

Israelpolitik. German-Israeli relations, 1949-69, by Lorena De Vita, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020, 256 pp., ISBN: 9781526147813 (hardback)

A popular idea about Germany is that it has dealt remarkably well with an impossibly barbaric past. Germans, so the idea goes, have applied their earnestness to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In doing so, they have supposedly managed to create an island of liberal democracy in a world where liberalism is on the decline.

A cornerstone of Germany's official identity as a liberal democracy that has learnt from its past is the close relationship it enjoys with Israel. Following a ritualised script, German politicians like to characterise this relationship as a 'miracle'. When politicians speak of miracles, one would expect of political scientists and historians to engage in the work of historical deconstruction, laying bare the interests, ideas, constraints and circumstances lying behind the seemingly miraculous. Perhaps surprisingly, this has only rarely been the case. Existing literature on the topic of German-Israeli relations has tended to copy the German narrative of moral relations born out of a German willingness to make amends (see for example Gardner-Feldman 1984, Lavy 1997, Hansen 2002). Recently, however, more critically attuned and empirically rich accounts have, in different ways, tried to correct the official narrative (Fink 2019, Marwecki 2020). Lorena De Vita's monograph forms part of these recent attempts to provide a more nuanced picture of a complicated, unusual and contradictory relationship. Her erudite history traces German-Israeli relations in their most crucial period, from 1949 until 1969.

De Vita's work differs from most other books and articles written on German-Israeli relations for two main reasons. First, the author is serious about studying *German-Israeli relations*. While focusing more on the West German side, her study is comparative in nature, devoting ample space to the Middle East policy of the 'other' Germany to the East. Secondly, De Vita has done more than just her homework as a historian. The author has sourced 31 different archives in Germany, Israel and the USA. Additionally, she has made use of numerous published archival sources, interviews with a handful of contemporaries, newspapers and biographies. All of this material has been condensed into no more than 230 pages of elegant storytelling.

The question providing the narrative arc is why West Germany and Israel would eventually forge a close relationship, whereas East Germany would come to be a supporter of Israel's adversaries. As she reminds us, this was not necessarily predetermined: at first, the Soviet Union had supported the creation of Israel. Weapon deliveries via Czechoslovakia had been important to the Israeli victory in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War that had followed upon the state's founding. On the other hand, West Germany could hardly be called a 'denazified' country at the time. As the Federal Republic's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, had said about former Nazi careerists in the diplomatic corps, 'if you have no clean water to wash with, you need to use dirty water'. Israelis were acutely aware of the Nazi continuities in Adenauer's 'new' Germany. In this light, it seems rather obvious that German-Israeli relations would emerge from a marriage of convenience.

De Vita situates 'the origins of the entente between West Germany and Israel, and the estrangement between the GDR and the Jewish state, within the context of the global Cold War.' (p. 208). Choosing the Cold War structure as the key explanatory variable makes sense, as it is best able to tie together an unwieldy narrative composed of different political logics, logics connecting the German-German competition with its respective politics towards the Nazi past to the conflict in the Middle East.

On the easily observable level, the two Germanies acted as polar opposites in the Middle East, each aligning with their respective superpower patron: West Germany acted in pro-Israeli fashion, East Germany in pro-Arab fashion. West Germany supported Israeli economically via the Reparations Agreement, as well as in terms of secret financial and military support (p. 156ff., 172ff). East Germany, which had less to give than its considerably richer big brother, came to support the Palestinian liberation moment and Israel's Arab foes both militarily and diplomatically. It is the history of West German support that is key to understanding why the young and fledgling Israeli state would gradually come to accept ever closer relations with West Germany. Perhaps, this element to the German story in the Middle East could have been emphasised a little more in the book.

Beneath the mirror-like opposition of the two Germanies in the Middle East lies a structural equivalence. As De Vita shows so well throughout her work, both Germanies privileged their often obsessive and pedantic struggle for mutual delegitimization, both saw the Arab-Israeli conflict primarily as an arena in which to advance their political and economic interests in the Middle East. And both came to weaponise the Nazi past on which both states were erected: 'West German officials, too, viewed the legacy of Nazism as something that could be used as leverage for political benefits — either to fend off East German attacks, or to resist Israeli pressure on troublesome issues. Indeed, the utilisation of the past was integral to the diplomatic efforts of both German states.' (p. 211).

The author expertly connects both Germanies' politics towards the past with the Cold War in the Middle East. About the fraught negotiations leading up to the Reparations Agreement, she writes that 'by finally accepting the American's recommendations to conclude the negotiations successfully, Adenauer attempted and managed to turn the legacy of the Nazi past from a political liability to an element that would emphasise how different (t)his Germany was from the one they had defeated in 1945.' (p. 41). Rehabilitation was an important element in West Germany's policy in favour of the Jewish state.

This may sound a little provocative to German politicians or academics invested in the moral narrative of the German-Israeli 'miracle of reconciliation'. But it is simply good history that politely transcends self-serving mythologies. Also, De Vita clearly prefers the constrained and contradictory West German path towards the Jewish State over the steadily increasing anti-Zionism of East Germany. The author dedicated her book 'to all those who can see the limits of any process of reconciliation and yet work relentlessly towards it'. This captures the spirit of her impressive study.

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