

# H-Diplo|RJISSF Commentary

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“The Long Shadow of World War II and the Holocaust—How the Politics of Memory are Shaping Public and Scholarly Narratives during the Israel-Hamas War”

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Essay by Sonja P. Wentling, Concordia College, Moorhead

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In the immediate aftermath of the 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas terrorists that led to the slaughter of over 1,200 Israelis (mostly Jewish, but also Arab, plus foreign nationals) and the capture of over 240 hostages (with over 100 still in captivity three months later), politicians, journalists, and scholars alike began searching their memory banks for analogies and comparisons to put these horrific events in historical perspective: it was another surprise attack like the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, Israel’s 9/11, Israel’s Pearl Harbor and a day that would live in infamy, and most poignantly, the largest pogrom against Jews since World War II.

This essay posits that the narrative of World War II and the memory of the Holocaust in particular, have shaped the rhetoric and discourse not just about the 7 October attack but also about the Israel-Hamas War in general. Israel has increasingly referenced World War II and the Holocaust to morally justify its war against Hamas in Gaza.<sup>1</sup> Reliance on the World War II narrative has also provided western governments like the United States and Germany with a frame of reference to support Israel’s ongoing campaign in Gaza despite a growing death toll among Palestinian civilians, a humanitarian crisis nearing epic proportions, and the looming collapse of civil society there.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, pro-Palestinian rhetoric has drawn on the World War II narrative to underscore the magnitude of Palestinian suffering at the hands of Israel through Holocaust inversion<sup>3</sup> that portrays Israel and the Jews as Nazis and Palestinians as the oppressed and

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<sup>1</sup> Press release by Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 24, 2023. <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/pm-netanyahu-meets-with-french-president-emmanuel-macron-24-oct-2023>. Adam Taylor, “Israel Leans into World War II Rhetoric to Justify Gaza War,” *The Washington Post*, November 1, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/01/israel-historical-comparison-world-war-two-ii/>

<sup>2</sup> Remarks by President Biden on the October 7<sup>th</sup> Terrorist Attacks and the Resilience of the State of Israel and its People, Tel Aviv, Israel. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/18/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-october-7th-terrorist-attacks-and-the-resilience-of-the-state-of-israel-and-its-people-tel-aviv-israel/>. Government statement by the Federal Chancellor on Israel, October 12, 2023.

<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/bk-government-statement-israel-2229864>. See Masha Gessen, “In the Shadow of the Holocaust: How the Politics of Memory in Europe Obscures What We See in Israel and Gaza Today,” *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-weekend-essay/in-the-shadow-of-the-holocaust> Gessen discusses how Germany “turned the reckoning with the Holocaust into its national idea.” It quotes historian Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, who argues that Germany’s singular focus on the Holocaust perceives historical “comparisons with other German crimes or other genocides” “as an attack on the very foundation of the new nation-state.”

<sup>3</sup> Manfred Gerstenfeld, “Holocaust Inversion: The Portraying of Israel and Jews as Nazis,” *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, April 1, 2007. <https://jcpa.org/article/holocaust-inversion-the-portraying-of-israel-and-jews-as-nazis/> Laurel Leff, “How the Nakba Has Eclipsed the Holocaust in U.S. Media Since October 7,” *Haaretz*, December 10, 2023.

suffering victims who are experiencing another Nakba (catastrophe, the first which occurred in 1948).<sup>4</sup> The politics of memory define the narrative about current events, and are used to justify war, violence, and ultimately claim moral authority. Furthermore, the rush by politicians and journalists to interpret and define these monumental events has also compelled historians to enter the public arena and issue words of caution against using or misusing history for political purposes. In fact, the Israel-Hamas War has led to an unprecedented response by the scholarly community in the form of op-eds and open letters that not only lay bare disagreements over the interpretation of present events but also bring into focus the role and responsibility of the historian and public intellectual in times of crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the first comparisons between the Holocaust and the massacres committed by Hamas were made by the victims themselves. Survivor May Hayat, who worked as a staffer at the Supernova Music festival in Re'im, related to the *Times of Israel* that when she and a friend were hiding from the terrorists, they invoked the stories of the Holocaust and how playing dead was the way to survive.<sup>6</sup> President Joe Biden visited Israel on 18 October and in his speech drew a direct link between the Hamas atrocities and the Holocaust, by calling October 7 “the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust” that “has brought to the surface painful memories and scars left by a [sic] millennia of antisemitism and the genocide of the Jewish people.” And Biden promised most dramatically that this time the world “will not stand by and do nothing again. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz promised Israel that Germany “stands firmly at the side of Israel,” because “our own history, the responsibility we bear as result of the Holocaust, make it our permanent task to stand up for the existence and security of the state of Israel.”<sup>8</sup> On 24 October, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told French President Emmanuel Macron that the 7 October attack was “the worst act of antisemitic violence since the Holocaust” and referred to the Hamas massacres as “Holocaust by Bullets,” invoking the German mass shooting of Jews in Babi Yar, near Kyiv, Ukraine in 1941.<sup>9</sup> And in an attempt to channel both British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt in their fight against Nazism, Netanyahu called the war against Hamas a

<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2023-12-10/ty-article-opinion/.premium/how-the-nakba-has-eclipsed-the-holocaust-in-u-s-media-since-october-7/0000018c-5328-db23-ad9f-7bf8c3be0000>

<sup>4</sup> Faruk Vele, “Why do Descendants of Jews Humiliated by Nazis Now Humiliate Palestinians?,” *Middle East Monitor*, November 9, 2023; Kyle Rempfer, “Israeli Operations Uprooted Palestinians in 1948: Many Fear a Repeat,” *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2023 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2023/11/03/israel-nakba-history-1948/>; <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231109-why-do-descendants-of-jews-humiliated-by-nazis-now-humiliate-palestinians/>; Raz Segal, “Israel Must Stop Weaponizing the Holocaust,” *The Guardian*, October 15, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/24/israel-gaza-palestinians-holocaust>; Raz Segal, “Statement of Scholars in Holocaust and Genocide Studies on Mass Violence in Israel and Palestine”, December 9, 2023, in *Contending Modernities*, Notre Dame University. <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/statement-of-scholars-7-october/>

<sup>5</sup> Omer Bartov, “What I Believe as a Historian of Genocide,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/10/opinion/israel-gaza-genocide-war.html?searchResultPosition=1>; “An Open Letter on the Misuse of Holocaust Memory,” *The New York Review*, November 20, 2023. <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2023/11/20/an-open-letter-on-the-misuse-of-holocaust-memory/>, An Exchange on Holocaust Memory. “An Open Letter on Hamas, Antisemitism, and Holocaust Memory,” *The New York Review*, December 8, 2023. <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2023/12/08/an-exchange-on-holocaust-memory/>

<sup>6</sup> Matt Lebovic, “Holocaust Scholars Weigh in on Politicians’ Comparisons of Hamas to Nazis,” October 29, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/holocaust-scholars-weigh-in-on-politicians-comparisons-of-hamas-to-nazis/>; Tia Goldenberg, “In Hamas’ Horrific Killings, Israeli Trauma over the Holocaust Resurfaces,” AP, October 15, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-holocaust-war-7a05336b15666e6306845cfa617b699>

<sup>7</sup> Remarks by President Biden on the October 7<sup>th</sup> Terrorist Attacks and the Resilience of the State of Israel and its People. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/18/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-october-7th-terrorist-attacks-and-the-resilience-of-the-state-of-israel-and-its-people-tel-aviv-israel/>

<sup>8</sup> Government statement by the Federal Chancellor on Israel, October 12, 2023. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/bk-government-statement-israel-2229864>

<sup>9</sup> Press release by Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 24, 2023. <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/pm-netanyahu-meets-with-french-president-emmanuel-macron-24-oct-2023>

necessary war to not just protect Israel, but to save the Middle East, Europe, and the world from barbarism. “ Hamas is the test case of civilization against barbarism,” he argued.<sup>10</sup>

Yet the invocation of the Holocaust also drew some mixed responses and outright condemnation. This included strong words from Dani Dayan, the chairman of Yad Vashem, when Israel’s ambassador to the UN, Gilad Erdan, and fellow delegates pinned a yellow star with the words “never again” to their jackets in an attempt to shame the United Nations Security Council into condemning the Hamas atrocities of October 7. Erdan stated that he was going to wear the yellow star “from now on” as a reminder of what it means to “stay silent in the face of evil.”<sup>11</sup> For him, the stars were “a symbol of pride, a reminder that we swore to fight back to defend ourselves.”<sup>12</sup> Dayan did not agree with this logic, arguing that the Jewish people were far more helpless during the 1930s and 1940s than they are today.

Avinoam Patt, director of the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Connecticut and Liat Steyr-Livny, associate professor of Holocaust, Film and Cultural Studies at Sapir College, have written against simplistic Holocaust analogies which trivialize the Holocaust, but in an essay published in the *Conversation*, they argued that the 7 October attack on Israel was “more than just the default associations of a people submerged in Holocaust post-memory....In seeking to describe the depths of evil they witnessed on Oct. 7, Israelis were making more than just an emotional connection between the Holocaust and the Oct. 7 massacres.”<sup>13</sup> Patt and Steyr-Livny pointed to the antisemitic eliminationist ideology of Hamas, the indoctrination of children in Gaza that is centered on the dehumanization of Jews, the brutal methods of torture and killing, the use of hostages in the killing process by forcing them to knock on houses to “lure” neighbors outside, and the terminology invoked by the Jewish survivors of 7 October as a “day of destruction.”<sup>14</sup> The authors concluded that while 7 October is not the same as the Holocaust, the eliminationist antisemitism of Hamas prevents a return to the pre-October 7 status quo of accommodation with Hamas.

In an op-ed for the *New York Times* on 10 November 2023, Omer Bartov, a prominent scholar of the Holocaust and Genocide Studies, issues his Cassandra call to heed history, warning of the potential for genocide beforehand rather than condemning it afterward. He points to the “deeply alarming language” of various Israeli government officials, including Netanyahu, who threatened that Gazans would pay a “huge price” for the actions of Hamas or the dehumanizing statement by Israel’s defense minister, Yoav Gallant, describing the war as one against “human animals.” According to Bartov, 7 October did not occur in a vacuum but was the culmination of decades of “occupation and oppression of millions for 56 years.” Over 2,500 scholars, he explains, signed his petition last August that warned against the Netanyahu government’s intent to “perpetuate the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.” Only a political solution, says Bartov, would

<sup>10</sup> Press release by Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 24, 2023. “We are in a war between barbarism and civilization. Chancellor Scholz, who visited Israel, said that Hamas are the new Nazis. And as in the Second World War, when the Allies fully supported the French anti-Nazi Resistance, today the international community is uniting in support of Israel. For Hamas barbarism not only threatens the Jews, it threatens the Middle East, it threatens the region, it threatens Europe, it threatens the world. Hamas is the test case of civilization against barbarism.”

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Mpoke Bigg, “Israel’s U.N. Ambassador Criticized for Wearing a Yellow Star of David,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/31/world/middleeast/israel-erdan-yellow-star-of-david.html>. Adam Taylor, “Israel Leans into World War II Rhetoric to Justify Gaza War,” *The Washington Post*, November 1, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/01/israel-historical-comparison-world-war-two-ii/>

<sup>12</sup> Reuters, “Israel’s UN Delegates Criticized for Wearing Yellow Stars as a ‘Symbol of Pride,’” October 31, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/israels-un-delegates-criticised-wearing-yellow-stars-symbol-pride-2023-10-31/>

<sup>13</sup> Avinoam Patt and Liat Steyr-Livny, “Holocaust Comparisons are Overused – But in the Case of Hamas’ Oct. 7 Attack on Israel They May Reflect More than Just the Emotional Response of a Traumatized People,” *The Conversation*, December 7, 2023. <https://theconversation.com/holocaust-comparisons-are-overused-but-in-the-case-of-hamas-oct-7-attack-on-israel-they-may-reflect-more-than-just-the-emotional-response-of-a-traumatized-people-218009#:~:text=We%20have%20written%20against%20simplistic,Hebrew%20word%20for%20catastrophe.>

<sup>14</sup> Patt and Steyr-Livny, “Holocaust Comparisons are Overused,” *The Conversation*.

put an end to the vicious cycle of violence.<sup>15</sup> In an interview with the *New Yorker* a few days later, Bartov implies that a moral imperative comes with the study of genocide, that is to look for the signs that genocide is going to happen, and “instead of waiting until something happens, it’s better to warn.”<sup>16</sup> He notes that the scale of the current war is different from anything that has happened before in Gaza. Bartov, while not accusing the Israeli government of committing genocide, is worried where the war may lead and how it has already changed both Israelis and Palestinians and detrimentally affected their ability to see each other as human beings.

Bartov’s position on genocidal intent and action is primarily focused on the rhetoric and actions of the Israeli government and calls on academics to be a voice of reason in the maelstrom of hurt, anger, hate, and vengeance that dehumanizes Palestinians: “It is time for leaders and senior scholars of institutions dedicated to researching and commemorating the Holocaust to publicly warn against the rage- and vengeance-filled rhetoric that dehumanizes the population of Gaza and calls for its extinction.”<sup>17</sup> In “An Open Letter on the Misuse of Holocaust Memory,” published in the *New York Review of Books* on 20 November 2023, Bartov together with other prominent scholars, including Christopher R. Browning, expressed “dismay and disappointment at political leaders and notable public figures invoking Holocaust memory to explain the current crisis in Gaza and Israel.” The letter urged public figures, including the media, to stop comparing “the crisis unfolding in Israel-Palestine to Nazism and the Holocaust,” since this obfuscates the complexities of the history between Israelis and Palestinians, erases nuance and further incites and provokes violence. The academics noted that it is “understandable why many in the Jewish community recall the Holocaust and earlier pogroms when trying to comprehend what happened on October 7—massacres, and the images that came out in the aftermath have tapped into deep-seated collective memory of genocidal antisemitism, driven by all-too-recent Jewish history.” However, viewing the horrors of October 7 through the lens of the Holocaust, so the authors argued, “obscures” both the roots of antisemitism today and the causes of the violence in the Israel-Palestine conflict. The letter by Bartov, Browning, et al., went further than just addressing the historical record but invokes the moral “responsibility” of academics “to use our words, and our expertise, with judgment and sensitivity,” to de-escalate the rhetoric and “prioritize speech and action aimed at preventing further loss of life.”<sup>18</sup>

The call for scholars to become activists, to condemn and prevent genocide, received an urgent endorsement by Raz Segal, associate professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Stockton University, and over fifty academics from institutions in the United States and abroad. In their “Statement of Scholars in Holocaust and Genocide Studies on the Mass Violence in Israel and Palestine since 7 October,” published on 9 December 2023, the academics wrote that they “feel compelled to warn of the danger of genocide in Israel’s attack on Gaza.” Their primary concern lay with both the rhetoric and actions of Israeli leaders that, according to the signers of the statement, “suggest an ‘intent to destroy’ Palestinians.” Citing dehumanizing language employed by Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories Maj. Gen. Ghassan Alian as well as incendiary language by various Israeli journalists on social media that called to “annihilate Gaza,” the scholars sound the alarm that “the time for concerted action to prevent genocide is now.” They called on governments “to uphold their legal obligations under the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide to intervene and prevent genocide” by implementing six specific actions that are ultimately aimed at shifting Israel’s focus from military solutions to political ones: 1. an arms embargo on Israel; 2. an end to Israel’s military assault on Gaza; 3. pressure on the Israeli government to stop the army and settler violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem; 4. demand for the continued release of all hostages held in Gaza, and all Palestinians imprisoned

<sup>15</sup> Bartov, “What I Believe as a Historian of Genocide,” *New York Times*.

<sup>16</sup> Isaac Chotiner, “How to Define Genocide: A Historian of the Holocaust Examines Israel’s Rhetoric and Actions in Gaza,” *The New Yorker*, November 16, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/how-to-define-genocide>.

<sup>17</sup> Bartov, “What I Believe as a Historian of Genocide,” *The New York Times*.

<sup>18</sup> Bartov et al, “An Open Letter on the Misuse of Holocaust Memory,” *The New York Review*.

unlawfully in Israel without charges or trial; 5. prosecution of Israeli and Palestinian war criminals by the International Criminal Court; and 6. the initiation of a political process in Israel and Palestine that is based on “truthful reckoning with Israeli mass violence since the 1948 Nakba and a future that will guarantee the equality, freedom, dignity, and security of all the people who live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.”<sup>19</sup>

To other scholars, however, Israel’s war in Gaza is one of military necessity, a war of self-defense not genocide. They argue that the warning of an impending genocide by Israel against the Palestinians seems misdirected, amounts to Holocaust inversion, and ignores the genocidal ideology of Hamas. In their response to Bartov’s open letter, historian Jeffrey Herf, who has written about Islamist Jew hatred and collaboration with Nazi Germany during World War II,<sup>20</sup> and a group of over thirty academics took a narrower look at the conflict by focusing on Hamas’s ideology of eliminationist antisemitism. In “An Exchange on Holocaust Memory,” published on 10 December 2023, the authors wrote that “the antisemitism of extermination, whether in 1941 or in 2023, includes dehumanization of Jews as well as the celebration and even recording of their murders as historic liberation from a global and existential enemy.” The letter categorically refuted the charge that placing Hamas in the line of a “reactionary tradition of Jew-hatred, racism, and terror,” is a misuse of history and memory.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Herf and fellow Holocaust historian Norman J.W. Goda not only placed the focus of the genocide accusation squarely on the ideology of Hamas and its massacre of Israeli civilians on 7 October, but also argued fervently against the “mischaracterization of Israel’s self-defense as genocide.” In a piece for *Quillette*, Herf and Goda concluded that establishing a connection between the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and the Holocaust “encourages what historians call ‘Holocaust inversion,’” whereby Israelis become the Nazis, intent on carrying out genocide, a charge that is not new and has been “a standard trope of anti-Israeli propaganda” for years. The authors agree with Bartov that the focus should be on how to minimize civilian casualties, but they disagree that a ceasefire with Hamas would be the desired means to achieve that. A ceasefire would “leave the Hamas leadership intact,” “allow Hamas to declare victory and to prepare for the next round of rocket fire and face-to-face killing,” and “consign Israel to live side-by-side with a terrorist state committed to its destruction.” Ultimately, for Herf and Goda, it is less about the characterization of Israel’s war rhetoric and actions than Israel’s right to defend itself and its citizens from destruction and delegitimization.<sup>22</sup>

In their response to Herf’s letter, Bartov and his colleagues affirmed their original statement that “warned against invoking Holocaust memory and history as a way to perceive and support the current war.” The authors reiterated that “framing the Gaza war as a war against Nazis, and the horrific events of October 7 as similar to the Holocaust, evades the fundamental issues underlying the conflict and disavows the role of the state of Israel in shaping them.”<sup>23</sup>

The memory of the Holocaust has cast its shadow over the discourse of the Israel-Hamas war—whether it is refuted or embraced. The specter of genocide has been raised as a warning of things to come or underlines the determination of never again. The charge over the use and misuse of history ultimately reflects a moral wrestling over notions of victim and perpetrator. Israelis lament that the world’s outrage at the brutality of the 7 October Hamas massacre of over 1,200 Israelis and the taking of over 240 hostages was rather short-lived and is no longer credited as a justification for Israel’s war against Hamas. In contrast, Israel’s war actions are under the microscope, and solidarity for Hamas as a Palestinian resistance movement has claimed the

<sup>19</sup> Raz Segal, “Statement of Scholars,” *Contending Modernities*.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> An Exchange on Holocaust Memory. “An Open Letter on Hamas, Antisemitism, and Holocaust Memory,” *The New York Review*.

<sup>22</sup> Norman J.W. Goda and Jeffrey Herf, “Holocaust Historians, the Genocide Charge, and Gaza,” *Quillette*, November 23, 2023. <https://quillette.com/2023/11/23/holocaust-historians-the-genocide-charge-and-gaza/>

<sup>23</sup> An Exchange on Holocaust Memory. Reply by the signatories of “An Open Letter on the Misuse of Holocaust Memory.” <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2023/12/08/an-exchange-on-holocaust-memory/>

narrative on college campuses and in pro-Palestinian demonstrations across the world. Yossi Klein Halevi, award-winning journalist and senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem,<sup>24</sup> who is a longtime proponent of Israeli-Palestinian co-existence, summarized this growing feeling of abandonment not just among Israelis, but many Jews in general, in an op-ed in the *Times of Israel* titled “The lonely people of history.” Halevi explains that “perhaps the most enduring wound for Jews from the Holocaust is the memory of aloneness.” But even with the establishment of a Jewish state, he continued, “there remained a lingering anxiety that the post-Holocaust-era of Jewish acceptance was an aberration and that someday we would once again be alone.” Halevi invoked “a moral disconnect,” with Jews still absorbing and processing the events of 7 October and the rest of the world being focused on Israel’s response and war actions that in turn have led to levels of antisemitism reminiscent of the 1930s. Where he sees “moral clarity” about the justness of the war, the world, and foremost the United Nations as the body representing the global community, points to the murkiness of history and the cycle of violence that preceded the 7 October attack. The politics of memory from Halevi’s perspective eschew complexity because in a time of war for Israel’s existence and survival, moral clarity must prevail. To Halevi, “the massacre was not a response to anything Israel does but to what Israel is.” He agreed that suffering of innocent Gazans “deserves the world’s urgent humanitarian attention, but not at the expense of moral clarity about the justness of this war.”<sup>25</sup>

Even in times of war, however, dialogue is not only possible but necessary. Despite Halevi’s impassioned piece in the *Times of Israel* about Israelis feeling abandoned and misunderstood, he continued his letter writing with an Arab friend, Egyptian-American author R.F. Georgy,<sup>26</sup> who responded to Halevi’s op-ed with a piece that focused on Palestinians as “the disposable people of history,” whose suffering and humanity are being ignored. Georgy readily condemned the barbarity of the 7 October attack by Hamas and understands Halevi’s point about the enduring wound of the Holocaust in Israeli society.<sup>27</sup> He expressed empathy with the Jewish fear of aloneness and abandonment, but he also pointed to another reality, western rhetoric and coverage of the Israel-Hamas War that has reduced the lives and suffering of Palestinians in Gaza to “an amorphous mass of undifferentiated misery, barbaric behavior, and agents of evil who are bent on the destruction of Israel.” Georgy also pointed to the dehumanizing language of Israeli leaders that “contained messages of vengeance and unmitigated destruction,” and issued a dire warning echoing the one by Bartov that “when you dehumanize another people, you make it possible to kill them en masse without having any moral doubt as to the rightness of your actions.”<sup>28</sup>

After corresponding via email for years, Halevi and Georgy met for the first time for a live conversation on NPR’s *On Point* with Deborah Becker on 21 December 2023, and confronted the underlying fear on both sides of the conflict, that is of becoming an abstraction. Georgy reiterated that he views the Palestinian people as the “disposable people,” whose suffering is that of an “amorphous mass” of people rather than individuals. “They are not fully formed human beings with narratives of their own.” Israeli suffering, on the other hand, he added, is about individuals, human beings who have families, and that’s how it should be, but it stands in stark contrast to the characterization of Palestinians. Halevi, on the other hand, expressed his fear that concern for Jewish suffering has faded altogether, that the Palestinian narrative has captured the progressive West and “we [Israelis] are not being seen anymore.” Ultimately, Halevi explained, each side, Palestinians and Israelis, is “experiencing this moment through the lens of its worst historical nightmare. For many Jews, October 7 was a throwback to the Holocaust. And for Palestinians, this is a throwback to the Nakba.”

<sup>24</sup> Yossi Klein Halevi’s most recent work, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor: A New Conversation about Narratives and Peace* (New York: Harper/Harper Collins Publishes, 2018), is an extension of an olive branch across the divide that separates Israelis and Palestinians, an invitation to dialogue that begins with listening to a Jewish story, his own.

<sup>25</sup> Yossi Klein Halevi, “The Lonely People of History,” *The Times of Israel*, November 12, 2023. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-lonely-people-of-history/>

<sup>26</sup> R.F. Georgy’s latest book, *Absolution: A Palestinian Israeli Love Story* (Syracuse, NY: Parthenon Books, 2014), is set to be adapted to a television series by Israeli director Eran Riklis.

<sup>27</sup> R.F. Georgy, “The Disposable People of History,” *The Times of Israel*, November 16, 2023. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-disposable-people-of-history/>

<sup>28</sup> Georgy, “The Disposable People of History,” *The Times of Israel*.

Historical analogies are never a perfect fit, and Halevi acknowledged that he did not like either of them, but “emotionally,” he insisted, “that’s what both sides are experiencing.... This is a moment where both sides feel they are in existential crisis.”<sup>29</sup>

This reference to emotions and primordial fears speaks to the power of traumatic events and catastrophes in defining the relationship between history and memory, and ultimately identity. It is no coincidence that the Holocaust is “still the primary, archetypal topic in memory studies.”<sup>30</sup> And over the past 75 years the Holocaust and its memory have assumed a central place in Israeli society and national identity. Dalia Ofer, the Max and Rita Haber professor emeritus of Holocaust and Contemporary Jewry at Hebrew University, argues that “the impact of the Holocaust on the consciousness of Israelis stemmed from its singularity and the dimension of the tragedy; its scale and outcome appeared ever more threatening as political tension in the Middle East increased.” For instance, Ofer explains that during the weeks of waiting leading up to the 1967 War, Israelis took Arab rhetoric that included threats of “destroying” Israel and “wiping” it from the face of the earth seriously and at face value, precisely because of the lessons learned from the Holocaust to “never consider such rhetoric as merely rhetoric.”<sup>31</sup> The Holocaust’s threat of annihilation is present in every war, most famously summarized in a quote attributed to the late Prime Minister Golda Meir and reiterated by Netanyahu in a 2006 speech to lawmakers: “If the Arabs put down their weapons today there would be no more violence. If the Jews put down their weapons today, there would be no more Israel.”<sup>32</sup> Israel’s institutionalized “meta memory” of the Holocaust, to “never again become a victim unable to fight its enemy,” has only become more dominant in recent years against the background of the Iran nuclear threat, growing anti-Israel rhetoric, and rising antisemitism around the globe.<sup>33</sup>

And yet, as Ofer points out, the Holocaust narrative in Israeli history is more complex and multifaceted and fully emerged in all its contradictions during the Six-Day War. While on the one hand it represents the fear of annihilation and the determination to survive, it also encompasses the dual reality that victory of one’s own people against enemies on multiple fronts also brought about the occupation of another. Ofer describes the experience of Menahem Shelah, who fought in the war and survived the Holocaust as a child, but felt “uneasy about being part of a victorious army,” when he saw the stream of Palestinian refugees who reminded him of the fate of European Jews and that of his own family during the World War: “When I saw parents dragging their children along by the hand, I actually almost saw myself dragged along by my own father.”<sup>34</sup> Hence,

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<sup>29</sup> “With long letters, how two writers—one Arab, the other Israeli—formed a rare friendship,” December 21, 2023, *On Point*, WBUR. <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2023/12/21/unexpected-friendship-between-an-arab-and-israeli-writer>. For further reading on how trauma has shaped responses on both sides see the analysis by Daniel Seidemann, “This War Is Wrought with Historical Trauma,” *Foreign Policy*, October 18, 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/18/israel-hamas-war-holocaust-nakba-historical-trauma/>. For further reading on the impact of the Holocaust and the Nakba on the narratives of both Israelis and Palestinians see: Grace Wermenbol, *A Tale of Two Narratives: The Holocaust, the Nakba, and the Israeli-Palestinian Battle of Memories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg eds., *The Holocaust and the Nakba: a new grammar of trauma and history* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). Basir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, eds., *The Holocaust and the Nakba. Memory, National Identity and Jewish-Arab Partnership* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute Press and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Claudio Fogu and Wulf Kansteiner, “The Politics of Memory and the Poetics of History,” in: *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. By Richard Ned Lebow, et al (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 286. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>31</sup> Dalia Ofer, “We Israelis Remember, But How? The Memory of the Holocaust and the Israeli Experience,” *Israel Studies*, Vol. 18, Nr. 2 (Summer 2013): 77.

<sup>32</sup> Meir’s statement resonated with Ukrainian soldiers in their fight against Russia as reported by Philissa Cramer, Kyiv-born Golda Meir becomes a symbol of hope for Ukrainians,” *The Times of Israel*, March 10, 2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israels-former-pm-golda-meir-has-become-a-symbol-of-hope-for-ukrainians/>

<sup>33</sup> Ofer, “We Israelis Remember, But How? The Memory of the Holocaust and the Israeli Experience,” *Israel Studies*: 82 - 83.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Near, ed., *The Seventh Day: Soldiers Talk about the Six-Day War* (Tel-Aviv, 1970), as quoted in Ofer, “We Israelis Remember, But How? The Memory of the Holocaust and the Israeli Experience,” 79.

identification with the refugees was also a consequence of Holocaust memory, and, together with Jewish history and Zionist ideology, Ofer explains, Holocaust memory “served both as a source of justification for ruling over belligerent Arabs and as a source of criticism of the occupation and the military rule imposed on the West Bank and Gaza.”<sup>35</sup> Omer Bartov’s *Genocide, The Holocaust and Israel-Palestine: First-Person History in Times of Crisis*, speaks to this complexity of Holocaust memory in Israel. Growing up in the young state of Israel that Bartov describes as a country, “where the Holocaust was all around us and yet never actually there,” led him on a “twisted path to Auschwitz, and back” before he understood his own coming to terms with the Holocaust and its memory. He addresses the “study, commemoration, and politicization of the Holocaust,” drawing from many of his previous publications, but also focuses on what he calls “uncomfortable yet clarifying connections...between the fate of the Jews in the Second World War and the plight of Palestinians on the eve and in the immediate aftermath of the establishment of the state of Israel.”<sup>36</sup>

The debate among scholars of the Holocaust and Genocide Studies is in many ways a reflection of the multifaceted legacy of Holocaust memory. Individual and collective memories of the Holocaust, whether in alignment with institutionalized meta memory or part of counter-memory traditions—personalized, politicized, or weaponized—are shaping the politics of memory about the Israel-Hamas War and are underscoring the historian’s task to continue the dialogue between the past and the present.

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<sup>35</sup> Ofer, “We Israelis Remember, But How? The Memory of the Holocaust and the Israeli Experience,” 79.

<sup>36</sup> Omer Bartov, *Genocide, The Holocaust, and Israel-Palestine: First-Person History in Times of Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 15 and 277.