of Israel’s attack on Gaza around 25,000 Palestinians were killed and around 60,000 wounded, 70 per cent of them women and children. Around 80 per cent of the population of Gaza has been displaced. The rate of killing has been higher than in most wars this century, sometimes reaching more than two thousand deaths a week. There have been airstrikes on ambulances, airstrikes on bakeries, airstrikes on UN schools serving as shelters. Israeli forces have killed more than 150 UN staff. International charities have been reduced to tallying daily limb amputations. While Israeli officials stick to absurd denials that there is any kind of humanitarian crisis, much of urban Gaza has been turned into an uneven igneous landscape of black-grey mounds” (2024: 19).

Stevenson continues to describe the experience of the inhabitants of Gaza thus: “Palestinian men and boys between the ages of 12 and 70 are stripped, cuffed, blindfolded and then loaded onto the backs of trucks to be taken for interrogation. Some have numbers written on their arms. Hundreds detained in Gaza have been transported to the desert prison of Ketziot, near the border with Egypt. Others have probably been taken to nearby military bases. Some men who were taken prisoner in Beit Lahiya were stripped and transported to fenced-off camps where for days

¹ Without any intention of reducing the history of Jewish-German relations to the Shoah (see Stern 2002).

² Horkheimer’s analysis of ‘the racket’ is especially relevant here, particularly in relation to the way in which fascist regimes establish and preserve their power (see Horkheimer (n.d., 1939, n.d., 1940); cp. Sünker (2006) and Sünker & Moran-Ellis (2020:137-143).

See, too, for a discussion of the substantial changes in Israeli society after October 7, 2023 The Guardian’s ‘Long Read’ report from O. Bartov, leading historian of Holocaust and National Socialism.

³ Essentially, he argues that the reason Adenauer wanted to enter into relations with Israel by way of paying reparations was not for the sake of atonement or as a recognition of guilt. Rather, according to Mishra: “Adenauer determined that his country needed greater sovereignty and a greater role in Western economic and security alliances; Germany’s long road west lay through Israel” (2024a: 11; cp. Stern 1991). Systematically H. Friese analyses the aporias of the German anti-antisemitism in a forthcoming text (in print).

they were tied up, beaten and tortured. Others have disappeared. The IDF has subsequently said that between 85 and 90 per cent of these detainees were civilians” (ibid.).^{4,5}

To facilitate an adequate analysis of (not just) Middle Eastern history and politics, with their moving contradictions, wars and struggles, but also instances of connection and examples of living co-operation, it should be remembered how Heinrich Heine, the greatest German poet and author, who was and remains more political than many others, viewed human societies and their possible future. As early as 1832, his statement of the tasks ahead, which combines education and politics and is worth updating for the present, reads as follows: “When we shall have brought it so far that the great mass of the people really understand the present, they will no longer allow themselves to be goaded by the hireling writers of the aristocracy to hatred and war; the great confederation of races, the Holy Alliance of nations, will be formed; we shall not need, out of mutual mistrust, to feed standing armies of many hundred thousand murderers; we will use their swords and horses for ploughs, and so attain to peace, prosperity, and freedom” (1893: 10).⁶

Together with Isaiah’s vision of ‘swords to ploughshares’, this triad of peace, prosperity, and freedom for everyone, as a political prospect grounded in an understanding of the constitutive conditions of a rational society, may, for the very reason that it is counterfactual, also serve as a basis here.

⁴ For a contextualisation of this Gaza war and its prehistory see, too, Shatz’s “Israel’s Descent” in June 2024 (2024: 3): “In the last fifteen years, it [the Israeli government, HS] has launched five offensives in the Strip. The first four were brutal and cruel, as colonial counterinsurgencies invariable are, killing thousands of civilians in retribution for Hamas rocket fire and hostage-taking. But the latest, Operation Iron Swords, launched on 7 October in response to Hamas murderous raid in southern Israel, is different in kind, not only in degree. Over the last eight months, Israel has killed more than 36,000 Palestinians. An untold number remain under the debris and still more will die of hunger and disease. Eighty thousand Palestinians have been injured, many of them permanently maimed. Children whose parents – whose entire families – have been killed constitute a new population sub-group.” And he concludes his analysis: “Whether Palestinians will be able to hold onto their lands until that day, in the face of settler zealots and ethnic cleansers who have captured the Israeli state, remains to be seen” (2024: 8).

⁵ See also the beginning of Mishra’s second article (2024b: 5): “In 1977, a year before he killed himself, the Austrian writer Jean Améry came across press reports of the systematic torture of Arab prisoners in Israeli prisons. Arrested in Belgium in 1943 while distributing anti-Nazi pamphlets, Améry himself had been brutally tortured by the Gestapo, and then deported to Auschwitz. He managed to survive, but could never look at his torments as things of the past. He insisted that those who are tortured remain tortured, and that their trauma is irrevocable.”

⁶ In view of the quality of current political and media discourse – particularly as regards reactionary contributions, whatever party they may come from - his further criticism of those in power is also worth remembering and reformulating for the present and as applicable to the different nations: “Never yet was a people so cruelly insulted by its rulers. Not only in this, that those ordinances of the [Bundestag] presuppose that we agreed to everything [...]. Yet, if you really could reckon with confidence on slavish submission, you had at least no right to regard us as fools. A handful of common nobles, who have learned nothing beyond horse-trading, cardsharpping, drinking tricks, and similar stupid rascal accomplishments, with which, at the utmost, only peasants at fairs can be duped — such men think they can befool an entire race, and one at that which invented gunpowder, and also printing and the ‘Criticism of Pure Reason’” (Heine 1893: 12).

II. Chomsky and Pappé on the Middle East Conflict

The past and present of the ‘Middle East conflict’ are marked, on both sides and in many forms, by relations of power and the use of force, but also by living connections and mediations in the interest of cooperation, and by attempts at finding a political and social solution for relations between Palestine and Israel that are directed towards mutual understanding.⁷

On Palestine is the work of N. Chomsky⁸ - the greatest living intellectual and foremost permanent critic of all forms of injustice, imperial domination and the violation of human rights, going far beyond the lip service of politicians of every hue (above all Western ones blathering about ‘our values’) – and of I. Pappé who, with his description of ‘ethnic cleansing’ (Pappé 2007), belongs to the small group of researchers who have tried to decisively change prevailing views on the realities of the foundation of Israel – in a similar vein to Fritz Fischer as regards the historiography of the German role in the ‘outbreak’ of World War I.⁹

The book starts with an introduction by Pappé which summarises the historiographical debates. This is followed by dialogues about the past, present, and future of the Middle Eastern question on the one hand, and about the domestic situation in Israel and the USA on the other. A second part contains the authors’ analyses of ‘Israel’s incremental genocide’, of the wars against Gaza,¹⁰ and of the question how these issues are and should be framed. The book concludes with a speech by Chomsky to the General Assembly of the United Nations in October 2014

⁷ The books of Amos Oz (2004), Israel’s most internationally famous author, and Sari Nusseibeh (2009), the Palestinian philosopher and long-serving president of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, both also peace activists, are excellent, and not merely as an introduction to this relation in past and present.

A stimulating read and one that complements overall structural analyses can be found in further accounts by members of the two left-wing factions of the Kibbutz Movement, for example those by Seligmann (2002) and Rosner (2002), which embrace biography and political analysis. While the former was a leading member of the social-democrat kibbutz research institute Jad Tabenkin, the other held a similar position at the left-socialist research institute Givat Haviva (which has a particular interest in cooperation between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis), as well as being a professor at the University of Haifa.

Additionally, it is worth reading the works of Michel (2004) and Schertges (2004), which give an idea of internal Jewish-Israeli debates and analyses and of political disputes between different factions in the early 2000s. Each includes the terrorism of both sides, by Israeli as well as Palestinian groups, however this may differ in form. Yet they also cover attempts at mutual understanding and the conditions under which these can succeed, and discuss the situations and living conditions of people on both sides from the perspective of these people themselves, a perspective that incorporates both discourses of victimhood and functioning cooperation etc.

See also Michel’s (2009) work on the political socialisation of different immigrant groups in Israel.

⁸ It should also be noted that when he was young, Chomsky belonged to a faction of the Zionist youth movement and lived for some years in Israel.

⁹ He subsequently emigrated to England and is working there as professor of history at the University of Exeter: see also his analysis *Out of the frame: the struggle for academic freedom in Israel* (Pappé 2010). See also *Ten Myths about Israel* (Pappé 2017).

¹⁰ Regarding the current debates on the events in Israel and Gaza since October 2023 – and without wishing to descend to balance sheets of the dead in conflicts/wars, for every dead person anywhere is one too many – it seems important to me to know what happened in one of Israel’s many wars against Gaza: “On August 26, 2014, Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) both accepted a ceasefire agreement after a fifty-day Israeli assault on Gaza that left 2,100 Palestinians dead and vast landscapes of destruction behind: The agreement calls for an end to military action by both Israel and Hamas, as well as an easing of the Israeli siege that has strangled Gaza for many years” (Chomsky, in Ch&P: 181).

where he deals with the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and freedom from occupation.

Given Pappé's research, Chomsky's political analyses and their joint evaluations, it is unsurprising that they – repeatedly and emphatically - see Zionism and the resulting 'apartheid state' and its settler colonialism against the indigenous population as the reason for the Middle East conflict. Land grabs, violence, terror, and even murder are an inherent and systematic part of this from the beginning, something that invites the comparisons with South Africa underlined especially by Chomsky.¹¹

The future they predict is ugly and suicidal for everyone in Israel. It is accompanied by class divisions and, according to Chomsky (CH&P: 99ff.), by a shift toward the right in mentality and politics as well as by nationalism and extremism. However, the decisive factor of the US position and its importance in providing cover for criminal Israeli policies must also be recognised and the question asked whether there could be changes in this regard (see also Chomsky 1999).¹² Furthermore, Pappé fears that things are developing in the direction of a 'Greater Israel', meaning the annexation of all occupied territories, and eliminating hopes for an alternative on the basis of talks between all parties to the conflict. This essentially turns on the question of how and whether those involved will find a common starting point in their analysis or description of the present reality (CH&P: 105).

In trying to understand the above arguments and evaluations, it appears to me to be useful and necessary to combine them with Dan Diner's analysis of the problem of violence and the process of state building in *Israel in Palästina. Über Tausch und Gewalt im vorderen Orient* (1980).¹³ Starting from a historical materialist approach, he states: "The special form of the Israeli state arises from the fact that it was founded on a *national basis* that could not be

¹¹ On Israel's occupation policy see Pappé's account: "Immediately after the 1967 war ended the thirteenth government of Israel began discussions that produced a series of decisions that all in one way or another condemned all the people who lived in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to life imprisonment in the biggest ever human mega-prison witnessed in modern times. The Palestinians living there were incarcerated in such a fashion for crimes they never committed and for offenses that were never ever pronounced, admitted, or defined. Today a third generation of such "inmates" have begun their life in that mega-prison" (Pappé, in: Ch&P: 171). Fortunately, speaking of Gaza as 'the greatest open-air prison' in the world may, now that Mr J. Borrel in his role as EU foreign minister has done so, be permissible in this country, too. At this point, it is interesting that our Western human rights defenders with their hypocrisy and double standards – which of course have long been well-known and repeatedly exemplified (see Mennell 2015) – have so far referred only to China and the Uighurs in this manner.

¹² On the political logic of US imperialism and its state terrorism generally, based on something that takes the shape of the 'national interest' and is de facto US capitalism, see Chomsky (1987). With respect to excellent analyses of US perpetrated terrorism, mass murder, coups against democratic elected governments all over the world over many decades, in their interests of geopolitics and business, see the works of Vincent Bevins (2021), an US journalist who worked for the Washington Post and Los Angeles Times, and the British journalist Matt Kennard (2024) who worked for the Financial Times. Kennard in particular emphasises that working for the FT gave him easy access to criminals called politicians, business people etc. in the Western World.

¹³ The core of this work is his *habilitation* dissertation, submitted to and accepted by the University of Frankfurt am Main in the Department of Social Sciences. See Zuckermann on the way Diner's position developed over the course of his life (in Z&Z: 113ff.).

attributed to a nationally homogenous *existing* population in the place where the state was created. Palestine did not merely lack a sufficiently large Jewish section of the population, let alone a pre-existing Jewish demographic majority, as a basis on which the citizen as Jew could have been constituted automatically, i.e. solely by a political act. Much more importantly, the predetermined material origin of the Jewish citizen who was to be brought into existence stood against that of the Arabs who constituted the majority of those living in the country” (1980: 20f.). The corollary is this: “The Zionist appropriation of land in Palestine with a *sovereign* purpose thus required violence” (1980: 23; cp. 64, 76). In plain language, this means that “under the existing historical, social and demographic conditions the establishment of a Jewish state in the area of Palestine required the exclusion of local Arabs”, which leads to “the use of force in the occupation and settlement of land” (1980: 87).

Diner does not merely reconstruct the land grabs to which the Palestinians were, and are, subjected, but also the ideological hypostasizing of Arabs as intrinsically violent (1980: 88), for the sake of representing one’s own Jewish violence as defensive (something that continues to this day). This is accompanied by designating the other as the enemy (1980: 150-164; vgl. 181). Diner then reconstructs, based on concrete data, how “the final, violent exclusion of Palestinian Arabs as exiles and refugees in the form of a military-terrorist occupation and settlement of territory” was carried out (1980: 170); this was something that happened in the main through an “indiscriminate use of force”, i.e. without distinguishing between killing combatants on the one hand or civilians on the other (171).¹⁴

III. Masalha on Palestinian History and Jewish Colonial Settlement

In his study of 4000 years of Palestinian history, Nur Masalha, a UK emeritus professor at SOAS, University of London, seeks to provide historical proof of the independence of Palestine and its indigenous population. Essentially, this is directed against the Israeli founding myth of a land without a people for a people without a land (M: 1). Moreover, he repeatedly aims to show, drawing on archaeological research and works of historical biblical criticism, that the Israeli politics of memory rely on myths and legends that have no connection to actual history. He argues that “the legend of the “Israelites”” conquest of Canaan and other narratives of the Old Testament (or “Hebrew Bible”) – a library of books built up across several centuries – are

¹⁴ Diner reviews material showing that “the introduction of uncontrolled forms of violence into the Israeli armed forces” – linked very early on with the name *Ariel Sharon*, initially as an officer, then as a politician, and someone who would subsequently become widely known as a war criminal – went as far as the formulation of a “principle of extermination” (note 85; see also note 90), something that neither supporters of Left Zionism, who put their hopes in the ‘purity of arms’, nor representatives of ‘political opportunism’ were able to prevent. “The very weapons which are used by this unit [unit ‘101’, HS] during their nocturnal actions make the indiscriminate destruction of life absolute by turning the excluded space into a lawless battleground, with a corresponding use of small arms allowing blanket coverage of a whole area, such as machine guns, hand grenades and Molotov cocktails” (1980:170-189).

myth-narratives designed to underpin false consciousness, not evidence-based history which promotes truth and understanding” (M: 2f.).

Part of this approach is a deconstruction of the distinctiveness of ‘being Jewish’: “Originally, being Jewish was one of the many regional identities within Palestine: it simply meant an inhabitant of Judea. The latter derives from the name Judah which dates from the 8th century BC and refers to the region of the southern highlands, foothills and adjacent steppe lands at some stage in the course of the 8th-early 6th century BC. The inhabitants of Judea became associated with what subsequently became known as the “Israelites”, who, as a group, appeared in Assyrian inscriptions at one point in Iron Age II in the 9th-8th centuries BC” (M:24).¹⁵

The history of the Patriarchs turns out to be just as much of a legend as that of the Exodus and of Moses, and this also applies to David and Solomon: “The “Kingdom of David” as a large and influential polity was probably based on a small tribal leader in Judea – This lack of material or empirical evidence for a “United Kingdom of David and Solomon” is almost universally recognised by archaeologists in the West and also by some leading Israeli archaeologists. Broadly speaking, the collapse of the historicity of the events described in the Old Testament about the “United Kingdom of David and Solomon” – Iron Age II (around 1000BC) – over the last four decades has been the result of two interrelated factors: empirical archaeological evidence, and critical textual and literary criticism” (M:28f.).¹⁶

His key assessment concerning the status of the dominant account of the establishment of the state of Israel, challenging and interesting in its complementarity with Diner’s analysis, goes to the heart of the conflict and is this: “In Palestine, the struggle between the coloniser and colonised over land, demography, power and ownership also centred on representation, misrepresentation and self-representation. The metaphoric self-representation of the European settler-coloniser as a “return to history” works to uproot and “detach” the native from history. The settler-coloniser invaded the space and appropriated the heritage of the local Palestinians and simultaneously detached itself from the colonised and disinherited Palestinian. The production of historical knowledge and power by the Ashkenazi Zionist settler-coloniser - a self-referencing ouroboros – resulted in the creation of a range of foundational myths; self-indigenising and self-antiquating strategies, including the myths of “exile and return” and

¹⁵ The invention of the concept of the ‘Jewish people’ – to adapt B. Anderson’s approach – as essentially distinct from a ‘faith community’ occurs in the 19th century under the influence of European racial theories and of social Darwinism and serves to homogenise multicultural and multi-ethnic Jewish entities in the interests of nationalism (M: 24f.).

¹⁶ On the absence of Moses and Exodus from modern theology and the ‘temple theology’ approach, see Barker (2004); on the history of David and Solomon, and on Solomon and the history of his meeting with the Queen of Sheba, which never happened, but was invented for the sake of dynastic legitimation, see Finkelstein & Silberman (2006) and Kleinert (2015).

“return to history” (M: 53) – in the end it involves ‘ethnic cleansing, memoricide and cultural genocide’ (M: 54; cp. 324, 359).¹⁷

Masalha’s account of the preconditions for the ‘acquisition’ of Palestinian land through Jewish settlement is relevant both historiographically and in regard to the politics of memory.¹⁸ According to him, there was a specific alliance or cooperation between British domestic and foreign policy, Zionist lobbying, and a specific Christian fundamentalism – which foreshadows present-day evangelical positions especially in the USA. This led to the so-called ‘Balfour Declaration’ of 1917 and the promise of a ‘Jewish homeland in Palestine’ (M.: 309). Masalha goes on to explain in more detail the motives of the ruling class in Britain: ‘Balfour’s brand of Christian Zionism was driven by a great deal of Judeophobia, hyped perceptions of “Zionist Jewish power” and of fears of mass immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe to Britain. As Prime Minister, Balfour had passed the 1905 Aliens Act, the main object of which was to restrict the entry into Britain of Jews from Eastern Europe’ (M: 310).¹⁹

An additional motive was the support for Zionism by a Protestant lobby group, based on prophecies in the Book of Daniel about the ‘end of times’. According to this group, the

¹⁷ What is historically important here is, as emphasised by Diner, the “complete identity of interests”, in the context of the Arabic-Palestinian Revolt between 1936 and 1939, “between the British mandate power and Zionist politics” in what must be called a violent “colonial suppression” of the revolt (Diner 1980: 167ff.). “The character of the battles in Palestine corresponded to the annihilatory, i.e. indiscriminate, colonial form of warfare which excluded a recognition of the insurgent Arabs as combatants. Indiscriminate killing is inherent in the forms of warfare used” (Diner 1980:169 cp. Barr: chapter 15).

¹⁸ On a practical level, settlement was to some extent prepared by the purchase of land from big landowners who were themselves living in Damascus, against the will and the acts of resistance of Palestinian tenant farmers (M: 285f., 317; Diner 1980:31ff.).

¹⁹ With respect to Balfour see, too, the depiction of R. Khalidi (2020: 37): “As we have seen, one of the officials most deeply involved in depriving Palestinians of their rights was Britain’s foreign secretary, Lord Arthur Balfour. A diffident, worldly patrician and former prime minister and nephew of long-time Tory Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, he had served for five years as Britain’s chief secretary in Ireland, the empire’s oldest colony, where he was much hated, earning the nickname ‘Bloody Balfour’. Ironically, it was his government that authored the 1905 Aliens Act, meant primarily to keep destitute Jews fleeing tsarist pogroms out of Britain.”

Regarding the context of the ‘Balfour Declaration’ Khalidi’s following points are especially relevant and enlightening: “If before World War I many prescient Palestinians had begun to regard the Zionist movement as a threat, the Balfour Declaration introduced a new and fearsome element. In the soft, deceptive language of diplomacy, with its ambiguous phrase approving ‘the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people’, the declaration effectively pledged Britain’s support for Theodor Herzl’s aims of Jewish statehood, sovereignty, and control of immigration in the whole of Palestine.

Significantly, the overwhelming Arab majority of the population (around 94 per cent at that time) went unmentioned by Balfour except in a backhanded way as the ‘existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine’. They were described in terms of what they were *not*, and certainly not as a nation or people – the words ‘Palestinian’ and ‘Arab’ do not appear in the sixty-seven words of the declaration. This overwhelming majority of the population was promised only ‘civil and religious rights’, not political or national rights. By way of contrast, Balfour ascribed national rights to what he called ‘the Jewish people’, who in 1917 were a tiny minority -6 percent- of the country’s inhabitants“ (Khalidi 2020: 24).

conditions for these would be fulfilled by the return of the Jews to Palestine and the revival of Jewish life there (M: 310f.).

In short, for Masalha the significant issues prior to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 are Palestine being within the Ottoman Empire (see also Howard 2017), British rule in the mandated territory and its contradictory policies, and the genesis of Zionism and the constellations in which the latter developed.

A foundational and challenging extension of Masalha's analysis can be found in J. Barr's study 'A Line In The Sand. Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East' (2012) which deals with the years 1915-1949. Based on new available documents, Barr shows, based on the "secret" Sykes-Picot agreement from 1916, how and why Britain and France try to gain the territories of the declining Ottoman Empire in the Middle East.²⁰ In the beginning of the 20th century, for geopolitical and empire-building reasons, "the British urgently needed a new basis for their claim to half the Middle East. Already in control of Egypt, they quickly realised that, by publicly supporting Zionist aspirations to make Palestine a Jewish state, they could secure the exposed east flank of the Suez Canal while dodging accusations that they were land-grabbing. What seemed at the time to be an ingenious way to outmanoeuvre France had devastating repercussions ever since" (2012: 2).²¹

Ultimately under mandates "granted by the League of Nations, Britain took control of Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq; France, Lebanon and Syria" (2012: 2). This was the beginning of a continuous fight – often involving secret services, often using dominated peoples – between Britain and France; Barr describes in detail the different constellations over time and shows how former allies became enemies and vice versa. With respect to the Palestinian – Jewish fight over land this is of special relevance.

From the early 1940s onwards it became clear that the Jewish Agency, along with the Jewish open terrorist groups Irgun and the even worse Stern gang who, as Barr (2012: 342) has shown, hid weapons in various places including "the basement of the main synagogue in Tel Aviv" (and leading members of the Stern gang were Begin and Shamir – later Israeli Prime Ministers for Likud, see Barr 2012; 340 and 352-353) were going to solve the "Zionist problem", i.e. establish a Jewish state no longer in a political manner but by "force of arms" (Barr 2012: chapter 20, 22 + 29; see too Pappé 2017a: 321-323)²² – arms delivered by the French. These

²⁰ Barr describes the starting point for his research: "In the summer of 2007 I came across a sentence in a newly classified British government report that made my eyes bulge. Written by an officer in the British security service, MI5, in early 1945 but never published until now, it solved a mystery that had been puzzling the government. Who was financing and arming the Jewish terrorists who were then trying to end British rule in Palestine? The officer, just back from a visit to the Middle East, provided an answer that was astonishing. The terrorists, he reported, 'would seem to be receiving support from the French'" (2012: 1).

²¹ "In 1878 Britain seized Cyprus and, four years later, Egypt and the Suez Canal in order to secure the route to India. As the canal turned into the major artery for Britain's growing eastern commerce, Egypt became the fulcrum of the British Empire" (Barr 2012: 9; cp. 314-315).

²² As Pappé shows, from 1945 onwards "hundreds of thousands of Jews [arrived in Palestine] to reinforce the Zionist community. Together the newcomers and the more veteran settlers constituted a well-established and

arms were used to kill British soldiers through terrorist actions (including the bombing of the British headquarter in the King David Hotel, Jerusalem or sending letter bombs to British ministries in London) and killing thousands of Palestinians via massacres.²³

The analytic conclusion formulated by Barr is thus: “It was the struggle between Britain and France for the mastery of the Middle East that led the two countries to carve up the Ottoman Empire with the Sykes-Picot agreement, and it was British dissatisfaction over the outcome of this deal that led them, fatefully, to proclaim support for Zionist ambitions in the Balfour declaration. And so, the Jews’ right to a country of their own became dangerously associated with a cynical imperial manoeuvre that was originally designed to outwit the French” (2012: 375).²⁴

This leads Barr to his final assessment of this history and story: “It was the flimsiness of their entitlement to redraw the political map of the Middle East that explained why the British now had to use a commitment to a stateless people to camouflage their determination to take over Palestine” (2012: 376).

determined community. Its leadership had used the war years to build up an army and acquire experience in warfare, and it would be ready to take over the country once the British Mandate ended. Moreover, there were many indications that Britain would not be able to hold out much longer in Palestine, or in the Middle East as a whole. Worse, the Zionists leadership at that point had decided on its future policy toward the native Palestinian population. Vague past ideas about massive expulsions and ethnic cleansing began to transform into real plans and an overall strategy that would result in the expulsion of half of Palestine’s indigenous population and the destruction of half of its villages and cities in 1948.

None of the Husaynis seemed to sense the pending catastrophe. Palestine in 1945 was dominated by the Arab League, a regional body that failed to achieve the goal of Arab unity but enabled its secretary general, Azzam Pasha, and other Arab leaders to use Palestine as the touch stone of the members’ pan-Arab patriotism. In reality, it became the arena in which the Arab countries jostled for prominence in the Arab world, either with rhetoric or by actually grabbing chunks of Palestine.” (Pappé 2017: 321; for the realisation of the politics of ethnic cleansing etc., see Pappé 2007).

²³ In this context it is of utmost relevance to know that *the Stern gang contacted Hitler in 1940*, offering to fight for Germany in return for support for establishing a Jewish state (Barr 2012: 268-269). The same principle – the enemy of my enemy is my friend – was followed by the *Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Haij Amin, when “courting Mussolini and Hitler”* (Pappé 2017a: 309-316). Pappé argues rightfully that scholars have to be aware of these actions by the Mufti: “This was not a formative chapter in Palestine’s history, but it is one that cannot be ignored given how it has been manipulated by Israeli historiography to Nazify the Palestinian movement as a whole and to justify brutal oppression, ethnic cleansing and occupation” (2017a: 315) – and one can say that this is the same strategy used by the German ‘Anti-Deutsch’ (Anti-German) movement for whom any crime the state of Israel commits against the Palestinians is acceptable or justified.

²⁴ Barr shows further consequences for the relationship of these two countries: “The wrangling between Britain and the Free French throughout the war years had a further far-reaching consequence when de Gaulle returned to power in 1958. As President of France it was he who infamously vetoed Harold Macmillan’s application to join the Common Market. In tracing exactly why de Gaulle said *Non*, it is, surprisingly, to the hot and noisy cities of Beirut and Damascus that we should look. The general’s experiences of British machinations in both places profoundly shaped his reluctance to allow his wartime rivals to join his European club. It is a tale from which neither country emerges with much credit” (2012: 377)

IV. Zimmermann & Zuckermann on Israel & Germany

“And because Germans have committed world-historically monstrous crimes against Jews; because Israel has become the self-declared champion of everything that is Jewish, and Israeli Zionism has thus become synonymous with Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness; because the matrix of this calamitous German-Jewish connection is projected onto the Middle East conflict and the Shoah thus becomes an ideological part of Israeli-Palestinian-German discourse – for all these reasons, things that have nothing to do with each other are repeatedly lumped together. Whether Jürgen Möllemann has made antisemitic remarks or, what is more, whether the FDP makes political use of latent antisemitism is a question that concerns every non-Zionist Jew (and in the last instance everyone with emancipatory aims) at least as much as the official state representatives of Zionist Israel. *Whether Sharon of all people is the most suitable person to indict “European Antisemitism” is just as doubtful as whether a critique of Israel coming from Möllemann [German politician, party chair of the Liberals, added by HS] is appropriate. What is truly problematic is the way the utterances of the likes of Möllemann and Sharon continue to complement each other. Ideologically, they sometimes seem made for each other. In this regard, the instrumentalisation of the Middle East conflict for German domestic strategies of exoneration and functionalisation is equalled by the usurpation of the commemoration of the Shoah and the manipulation of the struggle against antisemitism for heteronomous domestic Israeli interests*” (Zuckermann 2005:12; emphasis by HS). This is how M. Zuckermann put it in 2005 in his editor’s introduction to *Antisemitismus, Antizionismus, Israelkritik (Antisemitism, Antizionism and Criticism of Israel)*, the *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* for that year.

These lines are ideally suited as an introduction to the volume that Zuckermann, a former professor of history at the University of Tel Aviv, has written together with Moshe Zimmermann, a former professor of history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. This book takes the form of an exchange of emails that took place over two years during the Covid epidemic. It is entitled *Denk ich an Deutschland... Ein Dialog in Israel (Thinking of Germany ...A dialogue in Israel)*. The German edition has an added concluding chapter entitled ‘German Solidarity – with a democratic Israel’.

The volume includes analyses, evaluations, and descriptions of the triad Israel-Germany-Palestine; trenchant political statements on the situation in Israel – which also grapple with Zionist traditions and positions (as part of a reckoning with their own past) - and on Israel’s criminal occupation policy in Palestine; sharp criticisms of the way Israel has developed overall - and not just in regard to the emergence of fascist movements in the settler milieu; and discussions on quite controversial positions and self-definitions,²⁵ including the role they both play as public intellectuals (with a steadily declining influence on the development of Israeli

²⁵ As Zuckermann says about himself and Zimmermann: “In fact, we both mourn the inevitable disappearance of historical German Judaism” (in Z&Z: 11).

society, and getting them into a considerable amount of trouble with official Jewish organisations abroad). Both reserve particular criticism for German policies that embolden extreme right-wing and fascist developments in Israel instead of intervening in the Middle East conflict in a way that promotes humanity and peace and is supportive of a two-state solution.

Zimmermann starts from this assessment: “Everyone who criticises Israel or Israel policies is, according to hegemonic opinion, automatically designated an enemy of the Jews, i.e. an antisemite. But at the same time there is a tendency here to define crucial terms in an exclusive rather than a generic way: antisemitism is not classified as a subcategory of racism or prejudice; the Shoah is not seen as a special case of genocide and Zionism not as a special case of nationalism. Everything concerning “us” is per definition sui generis. This, in a nutshell, is the philosophy expounded by Israel, which official Israel wants to impose on the Germans, too. This philosophy goes down best with those Germans whom we, you and I, hold in lesser regard, in other words those belonging to the political right wing that extends into “the mainstream of society”. In this light, and as we have already seen, AfD politicians can claim to be for Israel and against antisemitism, but also, at the same time, against a “mistaken asylum policy” and hence against a supposed “swamping” of the national identity by foreign influences” (Z&Z: 99).^{26,27}

For Zimmermann, the self-definition of a majority in Israel, which is accompanied by an instrumentalisation of the Shoah, ends - as per Diner’s previous analysis - in the denial of one’s own responsibility by identifying the others as the enemy: “If “the others” are the villains, if “the others” unleash war, we have every right to hit back with full force... Needless to say, in doing so, the Hague or Geneva Conventions will be ignored. No allegation against Israel can convince Israelis that they have become perpetrators. The facts are irrelevant. ... This also means that no guilt complexes arise, whether towards the historical diaspora or towards present-day Palestinians. It is that interpretation of reality, which has been very efficiently injected into the aggressors’ brains, that is the reason for this moral blindness” (Z&Z: 157). Here he arrives at the crux of Israel’s internal problems. This is the question, in his view still unanswered, of whether the catastrophic and calamitous development of Israel “was already present in embryo in Zionist ideology”, or whether it constitutes an aberration (ibid.)

²⁶ See Finkelstein’s *Holocaust Industry* (2000) for debates among Jewish thinkers on the Shoah and the Holocaust in relation to their instrumentalisation; for a more recent analysis of the singularity thesis, see Lindner (2024).

²⁷On the antisemitism debate, see Zimmermann: “Israel has adopted sophisticated tactics in order to transform the Shoah into a ‘proprietary asset’, that is, an ‘advantage’ (while avoiding the trap implied in the dictum ‘the victims of victims’): it used the lever of the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance). About 20 years ago, what began as an instrument gifted by the Swedish government was transformed into a huge institution that makes global decisions on the definition of antisemitism and the Shoah and recommends a corresponding policy of remembrance” (in Z&Z: 92, cp. also 100).

For further discussions and criticisms of the IHRA definition, see also the comments, from different perspectives, in *The Guardian* of 30 July 2018, p. 4 - Opinion.

For Zimmermann, Zionism as a national movement that originated in Europe and “that aspired to the founding of a European outpost in the Middle East” raises a question that has already been thematised in the literature discussed above. This is the question “whether the things done by Israel have not from the start followed the pattern of European colonialism. Is there a fundamental difference between the immigrants who appropriated land in North America and colonised it and those who did this in Palestine, discriminating against the indigenous population and treating them as if they were the intruders – and enshrining all this in their constitution, too?” (in Z&Z: 139).²⁸

An essential analytical motif for Zuckermann is that of Israel as an occupying force, the internal domestic consequences of this, and its relations with Germany: “We wonder at the “blindness” of the criminal enforcers of the practice of occupation who make themselves immune to their critics and reject their criticisms; at the delusion of those who do not see the parallels with historical phenomena of Jewish suffering and insist on the postulated inadmissibility of the comparison; at the callousness of these criminals, who resist the recognition that their naked self-victimisation is in the end a betrayal of the memory of the historical victims” (in Z&Z: 151). In his view, this relates to the issue of the “effect of ideology” as an “intentional misperception”, a “false consciousness” (ibid.).

According to Zuckermann, this becomes operative – again in agreement with the analysis by Diner introduced above – above all in Israeli militarism, “especially in the degradation of the IDF into a brutal criminal state apparatus that serves the administration of the occupation regime and the internalisation of this situation by a major part of the Israeli population, who consider it a matter of course, a “natural” permanent condition. The “most moral army in the world” commits war crimes (as defined by the Hague Convention) day and night; it kills Palestinians and supports (directly and indirectly) those who persecute and terrorise them – and there is no state institution that openly addresses this perversion” (in Z&Z: 201).²⁹

Against this background, Zuckermann attacks the ‘German’ position: do people in Germany really know “the kind of state with which they stand in solidarity when they show such insistent loyalty to Israel? Or do they allow themselves to be blinded to such an extent by the pathetic stock phrase of a place of sanctuary that they ignore the reality of this state in order to abandon themselves, undisturbed and entirely out of touch with reality, to a work of atonement that has long since mutated into a reified fetish? *Do the German political classes really not know about*

²⁸ See also the reflections of Bar-On, a professor at the BGU Beer-Sheva and ‘pillar’ of Jewish-Palestinian reconciliation efforts: “Since I see myself as a secular Jew, critical of some of my government’s policies, especially in relation to the continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza but, at the same time, I consider Israel as my homeland, I had to develop a more complex perspective of myself in relation to the world around me. I learned to become more reflective and critical about the evildoing of Zionism toward Palestinians, without altogether denouncing it as being only a colonial, European, imperialistically motivated movement” (2005: 350f.).

²⁹ See the impressive description of the murderous violence of the IDF (and settlers) in the occupied territories – even in areas with non-violent resistance by the indigenous Palestinians – by M. Kennard (2024.: 119-126; see too Khalidi 2020: 242-245).

the decade-long barbarity of the Israeli occupation and its impact on the Palestinians and on Jewish Israelis? Do they not know that their solidarity is with a country that commits war crimes, that systematically violates international and human rights law, that has long since degenerated into an apartheid state?” (in Z&Z: 297; emphases by HS).

V. Peace Perspectives? History & Politics

‘What is must be changeable if it is not to be all’ says Adorno in his *Negative Dialectics* (1973: 398). And, with even greater resonance for the prospects of peace in the Middle East that are at issue here: “Grayness could not fill us with despair if our minds did not harbor the concept of different colors, scattered traces of which are not absent from the negative whole” (1973: 377f; cp. 344ff.; see also Sünker 2020).³⁰

If one follows Zuckermann’s critique of ideology, as a first step towards peace, one might argue on solid grounds that the philosemitism in mainstream politics and media in Germany is related, as an abstract negation in the Hegelian sense, to the previously prevalent antisemitism, i.e. that they are two sides of the same coin. On that basis, a rigorous and conscientious evaluation of the ‘Middle East conflict’ would, in recognising the nexus of guilt that was created by Germans in the course of the crimes of National Socialism, also recognise the connection between the founding of the Israeli state – even if this process had begun to be prepared long before the Shoah – and the suffering of the Palestinians.³¹ This would also entail reparations to a Palestinian state – the establishment of which should be vigorously supported,³² instead of stopping at a politics restricted to mere lip service.

Following Adorno once more, a second step would be to investigate how and why, against all ‘realities’, a peace-making, humanising change could be found in the relation between Israel and Palestine in the context of a two-state solution.

A first starting point for such reflections is this statement by Adorno in his lecture series *Introduction to Sociology*: “For the task of a dialectical theory would be to bring together these

³⁰ See also: “In the spell, the reified consciousness has become total. The fact of its being a false consciousness holds out a promise that it will be possible to avoid it – that it will not last; that a false consciousness must inevitably move beyond itself; that it cannot have the last word. The straighter a society’s course for the totality that is reproduced in the spellbound subjects, the deeper its tendency to dissociation. This threatens the life of the species as much as it disavows the spell cast over the whole, the false identity of subject and object. The universal that compresses the particular until it splinters, like a torture instrument, is working against itself, for its substance is the life of the particular; without the particular, the universal declines to an abstract, separate, eradicable form” (Adorno 1966: 346).

³¹ The analyses by Diner outlined above do not merely suggest, but also prove this.

³² This is being said conscious of the fact that, while so-called democracy has to be understood as a form of government under capitalism (see Sünker 2017), it is at the same time possible that both states - in contrast to authoritarian or corrupt regimes – may see developments in Marx’s sense of the “great civilising influence of capital” (see Sünker 2018), not least in relation to experiences in the Kibbutz movement with what Rosner (2002) has outlined as the prospect and substance of a “good society”.

two clearly opposed characteristics of society, its unintelligible opacity, on the one hand, and its reducibility to the human and thus its intelligibility, on the other. It would do so by deriving both moments from a common element, the life process of society...” (Adorno 2000: 82f).

A second starting point is derived from the position taken by Adorno in regard to historical processes and their interpretation in the lecture series *On History and Freedom*, where he considers whether one might not have reason to doubt the thesis that there are necessary historical preconditions for real change. He asks whether, within the confusing and often irrational structure of history, things might not once in a while have turned out differently, whether humanity might not after all have worked out a way out of the ‘mire’: “I should only wish to issue a general warning against automatically putting yourselves on the side of the victors, and joining in when people say what people always say when liberation movements are defeated, namely, that it happened because the conditions were not right” (2006:181).

He refers to his own experiences in this context: “I myself believe that I did once experience such a moment in my youth [the 1918 November Revolution in Germany, HS], when a change really seemed close. That is why I am not entirely convinced by that dialectical doctrine that I have dutifully passed on to you. I should like at least to add a question mark to the tradition from which I have come and which I have been teaching you up to now – even though, needless to say, nothing has come of it up to now and it is always easier for the philosophy of history to take sides with the bigger battalions than to join the weaker ones” (2006: 181).³³

In my view, this entails the task of analysing the actual events that took place in Palestine in 1948 and led to the war between the Arabic states and the Israeli state that was being founded. I assume that the supposed allies of the Palestinians in this war, authoritarian and reactionary regimes³⁴, were not interested in having two democratic-capitalist societies arise in their vicinity that would have offered a concrete alternative to the bad rule obtaining in each of these regimes.³⁵

³³ I feel it is necessary to point out – especially given the desperate situation in the Middle East – that Adorno takes a different position here in terms of both social analysis and social philosophy than he did 20 years earlier at the end of his *Minima Moralia*, where he said: “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption” (Adorno 2005: 247).

³⁴ See Barr with respect to the egoistic role of Abdullah, King of Jordan (who was one of the culprits on the scene), his interest in gaining territories from Palestine for himself, i.e. securing a deal with Britain to enlarge his kingdom (2012: 358-361; see too Pappé 2017a: 326-336).

Pappé points out that in 1947, King Abdullah “thought that dividing the country between himself and the Jews was a good idea. The leadership of the Jewish Agency eagerly welcomed the proposition, and the absence of a formal agreement between them was due to Ben-Gurion’s territorial aspirations to rule over most of the country, Abdullah’s concern not to seem to betray the pan-Arab interest and the atmosphere of uncertainty before the outbreak of hostilities.

The two sides agreed informally that Abdullah would stay out of the territory of the Jewish state, and in return the Jewish state would let him annex large chunks of Palestine. This was how the West Bank was born, and the Jewish state was spared a direct attack by the Arab world’s best-trained army.” (Pappé 2017a: 329)

³⁵ One of the preconditions that enabled the world congress of the ‘Utopian Society’ to take place at the University of Haifa in 1990 was a panel made up of influential Israelis and Palestinians on issues of peace and

This leaves room to hope that the relationship between Israel and Palestine might be the locus where a new world for the Middle East could begin to take shape, with both peoples building a democratic life in a ‘Holy Alliance’ in Heine’s sense against the surrounding alliance of reactionaries (from Egypt to Saudi-Arabia). If a peace-making policy perspective³⁶ is developed that recognises history and politics in their moving contradictions as amenable to intervention, and if this leads to emancipatory social changes,³⁷ such a world might become possible.

security. E. Habibi, a well-known Palestinian author, remarked, agreeing with my intervention from the audience, that many of his literary friends had ended up on the gallows of Arabic despots in neighbouring states. ³⁶ Such a perspective will need to be developed in public debates in which it is hoped that not just critical Israeli, but also more Palestinian intellectuals will intervene with a critical stance against their respective ruling powers. I see a very reflexive and useful approach in the ideas of Khalidi /2020: 245-246, 251-255), and in the idea of Darwish who refers to possibilities of “negotiation” instead of “negation” (Bagoury 2024). There is also the shared connection with the Patriarch Abraham.

With respect to international responsibilities in the world of academia see Burawoy (2024).

³⁷ The fairly successful handling of the Northern Ireland problem through the ‘Good Friday Agreement’ could be seen as a ‘model’ here, especially in its concrete mode of implementation.

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(A shorter German version was published in JUNE 24 in: Sozialwissenschaftliche Literatur
Rundschau (Social Sciences Review) Vol. 47 (Issue 88), 2024)