

Traumatic Terrain: Israeli Holocaust Memory & the Occupied Territories

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Abstract

This essay is excerpted from a 60-page chapter on the politics of Holocaust memory in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here I look at Israeli settlers who, in 2004-2005, wore Holocaust-era armbands in order to create a media spectacle and protest the government-ordered withdrawal of certain settlements from the Occupied Territories. By linking this spectacle to a 1952 anti-government protest in which similar armbands were worn, I trace the history of the settlers' traumatic-territorial logic. Analyzing this site provides a way to illustrate one of the key functions of cultural memory in the conflict: the *territorialization* of Holocaust memory. This excerpt synthesizes the work of the longer chapter, which traces the historical development of Holocaust awareness in Israel, in order to argue that the settlers' territorialization of Holocaust memory must be viewed as a *traumatic cultural memory*. The goal of this analysis is to provide a historical framework from which we can begin to theorize the necessities and possibilities of a political memory-work. This memory-work, I argue, must de-territorialize Holocaust memory in order to undo the ideological web of national identity, political geography and historical trauma. Working-through this traumatic history, I conclude, is an essential part of moving toward reconciliation and future peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Text

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is inextricable from the politics of memory. Each side's claim to the contested territory is grounded in collective memories of violence: the Diaspora and Holocaust for Israelis, the *Nakba* (Catastrophe) of 1948 for Palestinians. The territorial conflict therefore situates each collective memory in antagonistic relation to the other. (Gur-Ze'ev) The conflict is thus not only a matter of geography: it is equally a struggle over history and memory. (Said 1999; Boyarin 1996) Reconciliation, peace, and any 'road map' to the future therefore require addressing the force of a traumatic history and investigating the role of cultural memory in perpetuating the conflict.

Cultural memories are fundamental, of course, to the construction of national-collective identities—identities that are simultaneously defined in relation to geographic

space. As Maurice Halbwachs argues, collective memories are ‘inserted’ into material spaces to give them a stability and a permanence. (Halbwachs) For modern nation-states, the spatialization of collective memory takes a territorial form through the construction and maintenance of national borders. “States may be said to map history onto territory.” (Boyarin 1994:16) But there is a traumatic logic to this cartography: for transforming violent histories into geo-political borders can simultaneously reproduce violence in relation to contemporary alterity.

This traumatic cartography can be seen at work in a difficult, contentious and complex site: the relation between Holocaust memory and Israel’s Occupied Territories. This essay is excerpted from a larger project on both the political problems and ethical possibilities of traumatic cultural memory in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here I will focus on *the territorialization of Holocaust memory* in the Occupied Territories. My goal is to understand how the fear of a ‘second Holocaust’ has become transformed into a defence of the illegal occupation of what, according to international law, is Palestinian territory. Understanding this transformation is key to what I consider a necessary component of memory work en route to reconciliation: de-territorializing the Zionization of Holocaust memory.

The highly conflictual and equivocal role of Holocaust memory in Israel is exemplified in a series of events with Israeli settlers in Gaza between December 2004 and August 2005. In response to the Sharon government’s plan to evacuate certain settlements in Gaza, Jewish settlers created a media scandal by claiming that they would start wearing armbands with orange stars of David. By wearing these stars—recalling the yellow stars forcibly worn by Jews in the Nazi Holocaust—the settlers ventured to

compare the Sharon government's withdrawal plan to the Nazi Holocaust. Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Centre and the Simon Wiesenthal Centre both condemned this invocation of Holocaust memory, as did Holocaust survivors such as Shevah Weiss. As Yad Vashem's director Avner Shalev said, "the plan to wear orange stars perverts the historical facts and damages the memory of the Shoah."¹ And while this 'comparison' is clearly inaccurate and politically motivated, it highlights the deeply equivocal role and affective power of Holocaust memory in Israel. The settlers' proposal ignited a series of inflammatory references and accusations. Iraqi-born (and Jewish) Cabinet Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer received a letter calling him "the epitome of evil, a miserable Iraqi, a Nazi with Arab blood. You love Arabs more than Jews."² Graffiti attacks on then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon stated that "Hitler would be proud of you."³ Perhaps the most extreme comparisons were made by "Nativ," a policy review published in the West Bank settlement of Ariel. Nativ described the withdrawal plan as "ethnic cleansing," called Sharon a "*Judenrat*," (invoking the word for Jewish 'collaborators' in the Warsaw Ghetto), and accused Israel's defence minister as collaborating in "the final solution."⁴ Certain Rabbis joined in the attack on the state, declaring that the evacuation of the settlements was a betrayal of Jewish law; other Rabbis stated that loyalty to the holiness of the land supersedes loyalty to the state.⁵ Eventually, when evacuations began August 2005, settlers from several settlements shouted "Nazis!" at the soldiers and wore yellow

¹ Josef Federman, "Settlers' plan to don orange star hits nerve in Israel," *Globe and Mail* [Toronto] 22 Dec. 2004: A11.

² Josef Federman, "Sharon moves to rein in opponents," *Globe and Mail* [Toronto] 14 Feb. 2005: A9.

³ Greg Myre, "Israel Gears Up for Burst of Far-Right Anger at Pullout," *New York Times* 20 Feb. 2005: International 10.

⁴ Shira Herzog, "Israel's settlers are beyond democracy's frontiers," *Globe and Mail* [Toronto] 2 Mar. 2005: A15.

⁵ *ibid.*

stars of David affixed to their clothing.⁶ Obviously these events do not represent the mainstream of Israeli society: popular opinion quickly condemned the comparison. Nevertheless, the settlers' rhetorical gestures demonstrate the extreme possibility of a 'misuse' of traumatic memory for political purposes in the present. And while one might disregard these media spectacles as forms of extremism, a deeper analysis unearths an ideological logic at play through Israel's history.

What is the logic by which these invocations of historical trauma are mobilized in order to reproduce the colonial occupation of these territories? *Is there* a relation between these settlements and the Holocaust? And what about Palestinian experience and collective memory? For the settlements are part of a *reproduction of violence* whereby the re-occupation of these territories *reproduces* the trauma of the *Nakba*—the violent seizure of Palestine—and displacement of Palestinians—in 1948. (Sa'di & Abu-Lughod) Holocaust memory is thus being invoked—even if cynically or rhetorically—in order to perpetuate a reproduction of colonial violence. The settlers' mobilization of Holocaust memory demonstrates Edward Said's argument that Palestinians are the "victims of the victims." (Said 1995) Is it possible that the settlers' use of Holocaust costumes is part of a *traumatic* cultural memory?

While the 2005 armband incident exemplifies the possibility of a political 'abuse' of memory, it simultaneously recalls another incident—from fifty years earlier—in which armbands and stars of David invoking the Holocaust were worn in protest against the Israeli state. In January of 1952, four years after the founding of the state, the Knesset was arguing over whether or not to negotiate reparations agreements with Germany. Then

⁶ Mark MacKinnon, "Deadly attack fails to stall Gaza pullout." *Globe and Mail* [Toronto] 18 Aug. 2005: A10.

Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's ruling Maipai government was lobbying—against considerable popular opposition—to initiate negotiations with Germany in order to receive reparation payments. Popular opinion in Israel, however, was fiercely opposed to any negotiations with Germany, feeling that reparations, however economically pragmatic, were a form of 'blood money' that desecrated the memory of the victims. (Segev 2000) While the Knesset was in session, a group of demonstrators gathered to protest against the proposed reparations. As Tom Segev documents: "They wore yellow Stars of David, like the ones the Jews in the ghettos had been forced to wear; under the word *Jude* were the words 'Remember what Amalek did to thee.'" (Segev 2000: 216) While the Knesset debated, the protesters marching toward the building were interrupted by the police. In the riot that ensued, police threw smoke bombs and tear-gas into the crowd. As the wind turned, the gas blew back at the police and towards the Knesset. In the midst of the Knesset, amidst sounds of yelling and broken glass, rumours began to circulate that the police were using gas against the protesters. And the most inflammatory claim was the rumour that the tear-gas grenades were *made in Germany*. "The same gases that asphyxiated our parents!" yelled Menachem Begin, the leader of Herut, the opposition party that was opposing Maipai's reparations plans. (Segev 2000: 216; 217-19) Amidst implications that the police were 'gassing' Jews just as the Nazis did, the Knesset descended into chaos. When it reconvened the next day, Begin made a shocking speech calling the proposed reparations plan another "Holocaust." His speech warning against reparations concludes with outrageous claims:

I warn, but I do not threaten. Whom could I threaten? I know that you will drag me to the concentration camps. Today you arrested hundreds. Tomorrow you may arrest thousands. No matter, they will go, they will sit in prison. We will sit with them. If necessary, we will be killed with them. But there will be no 'reparations'

from Germany. May God help us all to prevent this Holocaust of our people, in the name of our future, in the name of our honor. (Segev 2000: 220)

Begin now goes so far as to claim that the Maipai government is actually (re)enacting a Holocaust—he predicts the emergence of ‘concentration camps’ and the killing of Israel’s Jewish citizens. The outrageousness of these claims—parallel, in absurdity, to that of the settlers in 2005—seems incomprehensible.⁷

Is such an incident merely an example of a vicious manipulation of emotionally charged rhetoric? Is it a cynical instrumentalization of Holocaust memory for the sake of power politics in the present? Or does the entirety of this complex scene—including its ‘repetition’ in 2005—require analysis as a site of traumatic cultural memory? One can see clearly a rhetorical manipulation of the discourse of memory—but to see this as merely rhetorical is to underestimate the popular passions that give such invocations such an affective—and effective—dimension. For the polemical, emotional, and affective dimensions of such an appeal to Holocaust memory still have currency: for over fifty years later, under very different circumstances, the armbands re-appear. The memory of the Holocaust is invoked again in 2005, where the armbands are dragged out of the costume box, in the context of territorial politics in the present. Does the present use the symbols of the past as a cynical rhetorical strategy in power politics? Or does the past exert some irrational force of repetition on the present?

While the armband costume traumatically repeats in Israeli anti-government protests, there is a key difference between the 1952 and 2005 mobilizations. For the settlers, the spectre of the second Holocaust becomes intertwined with material *territory*. Behind the apparent extremism of the settlers’ claims one finds the nationalist logic of

⁷ It is worth noting that long before Arabs and Palestinians were accused of attempting ‘another’ Holocaust, this same claim was made against the Israeli government—a claim repeated by the settlers in 2005.

cultural memory discourses that weave together history, national-collective identity and geography. How then does the spectre of the Holocaust, its repetition, become mapped onto Israel's borders—the Occupied Territories? What is the logic whereby the cultural memory of the Holocaust becomes *territorialized*? The question of territories hinges, of course, on the Six Day War of 1967—during which Israel initially captured what came to be called the Occupied Territories. As Mooli Brog argues, it is in 1967 that Israeli national identity became complicated based on the capture of new territories and populations. (Brog: 77-78) In what follows, I will briefly sketch certain transitions in the history and development of Holocaust awareness in Israel, as documented by various Israeli historians.⁸

Some Israeli scholars locate the origin of the concept of a “second Holocaust” in the anxious build up leading to the Six Day War of 1967. (Naor; Oren; Segev 2007) While a fear of annihilation had been present since the founding of Israel, it is in 1967 that this anxiety becomes explicitly linked, in public discourse, to the fear of a second Holocaust happening *within* Israel itself. As Arye Naor observes, this 1967 anxiety is inextricable from the after-effects of the 1961 Adolph Eichmann trial—a transformative site of Holocaust memory in Israel. (Naor 133) Many Israeli scholars agree that Holocaust memory was repressed in different ways throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s until the Eichmann trial inaugurated a fundamental shift in Israel's Holocaust awareness. (Segev 2000; Zertal 2005) Witness testimony provided intimate details in a personal context that reshaped Israeli memory discourses and provided an opportunity for

⁸ Given the space constraints of this essay, my analysis here will briefly synopsise work developed more fully in my dissertation.

Israelis to actually *identify* with Holocaust victims and survivors. (Yablonka 2004)⁹ In this powerfully affective context of identification, Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor in the Eichmann trial, articulated one of the first *territorial* versions of the ‘Holocaust lesson’:

All of us should bear the enormity of the Holocaust and its mandatory lesson for the nation’s retention of its country [...] the Holocaust could *recur* elsewhere and we must cling to this country, preserve and support *every stone and rock*, since it is our last refuge. (Yablonka 20-21; my emphasis)

A key precedent is set in this moment when the Eichmann trial inaugurates a new phase of Holocaust awareness in Israel (and elsewhere). For the possible *recurrence*—or repetition—of the Holocaust is linked to the need to preserve “every stone and rock” of the material territory. While most Zionist ideologies rely upon a territorial dimension,¹⁰ Hausner’s ‘lesson’ creates a new discursive and affective linkage between national-territorial identification and the fear of a *repetition* of the Holocaust.

A new ideological formation becomes possible on the basis of this anxiety: the *territorialization of Holocaust memory*. This emergent ideological intersection found one of its strongest manifestations in the arguments of Yitzhak Tabenkin, the ideological leader of the Kibbutz Hameuchad movement—a movement that was aggressively expansionist, and thus a precedent for contemporary settler groups. In a 1971 book reflecting on the *Lessons of the Six-Day War*, Tabenkin compared the Six Day War to the Ghetto Uprising in the Holocaust, and argued that the *pre-1967* borders had “brought a Holocaust upon us, the dangers of which are even graver than those of Hitler’s Holocaust.” (Naor 131-134) To clarify: the internationally sanctioned borders of Israel, as

⁹ It is on the basis of this *enabling of identification* that Yablonka contests Hannah Arendt’s view of the trial as a ‘show trial.’ (Arendt)

¹⁰ Not every form of Zionism: Ahad Ha’am’s Cultural-Spiritual Zionism provides an important conceptual alternative.

determined in the partition of 1948, are now *themselves* seen as ‘bringing a Holocaust’ against Jewish-Israelis. In Tabenkin’s logic, as analyzed by Naor,

Jewish settlement in the occupied territories would prevent a second Holocaust, and the danger of a second Holocaust was the ultimate justification for establishing settlements in all the newly acquired territories. (Naor 134)

Parallel to the logic of the settlers in 2005, the fear of a second Holocaust is transformed into a defensive identification with the borders of the occupied territories.

This ideological formation thus territorializes Holocaust memory through the material-discursive intertwining of national identity, political geography, and what can be viewed as *traumatic* cultural memory. In the psychoanalytic definition, traumatic memory blurs past and present, thereby projecting a traumatic history onto the present. While based on a desire to retroactively stop the traumatic event from happening, this traumatic form of memory can also ‘act-out’: unconsciously *repeating* traumatic violence. (Freud) Perhaps the cartographic logic—and violence—of the settlers can be analyzed as a form of traumatic cultural memory. For as Halbwachs argues, collective memories in search of stability insert themselves into physical spaces. Recent sociological work (Edkins; Alexander) uses a Foucaultian perspective to argue that traumatic memories are constructed through public discourses—discourses that create matrixes of collective and individual identification. From this perspective, we can critique the way that traumatic memory discourses blur past and present and manipulate the affective force of Holocaust memory to create over-identifications with territories.

The advantage of this perspective is that it offers provocative possibilities for *political memory work*: working-through traumatic history would therefore involve a de-territorialization of Israeli collective identity. And through this political memory-work,

Israel's conflicted relation to its own history intersects with its responsibility to its political other: the Palestinians. Addressing the role of cultural memory in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict depends upon this intersection: where Jewish-Israeli conflicts over Holocaust memory are intertwined with—or perhaps transformed into—territorial conflicts with Arabs and Palestinians. (Loubani & Rosen) Working towards peace and reconciliation therefore requires a form of political memory-work that dismantles the ideological fusion of traumatic history, national identity and political territory. At this intersection—where the history of the 'self' meets the demands of the political 'other' (Levinas)—the politics of memory is transformed into an ethics of the future.

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