

## **A ‘model of reconciliation’? Fifty years of German–Israeli relations**

*This article argues that German–Israeli reconciliation after 1945 has not been as exemplary as is often suggested. Drawing on key aspects which emerge from a discussion of relevant concepts in the first part of the article – transitional justice and reconciliation – it will show that Germany’s memory culture, as evidenced in the elite discourse, has indeed developed in a way that points to a successful reconciliation between the two countries. On the other hand, however, German regret emerged only reluctantly, was by and large confined to West Germany, and took a long time to establish itself formally, with emphasis on German suffering rather than suffering caused by Germans always playing an important role in German collective memory after 1945. It will also show that at grassroots level, reconciliation between Germany and Israel is far from unproblematic.*

*Apart from providing a critical assessment of the reconciliation between Germany and Israel after 1945, the article contributes to current academic literature on transitional justice, reconciliation and the role of memory which suggests that even though commemoration and micro-level reconciliation might be important, the geopolitical context in which reconciliation takes place and strategic security considerations also play a significant role.*

### **Introduction**

The assessment of German-Israeli relations on their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015 by politicians as well as academics was largely a positive one. German Chancellor Angela Merkel – not usually prone to using strong and emotive language – suggested that German-Israeli relations can, ‘without exaggeration’ be described as a ‘miracle’ (2016).<sup>1</sup> Equally positively, Yakov Hadas-Handelsman, Israeli ambassador to Germany, asserted that the two countries ‘have made the impossible possible’ describing their relationship as ‘unique’ (2015).

In a speech to the Bundestag on Germany’s National Day of Mourning (*Volkstrauertag*), which commemorates victims of war and tyranny, on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2014, Avi Primor, former Israeli ambassador to Germany, went as far as suggesting that regarding memory and the examination of conscience, Germany ‘has indeed, with time, become a role model, a worldwide role model’.

He suggested that Germany's memory culture provides persuasive evidence for this claim: 'But where else in the world have you ever seen a nation that builds memorials to commemorate its own shame, to remember its own crimes and perpetuate the memory of its own national disgrace. Until now only the Germans have done this. Truly exemplary!' This could easily be dismissed as 'anniversary prose' if academic assessments did not strike a similarly positive note. Lily Gardner Feldman, a leading expert in the field, also concludes, for example, that '[t]he transition in German-Israeli relations from enmity to amity in less than a generation is nothing short of miraculous.'(2012: 182).

As Avi Primor's remark suggests, the successful reconciliation of the two countries is largely attributed to the way post-war (West) Germany has 'dealt' with its past. In particular the memory culture that emerged in the Federal Republic as a response to the Holocaust and the Second World War is often used as an 'example of good practice' with its potential application to other post-conflict contexts also frequently being discussed (Art, 2006; Berger, 2013; Gardner Feldman, 2010). This article will take a more critical stance and argue that these very positive assessments paper over significant cracks in the memory culture that Germany has developed as well as in the German-Israeli relationship at societal level.

There is a considerable body of literature on the history of German-Israeli relations (Diner, 2015; De Vita, 2015; Gardner Feldman, 1984; Kloke, 2015; Lavy, 1996; Stein & Lewy, 2015), on aspects of transitional justice such as criminal prosecution and reparations (Balabkins, 1971; Romeike, 2016), on the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish historical consciousness and identity (Ofer, 2009; Ofer, 2013; Segev, 2000; Yablonka, 1999) and on debates about Germany's Nazi past and its impact on German identity (Art, 2006; Buruma, 1994; Giordano, 1987; Langenbacher, 2010; Maier, 1988; Niven, 2002; Wittlinger, 2010). Since the 1990s, there has also been an increased focus on theoretical discussions of concepts such as transitional justice and reconciliation (Buckley-Zistel et al., 2014; Crocker, 1999; Daase, 2010; Dodds, 2012;

Dwyer, 1999; Govier, 2006; Hamber & Kelly, 2004; Lederach, 2013; Little, 2011; Llewellyn & Philpott, 2014; Porter, 2015; Rigby, 2001; Teitel, 2003). Interestingly, however, apart from very few notable exceptions (Gardner Feldman, 2012; von Hindenburg, 2007), the German-Israeli case has not received very much attention at all in the literature on transitional justice and reconciliation.

By drawing on recent discussions of the key concepts and taking a fresh look at the empirical evidence, this article assesses to what extent reconciliation between Germany and Israel has indeed been successful. It argues that – although the theoretical literature helps to examine the dynamics between victims and perpetrators and the role of memory – it very often neglects to take into account the post-conflict geopolitical context in which reconciliation takes place as well as strategic security considerations which influence the process, or, as Lily Gardner Feldman has described it, the influence of ‘mutual needs’ on the process (Gardner Feldman, 1984: 49-86).

In order to provide a theoretical basis for the analysis, the first part of the article will examine recent discussions of transitional justice and the role that is attributed to memory, commemoration and apologies in this process. The next section will examine different conceptualisations of reconciliation which will provide the basis for an evaluation of the German-Israeli case later on in the paper. Following on from this, it will show that Germany’s memory culture – as evidenced in the elite discourse – has indeed developed in a way that points to a successful reconciliation between the two countries. The paper will then suggest, however, that German regret emerged rather reluctantly, took a long time to establish itself formally and that emphasis on German suffering rather than suffering caused by Germans has always played an important role in German collective memory after 1945.

This will be followed by a discussion of what has happened at grass-root level: the fact that Holocaust education has played a crucial role in (West) Germany after 1945, the way historical

consciousness has been passed on to the next two generations of Germans, the role of civil society in the reconciliation process and the meaning of the Holocaust for Israeli identity. This section will also examine recent survey data which indicate that – on a societal level – reconciliation does not seem to have taken place. Surprisingly, at least in the context of reconciliation after the Holocaust, however, it is Germans being critical of Jews and Israel rather than vice versa. The article concludes that even though reconciliation between Germany and Israel has been far from exemplary, the two countries have nevertheless managed to build a relationship that has been mutually beneficial.

The aim of the article is twofold: in addition to providing a new and more critical assessment of the reconciliation between Germany and Israel, it makes a contribution to current academic literature on transitional justice, reconciliation and the role of memory which suggests that – even though commemoration and micro level reconciliation might be important – the geopolitical context in which reconciliation takes place and strategic security considerations also play a significant role.

As Adrian Little has suggested, the ‘evaluation of theoretical devices, like reconciliation, needs to be deeply grounded in substantive contexts and the obstacles they involve – an approach that has been somewhat lacking in normative approaches to the concept of reconciliation.’ (2011: 83). The German-Israeli case study of reconciliation provides rich empirical material that covers a period of over 70 years and follows crimes which set a new world standard in terms of evil and have been described as ‘humankind’s darkest hour’, the ‘world’s cruellest episode in history’ and the ‘modern era’s greatest calamity’.

There is no doubt that the German-Israeli case of reconciliation and the violence that preceded it are unique. In contrast to other cases of transitional justice where reconciliation was sought after a violent past, the Holocaust was planned and carried out by the Nazi regime and also required the active, or at least tacit support, of many ‘ordinary’ Germans. Reconciliation on the

German side was led by the democratic legal successor of the 'Third Reich', the Federal Republic of Germany, with the other part of Germany, the GDR, not facing up to responsibility for the past until a few months before its demise in 1990. The victims, on the other hand, were represented by the state of Israel which had not even existed when the atrocities occurred. It therefore does not fit easily into the usual categories of reconciliation between states, groups within one state, or between one state and a particular group. Nevertheless, the debate emerging out of the literature on transitional justice which is discussed in the following sections will provide the key markers with which to evaluate the reconciliation that has been taking place between Germany and Israel and will make an important contribution to the argument of this paper.

### **Transitional justice and the role of commemoration and apologies**

Ruti Teitel identified the period between 1945 and the onset of the Cold War as the first phase of the genealogy of transitional justice which, '[t]hrough its most recognized symbol, the Allied-run Nuremberg Trials', in her view 'reflects the triumph of transitional justice within the scheme of international law' (2003: 70). But the actual term 'transitional justice' only started to come into wider use from the 1980s onwards and has since 'gained global significance as an umbrella term for approaches to deal with the past in the aftermath of violent conflict or dictatorial regimes' (Buckley-Zistel, Koloma Beck et al., 2014: 1). Transitional justice is usually associated with the transition from a violent past to a peaceful future of societies which were previously deeply divided along, for example, ethnic, national or religious lines. Measures adopted in this process are aimed at offering redress to victims and prosecution of perpetrators in order to address past wrongs and include reparations, tribunals and truth commissions but also commemorative events and projects. In fact, the past – or better, the collective memory of the past – plays a crucial role in transitional justice processes. The need

‘to deal with the past’, which is often expressed through commemoration, is increasingly considered to be crucial for transitional justice since an engagement with past violence is considered necessary for reconciliation and a peaceful future. In this context, Ann Rigney has pointed out: ‘As a huge body of literature demonstrates, post-conflict nation building has become inseparable from the perceived need to come to terms with the divisive legacy of the past so as to generate solidarity or, at the very least, conditions for peaceful co-existence.’ (2012: 252). Memory is then very often not only considered susceptible to change ‘but as being an agent of change in and of itself’ (Assmann and Shortt quoted in Buckley-Zistel and Schäfer, 2014: 6).

Remembrance is considered to play a key role not only in commemorating the victims but also in keeping the memory of past injustices alive in order to avoid their recurrence. According to Ruti Teitel, ‘[i]n the transitional justice discourse, revisiting the past is understood as the way to move forward.’ (2003: 86).

In addition to developing a memory culture that commemorates past wrongs, apologising for them and showing remorse are also often seen as crucial for the process of reconciliation. Accordingly, the role of apology in transitional justice has received considerable attention (Barkan, 2000; Brooks, 1999; Gibney et al., 2008; Torpey, 2006). The academic debate acknowledges, however, that the motivation for this might vary. Even though an apology is only part of the beginning of the process of reconciliation, as Christopher Daase has pointed out, ‘[t]he public display of remorse, no matter whether it stems from instrumental, rhetorical or normative motivations, does play a key role in collective conflict and reconciliation processes’ (2010: 20). Nevertheless, as Dodds has pointed out, the function of government apologies often goes beyond offering remorse for past wrongs by containing ‘emotional elements’ and invoking ‘norms of dignity, community, and belonging’. Furthermore, ‘[b]y saying – often explicitly – that a wrong should never have occurred and in promising that it

will never recur, apologies invoke a shared community – whether our common humanity or as members of a particular nation – that was wrongly torn asunder and that should be made whole again, reaffirmed and strengthened.’ (2012: 132).

According to Torpey, apologies complement reparations which offer material compensation and ‘communicative history’ encapsulating memory, memorials and a particular historical consciousness. In his view, ‘apologies and statements of regret involve exchanges of sentiments between perpetrators and victims, whether the interaction takes place between surviving members of either group or their descendants.’ (2003: 7). He also suggests, however, that it is questionable ‘whether any meaningful apology can be made by those not directly involved in the acts for which an apology is now offered.’ (2003: 28, note 21).

Apart from the question of how meaningful an apology from the descendants of the perpetrators can be, what is also important in the context of this paper is the question whether there might be circumstances in which an apology seems simply inadequate in view of the crimes committed. As Dodds has pointed out: ‘Also, sometimes the circumstances or scope of an historical wrong are such that it can never be fully righted, by an apology or any other means. After all, what words or deeds could possibly make up for the Holocaust or centuries of slavery and discrimination?’ (2012: 143). Similarly, Jean-Mark Coicaud and Jibecke Jönsson have asked whether it is ‘possible – is it decent – to issue an apology for crimes against humanity? In a way, the sheer inhumanity of the crime, the lack of proportionality between the crime and anything else, makes the issuing of an apology somewhat absurd, if not obscene.’ (2008: 83). Nevertheless, as I will show later in the article, in their relations with Israel, German political elites, at least eventually, developed a commemorative discourse characterised by remorse and regret.

### **Reconciliation beyond statist diplomacy**

Reconciliation is a key concept in the transition from conflict to post-conflict societies and is very often considered as crucial for a just and sustainable peace (Lederach, 2013; Little, 2011; Maddison, 2016; Porter, 2015; Rigby, 2001). It has played a central role in debates about transitional justice which have gathered momentum from the 1980s onwards (Annan, 2004; Llewellyn and Philpott, 2014; Porter, 2015; Rigby, 2001).

In his article 'Reckoning with Past Wrongs: A Normative Framework', David A. Crocker, for example, has formulated eight goals that have emerged in his view 'from worldwide moral deliberation on transitional justice and may serve as a useful framework when particular societies deliberate about what they are trying to achieve and how they should go about doing so' (1999: 47). In addition to establishing and disseminating the truth about past atrocities, providing victims and their families with a public platform to tell their stories, holding individuals and groups responsible for past crimes, complying with the rule of law when reckoning with past wrongs, paying compensation, restitution or reparation to individuals and groups whose rights have been violated, providing for the future through a reform of the law and basic institutions to avoid a recurrence of the violence and aiming to include public spaces, debate and deliberation in its goals, institutions and strategies, Crocker also recommends that a society which aims to overcome its conflictual and repressive past should aim to reconcile with former enemies (1999).

There are 'thinner' and 'thicker' or 'weaker' and 'stronger' conceptions of reconciliation, with the former envisaging 'merely' an end to violence whereas the latter assume the outcome if not the process to involve forgiveness, unity and harmony (Crocker, 1999; Porter, 2015; Porter, 2003; Govier, 2006). There is some acknowledgement, however, that the process of human reconciliation involves tensions and contestations (Dwyer, 1999).

Normative approaches in particular emphasise that the convergence of peace, justice and reconciliation is desirable as well as necessary for sustainable peace (Porter, 2015: 3-4) and



although peace without justice happens all the time, it is not a lasting and positive peace (Sanam Naraghi Anderlini in Porter, 2015: 17). As Porter has argued, ‘reconciliation built on a foundation of peace and justice is likely to be more substantial than one reliant on peace without justice.’ (Porter, 2015: 13). Such a normative conception of reconciliation also considers trust to be of crucial importance to the process: ‘Building trust thus requires a reciprocal process of dialogue and listening, which is initially awkward for its pure novelty; then comes the recognition of the value of difference, gradually overcoming fear of the other, and in the strongest cases of reconciliation, a celebration of difference.’ (Porter, 2015: 22)

Of particular interest for the purpose of this paper is the fact that many conceptions of reconciliation emphasise the importance of both macro and micro levels for the process of reconciliation. The idea of dialogue and engagement between former enemies and building positive relationships is considered to be central (Lederach, 2013; Porter, 2015). Apart from a shared vision of an independent and fair society and the acknowledgment and dealing with the past and substantial social, economic and political change, Hamber and Kelly, for example, stress the importance of building positive relationships and achieving significant cultural and attitudinal change (2004: 3-4). Similarly, Lederach emphasises the importance of grass roots activity for the process of reconciliation: ‘I believe that the nature and characteristics of contemporary conflict suggest the need for a set of concepts and approaches that go beyond traditional statist diplomacy. Building peace in today’s conflicts calls for a long-term commitment to establishing an infrastructure across the levels of a society, an infrastructure that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society and maximizes the contribution from outside.’ (2013: xvi)

Lederach articulates some working assumptions on which he bases his conception of reconciliation: ‘that *relationship* is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution’, that ‘[r]econciliation must find ways to address the past without getting locked into a vicious

cycle of mutual exclusiveness inherent in the past' and that 'opportunity must therefore be given for people to look forward and envision their shared future' and that reconciliation represents a social space, i.e. 'place where people and things come together.' (2013: 26-27). In sum, he sees reconciliation 'as a process of encounter and as a social space'. (2013: 29). In a similar vein, Andrew Rigby explains that a culture of reconciliation cannot be confined to the symbolic realm, but 'must be embodied and lived out in new relationships between people at all levels of society' (2001: 189).

Also emphasising the importance of the societal level for reconciliation to be meaningful, in the South African context, Dwyer raises the question as to the relationship between the micro and the macro level and to what extent reconciliation at the macro level depends on the possibility of reconciliation at the micro level, in particular whether national reconciliation would be 'purchased at the cost of denying justice to individuals?' (1999: 91). In her view reconciliation between individuals might be possible in some cases and in particular circumstances but it is far from inevitable (1999: 95). In particular, she raises the concern that 'that the stability of reconciliation might, in some cases, depend upon face-to-face encounters' (1999: 96).

In contrast to Porter, Dwyer also recognises that reconciliation is not necessarily based on justice:

Nevertheless, reconciliation conscientiously pursued and faithfully supported is no guarantee of justice, unless we distort our conception of justice to conform to contingent practical limitations. Reconciliation may often fall short of justice. This point bears emphasis. Political leaders should not pretend that reconciliation is the same as justice. But, again, this does not mean that reconciliation is a second-best option. Justice is not the only thing we value. And in many cases, reconciliation may be our sole morally significant option. (1999: 98)

What emerges from this discussion for the context of this paper is an understanding of reconciliation that puts it at the core of the transition from conflict to post-conflict societies. It acknowledges that there are 'thinner' and 'thicker' conceptions of reconciliation but argues

that the latter offers a more promising path to a sustainable, if not necessarily just peace. Most importantly for the following assessment of German-Israeli relations regarding its achievements in terms of reconciliation, however, it emphasises the importance of micro level engagement in the process, i.e. a sincere grass-roots level engagement with ‘past wrongs’, in this case the Holocaust. Before turning to the wider societal level, however, it is necessary to look at German-Israeli relations at elite level which by and large can indeed be seen as a success story.

### **Reconciliation at elite level: a success story**

In spite of regular ups and downs throughout its history, overall, and at the elite level, the relationship has indeed by and large been remarkably successful considering that Germans’ horrendous crimes against European Jewry provided its foundation. This is not to say that it has always been easy. Especially during the period before the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1965, the two countries struggled to find a way to deal with each other that took account not only of what is sometimes euphemistically referred to as ‘their difficult past’ but also of the new geopolitical realities of the Cold War and divided Germany’s position within those. A major milestone was reached when both countries’ leaders and their parliaments agreed and ratified the Luxembourg Agreement in the early 1950s which offered the state of Israel and the Jewish Claims Conference material reparations. Chancellor Adenauer’s Policy of Restitution (*Politik der Wiedergutmachung*) was a pragmatic way to move the relationship forward even though it concentrated on the material rather than the moral dimension of German crimes.

Not only the horrendous nature and scale of the crimes committed by Germans against Jews but also the new geopolitical realities of the Cold War made it difficult to establish diplomatic relations. In May 1965, two decades after the end of the Second World War, the two countries

finally ‘stumbled’ into diplomatic relations with each other (Stein and Lewy, 2015: 4). In the end, it was German-German competition that played a crucial role in West Germany’s decision under Chancellor Ludwig Erhard to offer Israel the establishment of diplomatic relations. The history leading up to the start of German-Israeli diplomatic relations in 1965 illustrates very well the way the Holocaust and its legacy provided the ‘basic narrative’ of the relationship while power political and economic factors were its crucial drivers, and, at times, hindrances (De Vita, 2015).

Nevertheless, the political elite of the Federal Republic continued to struggle to articulate the nature of the relationship with a terminology that was also acceptable to Israel. Was it ‘normal,’ as Walter Scheel had suggested in 1969, or ‘special,’ or was the truth in Willy Brandt’s formulation during his visit to Israel in 1973, the first visit of a German Chancellor to Israel, that the ‘normal relations’ between West Germany and Israel were characterised by ‘their uniqueness’, meaning that they would always have to be seen against the sinister background of National Socialism (Stein and Lewy, 2015: 3; Wolffsohn and Brechenmacher, 2007: 511).

Just like Germany’s European neighbours, Israel found the prospect of German unification a daunting one, with fears of a ‘Fourth Reich’ being expressed in the Israeli press. If anything, however, bilateral relations have intensified between united Germany and Israel, with the positive bilateral relationship being supported by an official German memory culture which acknowledges the centrality of the Holocaust for German national identity. German political elites by and large also seem to have found appropriate reconciliatory language in their speeches leaving behind any notion that subsequent generations of Germans could ignore this historical legacy. Nearly a decade after the historians’ dispute (*Historikerstreit*), which had shown that forty years after the end of the Second World War there was still no consensus regarding the place of the Holocaust in German historical consciousness (Augstein, 1987, Maier, 1988), Federal President Roman Herzog on his visit to Jerusalem in 1994

unambiguously declared that any demand ‘to draw a line under the German past’ was, in view of the historical dimensions of the crimes, out of the question. He thus adopted the position of President Richard von Weizsäcker’s seminal speech on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War which was to become the consensus from the late 1990s onwards, namely that the Holocaust would continue to be a central pillar of German historical consciousness for subsequent generations of Germans and that memory of the Holocaust formed a key part of German identity.

On 16 February 2000 German President Johannes Rau was the first non-Jewish German to be allowed to speak to the Knesset with Avraham Burg, then Speaker of the Parliament, describing him as the ‘best friend’ of Israel. Rau asked for forgiveness for what Germans had done ‘for myself and my generation, for the sake of our children and children’s children, whose future I would like to see at the side of the children of Israel’ (2000).

After Chancellor Schröder’s rather low level of interest in Israel, it was Merkel’s visit in 2008 which brought a new intensity to the relationship (Mushaben, 2017). She was not only the first German Chancellor but also the first head of any foreign government to be invited to deliver a speech to the Knesset. The Israeli parliament had to change its statutes to make this possible. In her speech Merkel suggested that the Shoa ‘fills us Germans with shame’ and also emphasised its singularity: ‘The break with civilization that was the Shoa has no parallel. It left wounds that have not healed to this day.’ She emphasised that words are not enough, they would have to be followed by action, for example in response to anti-Semitism and the expression of critical attitudes towards Israel. Merkel also seemed to take Germany’s responsibility for Israel’s security to another level by suggesting that it was Germany’s *raison d’état* (*Staatsraison*) (2008). Even though there was some opposition to her speaking ‘in the language of the perpetrators’ to the Knesset, her speech was very well received and Merkel was given a standing ovation. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert described the negotiations as

‘exceptional and perhaps historical’ and called Merkel and her government ‘honest and true friends of Israel’. (Merkel and Olmert, 2008). In his speech to the German *Bundestag* on Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January 2010, Shimon Peres spoke of a ‘unique friendship’ that had developed between Germany and Israel which had not developed at the expense of the memory of the Holocaust but which was very much conscious of it (Peres, 2010).

A clear caveat has also been expressed at times, however. On the occasion of Federal President Köhler’s visit to Israel in 2005, for example, Prime Minister Sharon pointed to the limitations of the relationship between the two countries: ‘Even 60 years after the Holocaust, the pain of the terrible loss of millions of innocent Jews ... has not faded ... There cannot be and there is no pardon and forgiveness for what the Jewish people suffered at the hands of the Germans.’ (quoted in Gardner Feldman, 2012: 134).

2015 was a year of key anniversaries commemorating events at the heart of German-Israeli collective memory. Events celebrated 50 years of German-Israeli diplomatic relations but also commemorated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of concentration camps and the end of the Second World War. Speeches given by German political leaders at these commemorations illustrate very clearly the key pillars of the consensus that has emerged regarding Germany’s Nazi past. It is considered a key part of German identity – ‘there is no German identity without Auschwitz’ – and will remain so for future generations, with the singularity of the Holocaust being by and large accepted. It is also part of this consensus that German-Israeli relations are considered as special and unique and that the friendship between the two states is largely due to Israel’s generosity and reconciliatory stance towards Germany after 1945 in spite of the crimes committed against Jews in the previous period.

In his speech to commemorate the liberation of Sachsenhausen on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2015, for example, Foreign Secretary Frank-Walter Steinmeier asserted that ‘the crimes of the National Socialist regime are without parallel’ and – quoting a Holocaust survivor – ‘[m]emory has no expiry

date'. He also suggested that it 'truly seems a miracle that Germany and Israel are united in friendship today', which in his view was 'because the country of the persecuted reached out a hand to the country of the persecutors – hesitant at first, and then determined.' He also pointed out what he thought was Germany's contribution to this process: 'This was also made possible by the fact that my country acknowledged and continues to acknowledge its historical guilt, and because we acknowledge our current responsibility with respect to Israel's right to exist.' Nowadays, Germany and Israel are united by a 'special and unique friendship,' according to Steinmeier (2015a).

Overall, especially from the 1990s onwards, a consensus has emerged in Germany's official memory culture which acknowledged the Holocaust as central to Germany's historical consciousness. As the examples above have shown, German political elites – at least eventually – developed a commemorative discourse which suggests that Germany is taking responsibility for the crimes and showing remorse. It is difficult, if not impossible, to judge to what degree these expressions of guilt and remorse are sincere or merely symbolic, rhetorical or even strategic. What is clear is that they have intensified at a time of transition from 'communicative memory' to 'cultural memory' (Assmann, 1995), that is the gradual disappearance of the eyewitnesses. As the next section will show, however, a strong argument can be made to suggest that there are considerable cracks in the way Germany has 'dealt' with its past and that the reconciliation at elite level does not appear to be mirrored in society at large.

### **Reluctant regret**

The early stages of German-Israeli 'reconciliation' illustrate very well what would become a permanent feature of Germany's relationship with its Nazi past until the 1990s: a reluctance to face this past. It was only under pressure and in view of economic and power political considerations that West Germany started to develop a relationship with Israel after the Second

World War. Eugen Kogon and Walter Dirks, for example, appealed unsuccessfully to the *Bundestag* and the new government in 1949 to start restitution (*Wiedergutmachung*) and foster relations with the Jewish people ‘and its state in Palestine’ (Kloke, 2015: 4). In 1951, SPD politician Carlo Schmid suggested that West Germany should recognise the state of Israel as the legal successor for any compensation claims where there were no heirs. It was only when Israel exerted pressure through the western allies regarding reparations, however, that Konrad Adenauer expressed his commitment to material compensation (*materielle Wiedergutmachung*) and started to meet with delegates from Israel with a view to negotiating an agreement (Diner, 2015, Kloke, 2015: 4; Gardner-Feldman, 1984: 54-56). The agreement was strongly contested on both sides and the struggle of the Adenauer government to ratify the agreement in the *Bundestag* shows just how widespread the reluctance to engage with material compensation – and by implication therefore also the moral dimension of the historical legacy – was among West German parliamentarians. Adenauer did not have sufficient support from his own ranks to get the agreement ratified but relied on votes from the opposition to get it through the *Bundestag*. Critics of the agreement in Germany felt that it placed too heavy a burden on the budget of the new West German state (Gardner Feldman, 1984: 76-77; Wolffsohn and Brechenmacher, 2007: 507).

This reluctance was mirrored in West German society at large. According to a survey carried out in August 1952, 44 percent of respondents considered the Luxembourg Agreement to be ‘superfluous’ and only 11 percent were in favour (Kloke, 2015: 4). As Federal President Joachim Gauck acknowledged in his speech commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, ‘the Reparations Agreement with Israel was not at all popular with the public at the time’ (Gauck, 2015).

The reluctance to consider material compensation was accompanied by a possibly even stronger reluctance to face the moral legacy of the crimes committed against Jews during the



‘Third Reich’. As the renowned historian Heinrich August Winkler pointed out in his speech to the *Bundestag* on 8 May 2015, the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (*Stuttgarter Schuldbekennntnis*) of October 1945 did not even explicitly mention the most horrendous of crimes against humanity, the murder of approximately six million Jews, and it took decades for the recognition to set in that the Holocaust was the central fact (‘Zentraltatsache’) of Germany’s 20<sup>th</sup> century history (Winkler, 2015).

The official discourse in East Germany used the concept of anti-fascism to deal with the past. It enabled the GDR to distance itself not only from the Nazi past but also from its capitalist ‘other’, the Federal Republic of Germany. Both regimes were considered to have emerged out of capitalism and a renunciation of capitalism in the form of anti-fascism was seen as key to the GDR’s process of ‘coming to terms with the past’. As Jeffrey Herf has pointed out, even when former concentration camps were opened as memorials (e.g. Buchenwald in 1958 and Sachsenhausen in 1961), the speeches by political leaders focused on the ‘heroes of antifascist struggle’ and the ‘victims of fascism’ in general with fallen soldiers receiving more attention in the speeches than Jewish victims (1997, 175-176). West Germany’s integration into the western alliance system and the fact that it was the legal successor of the ‘Third Reich’ further reinforced the perception that the Nazi past was a West German matter. It seemed, in fact, ‘that Hitler himself had been a West German’ (Müller, 2000: 22).

Throughout the lifetime of the GDR, no serious attempts were made by the official discourse to acknowledge the Nazi past, and in particular the Holocaust, as part of the GDR’s history and identity with the result that questions of responsibility and guilt remained largely unaddressed (Wittlinger, 2010: 18-20). This was publicly acknowledged in a meeting of the GDR parliament only months before the demise of the state.

Whereas the GDR absolved itself through its commitment to anti-fascism, allowing it to distance itself from Hitler’s Germany as well as capitalist West Germany, for a long time the

Federal Republic did not do much better. The Nuremberg trials of 1945-46, at which the leading figures of the 'Third Reich' were held to account, seemed to reinforce the widespread and lasting notion that the responsibility for the horrendous crimes lay with Hitler and the group surrounding him. By implication, this allowed 'ordinary' Germans to avoid questions of their involvement in and responsibility for the Holocaust. It was only in the 1960s that such questions gained more prominence in the public realm through the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt. It took until the 1970s, however, for commemoration to become institutionalised and questions of responsibility and guilt to be more widely discussed. When Chancellor Willy Brandt fell to his knees at the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Germany's regret for its crimes was starting to gain a public platform. However, a clear position was only articulated in President von Weizsäcker's speech in 1985 in which he interpreted 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 as a liberation rather than a defeat and in which he also addressed the question of the responsibility of German society at large for the crimes. The fact that it took 40 years for a German political leader to address questions of widespread culpability and responsibility suggests that the reconciliation that took place at elite level between West Germany and Israel during this period was not mirrored by recognition of and regret for the crimes on a wider scale. Furthermore, the Bitburg controversy of 1985 and the historians' dispute of 1986-87 made abundantly clear that the German Nazi past and its place in German memory and identity were still hugely contested (Maier, 1988; Wittlinger, 2010: 18-26). The reluctance of Germans to face the Nazi past led Ralph Giordano in the 1980s to suggest the emergence of a 'second guilt', that of the suppression and denial of the first guilt acquired under Hitler (1987).

It was in fact only in the 1990s that questions about the involvement and responsibility of 'ordinary' Germans were examined in a number of high-profile disputes such as the Goldhagen debate and the debate about the crimes of the *Wehrmacht*. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews

in Europe in Berlin which was completed in 2004 probably provides the most commonly cited evidence for and symbol of Germany's successful engagement with its past. The fact that it took nearly 60 years to arrive at this stage suggests that Germany's engagement with the past has not been all that exemplary.

Furthermore, whereas it took several decades to arrive at a consensus regarding the position of the Holocaust in German collective memory and identity and to establish a memory culture which acknowledged widespread culpability and responsibility, Germany's own victims – as expellees and refugees fleeing from the advances of the Red Army towards the end of the war and its immediate aftermath or as victims of the allied bombing raids towards the end of the war – possessed a firm place in postwar German memory and identity right from the beginning. As Hannah Arendt observed, after the Second World War Germans very much concentrated on their own suffering. Whenever she pointed out her German Jewish origin at the beginning of a conversation with a German stranger, according to Arendt, what followed an embarrassing pause was not a question as to where she had gone or what had happened to her family but a flood of stories about German suffering (1993: 25). As Moeller has argued persuasively, what had been assumed to be a general silence regarding the memory of the war period was only a very selective one, i.e. one which allowed Germans to commemorate their own victims but which by and large ignored the victims of the Germans. Germans thus reinvented themselves as a community of victims which allowed the emergence of a collective identity in post-war West Germany (2002: 6). Although the 'Germans as victims' discourse was not quite as vocal during the period from the 1960s onwards until the 1990s, it was certainly not the taboo some observers claimed it to be when it re-emerged as a prominent feature of German collective memory in public, literary and political discourses towards the end of the 1990s (Wittlinger, 2006). Although this memory strand is becoming increasingly institutionalised in Germany's memory culture, Angela Merkel in particular has continued to emphasise the causal

relationship between the 'Third Reich's' destructive expansionism and the forced migration from the East or the bombing raids on German cities.

Germans' emphasis on and empathy for German victims which was very at the expense of consideration of the victims of Germans provides further evidence for the argument that Germany's reconciliation with its former enemies lacked the model character that is often ascribed to it. It is doubtful however whether the consensus among German political elites which now seems to have been reached regarding the place of the Holocaust in German memory and identity is mirrored in society at large. Holocaust centred memory has never been very widespread or deeply anchored in society and has, more often than not, in postwar German history been challenged by discourses on German victimhood (Wittlinger, 2006).

### **Reconciliation at grass-root level?**

It was recognised very early on in the process that the education of future generations of Germans would have to play a crucial part in the wake of the 'Third Reich' and the Holocaust. And this was very much taken on board – strongly encouraged by the occupying powers (Romeike, 2016: 35) - by West Germany after 1945, particularly in comparison to Japan, for example (Buruma, 1994). In addition to adult education promoted, for example, by the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (Federal Agency for Civic Education), since the 1960s curricula of all schools in every German state allocate a central role to teaching about National Socialism and the Holocaust. Evidence found in textbooks clearly supports the notion that (West) Germany has tried very hard to instil a historical consciousness in its young people that shows an awareness of the Nazi past and the nature and scale of its atrocities. (Buruma, 1994, 182-185). As Boschki et al. have pointed out, '[l]ittle by little, it became clear that education would be the key to prevent anti-Semitism in the future (2010: 135). In spite of significant

efforts to ensure the presence of the Nazi past in secondary school education, however, a number of empirical studies which evaluate the success of these educational measures suggest that the outcomes are not necessarily in line with the aims of Holocaust education in schools in terms of an understanding and awareness of history. According to Boschki et al. there is ‘a whole host of studies that identified a worrying lack of knowledge amongst the interviewed young Germans’ (2010: 140).

The results of two studies – initially based on qualitative research and then complemented by a quantitative study carried out by Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall provide even more cause for concern. A very striking finding of their research on the way historical consciousness is passed on to the next two generations is the discovery that the roles of victims and perpetrators are often reversed in family history. This leads the authors to conclude that ‘whoever is to blame for the Holocaust, whoever committed the crimes in the war of extermination, the forced labour system and in the camps – one thing seems to be clear to nearly all citizens of the Federal Republic: Granddad was no Nazi.’ (2002: 248).

As several scholars have pointed out, however, there have been attempts to promote reconciliation also at grass-root level in Germany and Israel (Gardner Feldman, 2012; von Hindenburg, 2007). After the lack of broad societal support for the restitution agreement of 1952, from the late 1950s onwards, pro-Israel activities started to emerge in German society organised, for example, by student groups which tried to influence West German government policy towards Israel or as a reaction to the anti-Semitic incidents in the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. This was strongly supported by American-Jewish organisations which wanted to make sure that German youths would be very much aware of the threats of authoritarianism (von Hindenburg, 2007: 50-51).

Lily Gardner Feldman has also emphasised the extensive role of civil society in German-Israeli relations. She points to the numerous non-governmental organisations like *Aktion*

*Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste* (Action Reconciliation Service for Peace), for example, which were founded to promote reconciliation between Germany and Israel at grass root level. She acknowledges, however, that the long-term effects of all these activities are difficult to gauge (Gardner Feldman, 2010: 139).

In line with its general approach to the 'Third Reich', the GDR on the other hand made sure that the antifascist theme continued in representations of the Holocaust and the Second World War in textbooks. As Ian Buruma has pointed out, '[a]trocities and genocide are less in evidence in these texts than the heroism of Soviet liberators and Communist rebels. The children of the GDR were not asked to atone for or reflect on the crimes committed by their parents and grandparents. Auschwitz was not meant to be part of their identity. They were taught to identify with heroes.' (1994: 182).

Even in the GDR, where – as has been discussed earlier – any kind of remembrance had to fit into the straight-jacket of anti-fascism, there were some early attempts at grass-root level and outside of the official discourse to come to terms with the National Socialist past in a more genuine and sincere way. Particularly the very early post-war period was characterised by a plurality in the memory culture of the east with protestant pastors, representatives of the resistance of 20 July and members of Jewish communities organising commemorative events together (Annette Leo quoted in Moller, 2003: 45).

Memory of the Holocaust is obviously also crucial to an understanding of Israeli politics and society. Acknowledging the tensions between individual memory and the construction of collective memory, Ofer points out that even though the number of survivors is naturally declining, the centrality of the Holocaust in Israeli society has not diminished. Quite to the contrary, the impact of personal narratives of survivors on Israel's historical culture and consciousness has intensified over time and now also includes previously excluded groups such as the voice of the child survivor and the voice of women (Ofer, 2004:137-138). She also

points, however, that the centrality of the Holocaust in Israeli society and Israel's self-understanding does not result in homogeneity in terms of its understanding and meaning. Different religious groupings as well as generational differences regarding ideology and politics are 'quite significant and contribute to disagreements about how and to what extent the Holocaust should be remembered' (Ofer, 2010: 493).

According to Ofer, the central role of the Holocaust for Israeli identity is also encapsulated in the expression 'Never again' which becomes prominent in Israeli discourse every time an existential threat is perceived (2010: 511). She acknowledges that 'Holocaust memory in Israel surfaces in numerous contexts, including political ones. Some of them really attempt to understand the meaning of the historical event, while others manipulate its use, thus demeaning the memory' (Ofer, 2009: 29). She does not believe that the latter outweigh the former, however, and comes to the following conclusion:

Certainly some Israelis fear that militarism will become a tolerated ideology in Israel, and that the lessons of the Holocaust – to never again become a victim unable to fight against its enemy – would come to dominate Israel's worldview. In their eyes the transition from being perceived as a victim to becoming a perpetrator was alarming. More recently, a provocative post- or anti-Zionist approach has viewed Holocaust commemoration as a means to promote nationalistic identity, militarism, and a particularistic historical memory which denies any universal meaning of the Holocaust. However, the critique relating to the manipulation of the Holocaust by various political forces that was voiced strongly after 1977 seems one-sided in view of the multiple individual and group efforts to shape commemoration patterns (Ofer, 2013: 83).

If Willy Brandt was right in his comments to the Polish Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz, a survivor of Auschwitz and Mauthausen, in 1970, that understanding and reconciliation cannot be decreed by governments but must develop in the hearts of the people on both sides (Brandt in Steinmeier, 2015b), German attitudes towards Jews in Israel as well as elsewhere will provide a further measure of the success or failure of reconciliation between the two countries.

There is no doubt that especially during anniversary years such as 2015, there are exhibitions, concerts, sporting events, youth exchanges etc. which practise and even celebrate German-Israeli relations and understanding in a variety of fora. Looking at recent survey data, however, this does not seem to positively affect the majority of Germans and their views. In fact, the relationship is considered to have become ‘asymmetric’ with Germans becoming increasingly critical of Israel – which is said to be at least partially linked to anti-Semitic views – whereas young Israelis have quite positive perceptions of Germany and the Germans (Kloke, 2015: 21-22). A survey conducted in 2014 suggests that seventy percent of Israelis have a positive view of Germany and only twenty-three percent of respondents view Germany in a negative light (Borchard and Heyn, 2015: 3). Germany is seen as a stable democracy by eighty percent and fifty-nine percent of respondents think German unification has further improved German-Israeli relations. The most commonly used terms to describe the bilateral relationship were ‘warm’, ‘very close’ and ‘very friendly’ (Borchard and Heyn, 2015: 5). Fifty-seven percent think Israel can trust Germany and fully rely on it (Borchard and Heyn, 2015: 6). Forty-two percent consider history to be the basis for the relationship rather than common interests. Remarkably, thirty-three percent think that common interests provide the basis for the relationship and nineteen percent that it is a combination of history and common interests (Borchard and Heyn, 2015: 7). Asked which country benefits more from the relationship only seventeen percent think that it is Germany, against fifty-one percent of respondents who think that Israel benefits more (Borchard and Heyn, 2015: 7).

German attitudes on the other hand, indicate cause for concern. A recent survey commissioned by the Bertelsmann Foundation suggests that – in general terms – seventy-seven percent of Germans want to move on from history and concentrate on current and future problems. The figure is even higher (eighty-one percent) when Germans are asked specifically about leaving behind the history of the Holocaust (Hagemann and Nathanson, 2015: 23). Fifty-five percent



of Germans think that 70 years after the end of the war and the persecution of Jews a line should be drawn under the past. Forty-two percent, constituting an increase compared to figures from 1991 and 2007, however, don't agree with this statement (Hagemann and Nathanson, 2015: 24-25).

In contrast, seventy-seven percent of Israeli respondents consider it wrong to stop talking about the persecution of Jews and drawing a line under the past (Hagemann and Nathanson, 2015: 26). There are clear differences between Germans and Israelis when evaluating the historical legacy with Germans giving a lower estimate of its continued influence. Forty-three percent of German respondents think that German-Israeli relations are not at all or only slightly burdened by the past whereas only twenty-one percent of Israeli respondents are of this view (Hagemann and Nathanson, 2015: 33-34).

Nevertheless, sixty-eight percent of Israeli Jews have a generally positive attitude towards Germany (a figure that has steadily increased from forty-eight percent in 1991 to fifty-seven percent in 2007) but only forty-six percent of Germans have a positive view of Israel. (Hagemann and Nathanson, 2015: 35).

This study also shows that more or less latent anti-Semitism continues to exist in Germany. Twenty-eight percent of German respondents for example agree with the statement that 'Jews have too much influence in the world' and forty-one percent of German respondents think that Israeli policy towards the Palestinians is in principle the same as what the Nazis did to Jews in the Third Reich (Hagemann and Nathanson, 2015: 40). According to the study, overall, nearly a third of the German respondents hold negative prejudices against Jews. (Hagemann and Nathanson, 2015: 40).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is of course likely to influence German attitudes towards Israel and Jews with large parts of German society being critical of Israel's treatment of the

Palestinians. As Pól Ó Dochartaigh (2016) has pointed out, the occupation also serves as a ‘justification’ for anti-Semitic feelings in the wider population, however.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to disaggregate survey results to such a degree that they would provide evidence for this. Respondents are unlikely to want to admit to anti-Semitic views or might not actually be aware that they hold them. In view of continued rather widespread anti-Semitism, arguably, there is a strong likelihood that a considerable number of Germans assess Israel’s actions through an anti-Semitic lens.

### **A ‘model of reconciliation’? No, but ...**

According to ‘thin’ or ‘weak’ conceptions, reconciliation is achieved when violence has ended. Regarding German attempts to eradicate European Jewry during the ‘Third Reich’, this was certainly the case in 1945. If we employ ‘thicker’ or ‘stronger’ conceptions of reconciliation and the core goals they articulate such as justice, forgiveness, trust and harmony, however, it is evident that they have only partially been achieved and are, by and large, confined to the elite level of German-Israeli relations. At the micro level – the importance of which has frequently been emphasised in recent literature if reconciliation is to be sustainable and durable – reconciliation between Germans and Jewish victims and their descendants has considerable flaws. Even though there have been cultural and youth exchanges and numerous other initiatives which are aimed at fostering better relations at all levels of society, more often than not they have been characterised by a top-down approach and have reached only a very small number of people. Reconciliation in German-Israeli relations has never occupied the ‘social space’ that Lederach has identified as crucial. Neither have there been new relationships between people of all levels, a factor Rigby considered as important for a culture of

reconciliation to emerge, not least because German society at large for a long time never faced up to the crimes and the responsibility of ‘ordinary’ Germans.

That reconciliation at elite level has nevertheless been achieved is truly remarkable, even if it is not in line with the normative approaches discussed earlier which envisage reconciliation across all sections of society for it to be sustainable and durable and which revolve around trust, harmony and forgiveness. The German-Israeli case suggests that other factors which were grounded in power politics have played an important role, such as pressure from the international community on Germany which wanted to be readmitted to the circle of civilised nations and support for Israel’s security within the new post-1945 set-up through arms exports from Germany, for example (Serr, 2015). Maybe what has been achieved is not so much reconciliation but a pragmatic way forward which suited both countries. As Lily Gardner Feldman has pointed out, ‘reconciliation is always a coupling of morality and pragmatism’ (2012: 14). This article has argued that – apart from Germany’s efforts at elite level – the reconciliation process was light with regard to morality. Pragmatism prevailed and suggested that the present and its problems were more important than the past and that power political considerations were more important than the moral dimension of dealing with past wrongs. Israel needed support to ensure its security and an ally to confirm and assert its ‘right to exist’ in a volatile regional context and Germany needed – not necessarily forgiveness – but bilateral relations with Israel to gain rehabilitation in the international community.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German into English are my own.