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Lorena De Vita’s monograph deals with the relations between Israel and the two Germanies during a formative period, the years 1949 to 1969. The reviewers in this roundtable, William Glenn Gray, Hope Harrison, Asher Lubotzky, and Thomas Weber, are full of praise. Weber finds the book “brilliant.” Lubotzky notes that “Lorena De Vita succeeds in significantly enriching our understanding of these special and multifaceted relations.” Gray appreciates the fact that despite the volume’s slimness, it “delivers more than it promises.” Harrison holds that “Lorena De Vita’s book offers an engagingly written contribution to the growing body of literature.”

The reason for this praise is that De Vita’s study brings new arguments to the conversation. First, De Vita does not take the protagonists at their word. She does not accept that the German desire for repentance was the only cause for the friendship that was struck between West Germany and Israel. Nevertheless, as the reviewers note, De Vita deals with this emotion-laden topic with compassion and sensitivity. Thus, De Vita emphasizes the Cold War context in which the alliance between these countries took shape. To fully articulate the potential of this approach, De Vita borrows creatively from Lorentz Lüthi’s concept of “Cold Wars.” Lüthi’s model decentered the Cold War in seeing this era not as the story of a superpower conflict that was the driving force behind every event around the globe, but rather as the story of a host of regional conflicts that interacted both with each other and the clash between the Soviet Union and the United States.¹

As Weber notes, De Vita’s analysis highlights “the story of three interlocking conflicts: the German-German East-West conflict, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the struggle of both Germanies to come to terms with the darkest chapter of the country’s history.” As De Vita further elaborates in her response, gently pushing against existing interpretations, “as Israelpolitik shows, the dynamics related to conflicts that are usually studied separately, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East, or the German Cold War rivalry in Europe, not only overlapped but also influenced each other in ways that one cannot comprehend when analyzing them in isolation.”

The reviewers point out concrete examples of this linkage. For instance, Harrison observes that “East Germany was on the lookout to take advantage of every hiccup in West German-Israeli relations and was eager to use the developing ties between the two as a tool to persuade Israel’s Arab enemies to foster closer relations with East Germany.” Likewise, “with an eye on East Germany, as West Germany increasingly developed ties with Israel, it also hoped to maintain its ties with Israel’s Arab neighbors and prevent the GDR from gaining ground there.” This is the foreground for De Vita’s argument that the German-German conflict “sometimes willingly, mostly inadvertently, played a crucial role in polarising the Arab-Israeli conflict along East-West lines, and vice versa that Middle Eastern actors, too, fueled the bipolar rivalry.”

De Vita argues that Arab countries could use the German Cold War to their advantage forcing both Germanies to vie for the support of Arab countries. They could do that and face no retribution as exemplified by the invitation of Walter Ulbricht, head of the German Democratic Republic, by Gamal Abd al-Nasser, the Egyptian president, to Egypt in 1965. Israel, however, had less leeway as it could expect nothing from East Germany. Still, it had a veto power over West German integration into the family of nations. De Vita’s study also shows how that limitation worried and frustrated Konrad Adenauer, the first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, immensely. And not just him. There were others in the German government, such as Finance Minister Fritz Schäffer, who argued that Germany could not pay both the debts it owed to the West and restitution to Holocaust survivors.

As the reviewers note, De Vita is able to follow this triangular relationship by using multi-lingual and multi-archival source material from Germany, Israel, the US, the UK, and the Czech Republic. It is thanks to this

¹ Lorenz Lüthi, Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
creative use of archival documents, Gray notes, that “what De Vita presents is essentially an international history of the German-Israeli relationship during the years in question.”

Here and there the reviewers regret that De Vita did not do more to engage with the literature, or study additional archives, or cover a longer period. But there is also an understanding that there is only so much one can do within the confines of a single book. Therefore, on the whole, the reviewers celebrate the author’s achievement: De Vita took on a much-debated topic and an oft-told story, looked at it from a fresh vantage point, added additional sources, and introduced a new argument.

Contributors:

Lorena De Vita is Assistant Professor in the History of International Relations at Utrecht University, where she is leading two research projects: Holocaust Diplomacy: The Global Politics of Memory and Forgetting, funded by the Alfred Landecker Lecturer Programme, and Wording Repair, funded by the Dutch National Research Council (NWO). She has held affiliations at the Jena Center for Twentieth Century History at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena (Germany), the Richard Koebner Minerva Center for the Study of German History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel), and most recently at Oxford University (United Kingdom). She is the author of Israelpolitik: German–Israeli Relations, 1949–1969 (Manchester University Press, 2020; pbk: 2022), as well as scholarly and popular pieces published in International Affairs, Cold War History, Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte and The Washington Post.

Guy Laron is a Senior Lecturer at the International Relations Department in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Previously, he was a Visiting Assistant Professor at Northwestern University, and served as a Fellow at the University of Oxford and the Wilson Center. He is the author of two books: Origins of the Suez Crisis (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013) and The Six-Day War (Yale University Press, 2017). His op-eds and stories have appeared in the Guardian, The Nation, History Today, Haaretz, Le Monde Diplomatique, and the American Prospect.

William Glenn Gray is an Associate Professor of History at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. He is the author of Trading Power: West Germany’s Rise to Global Influence, 1963–1975 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), along with numerous articles and book chapters relating to German foreign affairs. With Thomas Schlemmer, he recently co-edited volume six of the German Yearbook of Contemporary History (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), dedicated to the theme “Secret Services and the International Arms Trade.”

Hope M. Harrison is Professor of History and International Affairs at The George Washington University in Washington, DC. She is a specialist on the Cold War, Germany and Russia and the author of Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953–1961 (Princeton University Press, 2003); After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present (Cambridge University Press, 2019); the audio book, The Berlin Wall: A World Divided (Great Courses/Audible, 2021), and many articles, including most recently, “Russia, the United States, Germany and the war in Ukraine: a new Cold War but with a dangerous twist,” Cold War History 23:1 (2023), 154-166.

Asher Lubotzky, PhD, is an Israel Institute Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow and a Scholar in Residence in the Department of Political Science at the University of Houston. He wrote his PhD dissertation, “Before the Apartheid Analogy: South African Radicals and Israel, 1948–1976,” at Indiana University. Asher’s scholarship focuses on Africa-Israel relations (with an emphasis on South Africa), Jews in Africa, Israel’s foreign affairs and global image, and different interpretations of Zionism.
Thomas Weber is Professor of History and International Affairs as well as the founding Director of the Centre of Global Security and Governance at the University of Aberdeen. He also is a Visiting Fellow of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University; an Associate Fellow of the Center for Advanced Security, Strategic and Integration Studies at the University of Bonn; and a member of the Security History Network at Utrecht University. His expertise lies in European, international, and global political history from the 19th century to the present. A native of Breckerfeld in Westphalia, he earned his DPhil from the University of Oxford. He also has taught or has held fellowships at Harvard, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Chicago, and the University of Glasgow. His books include, *Becoming Hitler: The Making of a Nazi* (Oxford University Press & Basic Books, 2017).
This is a slim, well-written book that delivers more than it promises. What might look like a bilateral study is actually triangular in nature; both East and West German interactions with Israel are examined in depth. And because the third side of the triangle, the bitter rivalry between Bonn and East Berlin, played out within a regional Arab-Israeli and global Cold War setting, De Vita brings in documentation from the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia. Even if the bulk of the material cited derives from political, diplomatic, and intelligence sources in Germany and Israel, what De Vita presents is essentially an international history of the German-Israeli relationship during the years in question.

De Vita is not the first to study West Germany's relations with Israel from the standpoint of the intra-German Cold War. Several features of Bonn's policies are well known: the decision to pay reparations in the form of industrial exports; the remarkably tight relationship between the two countries' defense ministries; the cautious refusal to establish consular or diplomatic relations for fear of exciting the anger of the Arab countries, which might have retaliated by recognizing the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as a second German state.¹ Yet De Vita creates the impetus for a fresh account by giving due attention to informal intermediaries—including Kurt Mendelsohn, who spent three months in spring 1950 quietly touring East and West Germany on Israel's behalf (16-19). Considering how secretive and personality-centered German policy was under Konrad Adenauer, De Vita's approach yields a more complete and compelling interpretation of the origins of the 1952 Luxembourg reparations agreement.²

More original still is De Vita's consideration of East German policy. Other scholars, including this reviewer, have treated the Ulbricht regime's relations with Israel as a gaping null set. East Germans bragged to Arab leaders about how little they engaged with Israel; and they steadfastly refused to pay reparations, insisting that their “anti-fascist” state was by definition not responsible for the crimes of the Third Reich. How can one speak of an Israel policy at all? Thanks to her skilled triangulation, De Vita can show that individual East German diplomats did seek out Israeli interlocutors—sometimes on the basis of prior acquaintance from the years before 1933. The Israeli side continued to press for reparations, calling out the flimsiness of East Berlin's excuses. For their part, East German officials summoned Jewish ex-combatants into service, sending them to Israel on occasions such as the 1963 anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (165-67). Attorney Friedrich Karl Kaul attended the trial of Holocaust planner Adolf Eichmann in 1961, demanding to assist the prosecution on behalf of East German Jews (138-44). Such ventures were designed to condemn the Federal Republic as a continuation of Nazism by other means, underscoring the embarrassing role played by Hans Globke—a jurist who had authored commentaries on the Nuremberg Laws—as Adenauer's chief of staff. Kaul's arguments were deeply cynical in light of the GDR’s own refusal to accept historical responsibility; yet they succeeded in stirring up hostile feelings in sections of Israeli public opinion.

De Vita's close attention to Israeli politics is another significant feature of this study. Certain anti-German outbursts are well-documented in the historical literature, such as the impassioned protests in 1952-53 against the acceptance of German reparations or the hostility shown to Bonn's first ambassador to Israel, Rolf Pauls, in 1965.³ But De Vita highlights a consequential debate in the Knesset in spring 1963, following dramatic revelations about West German scientists assisting Egypt's guided missile program. Founding Prime Minister

² See now also Jacob Tovy, Israel and the Question of Reparations from Germany: Post-Holocaust Reckonings (1949–1953) (Munich: de Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023).
David Ben-Gurion leaned heavily on the economic and growing military relationship with Bonn, yet he moved ahead of Israeli public opinion, and the semblance of West German perfidy helped to seal his political fate (160-64).

Nor did the complexity of West German-Israeli relations only make for domestic controversy. From the outset, Arab diplomats cried out vehemently against the Luxembourg agreement of 1952 (and its quiet renewal in the 1960s under the rubric “Operation Business Friend”). East Germans gleefully seized upon the opportunity to make friends in the Arab world. During the Suez Crisis, Foreign Minister Lothar Bolz fancifully demanded that henceforth Bonn’s reparations should be paid instead to Arab victims of Israeli aggression (92). Relentless campaigning served East Germany’s top priority, the pursuit of international recognition. They did not succeed during the time frame covered by De Vita’s study, though the government of Gamal Abdul Nasser did make room for an East German trade agreement (1953), a trade mission (1955), and a consulate (1959). At a time when the Eisenhower administration was trying its best to keep the Cold War from lining up with the Arab-Israeli conflict, the East Germans were actively fostering regional polarization. Even Soviet leaders reprimanded their East German counterparts for pushing too hard—a sign that Moscow, too, was not yet prepared to delineate the Middle East along rigid East-West lines (86-87).

The intensity of coverage in this study diminishes in the years after 1963—though De Vita does make room for a retelling of West Germany’s most notorious foreign policy debacle. When West German tank deliveries to Israel were exposed in the winter of 1964–1965, Nasser took revenge by inviting East German leader Walter Ulbricht to Cairo. Adenauer’s hapless successor, Ludwig Erhard, wanted to retaliate by breaking relations with Egypt—but the United States insisted otherwise in very strong terms. After several weeks of fumbling, including a humiliating decision to stop the tank shipments, Erhard finally hit upon a forward-looking reaction: the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel. De Vita is perhaps overly generous to Erhard here, claiming that he preserved “at least the façade of a West German position of autonomy, independence and power in the international domain” (188). Considering that ten Arab states broke relations with the Federal Republic, West Germany hardly came away looking more powerful—though the episode does underscore De Vita’s point about how the German-German rivalry propelled the Cold-War-ification of the region. Two years later, the Six-Day War gave the East Germans another enormous opening; alongside propaganda barrages against Israeli and West German “imperialism” came actual military hardware destined for Egypt and Syria (199-200).

De Vita’s study comes to a rather abrupt end. The choice of 1969 points to the diplomatic breakthrough that came when six countries (including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and South Yemen) opted to recognize the GDR formally; and also a change of government in Bonn with the advent of Willy Brandt’s chancellorship. These scenarios are only mentioned in passing, however, and the author might have done more to spell out the long-term consequences of German policy under Adenauer and Erhard. How did the furtive, under-the-table nature of West German-Israeli relations prior to 1965 create challenges for “normalization” in subsequent years? Bonn had, after all, long acted as if there were something shameful about establishing formal relations with Israel. Did this play into the far left’s radicalization on Middle Eastern problems in the late 1960s? East Germany’s constantly growing enmity toward Israel is, in that sense, an easier trajectory to follow: as De Vita notes, it intensified further in the 1970s with the opening of a Palestine Liberation Organization office in East Berlin.4

Throughout the book, De Vita carefully refrains from moralizing commentary, leaving the reader to reflect on the shocking audacity of East German propaganda. Denouncing West German reparations for the Holocaust was, as she rightly stresses, a “strategy” and not merely a rhetorical fig leaf (219). Perhaps it is true that the GDR lacked the financial wherewithal to pay its own reparations to Israel, as De Vita contends (209); but it

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was opportunism and not necessity that led Ulbricht’s government to echo and amplify the Arab world’s hostility to Israel. That any German government after 1945 could behave so callously toward Jewish survivors—or for that matter any internationally recognized state!—demonstrates a profound indifference toward the militaristic and genocidal actions of a great many Germans who still populated East as well as West Germany.
Lorena De Vita’s book offers an engagingly written contribution to the growing body of literature examining the history of postwar divided Germany in a holistic way instead of considering East and West Germany separately.¹ Her book is a great example of why looking at West German policy toward Israel alone makes no sense; East Germany was on the lookout to take advantage of every hiccup in West German-Israeli relations and was eager to use the developing ties between the two as a tool to persuade Israel’s Arab enemies to foster closer relations with East Germany. De Vita’s work thus also vividly demonstrates the interconnections between the Cold War in Germany and in the Middle East.

As the new states of East and West Germany, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), sought legitimacy on the world stage, their search for allies, as well as commercial and diplomatic ties, brought each of them into the conflict in the Middle East. With an eye on East Germany, as West Germany increasingly developed ties with Israel, it also hoped to maintain its ties with Israel’s Arab neighbors and prevent the GDR from gaining ground there. The complicated diplomatic rivalry between the two Germanys played out not only domestically but also in their foreign policies, bringing the Cold Wars in Europe and the Middle East into close contact.²

De Vita maintains that her book argues against the standard narrative that West Germany’s policy toward Israel, or Israelpolitik, was motivated by guilt for the Holocaust and that there were other equally important motivating factors, including US pressure and German commercial interests. I would argue, however, that at least since Thomas Schwartz’s 1991 book, America’s Germany: John J. McCloy and the Federal Republic of Germany, it has been clear that Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was driven by realpolitik.³ US High Commissioner McCloy impressed upon Adenauer that the best way to get international legitimacy for the new West German state was to confront the Nazi past—at least by extending restitution to Israel if not by going after former Nazis at home. Especially given the amnesties Adenauer increasingly issued to former Nazis, it was all the more important that he support Israel.⁴ While there were some West Germans who felt that it was morally important for the FRG to face up to the past and to offer significant restitution to Israel (as De Vita shows, Adenauer himself went back and forth on this), there were others (such as Finance Minister Fritz Schäfer) who were strongly against it, arguing that the FRG could not afford to do so, especially since it had to pay off the former Germany’s debts to the West, a story that De Vita describes in great detail.

The strength of De Vita’s book is the detailed yet clear narrative she creates of all the factors influencing the Israelpolitik of both West Germany (which is the more frequent focus) and East Germany, including morality,

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² On the Cold War being not just one conflict between the US and USSR but also multiple conflicts in various regions of the world, see Lorenz Lüthi, Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020).


realpolitik, commercial interests, and other factors. She combines this with an examination of the policies and interests of the Israelis, the Jewish Claims Conference, and the Arab League. She traces the impact of the Arab League on the tripartite West German-Israeli-Jewish Claims Conference negotiations leading up to the historic September 1952 Luxembourg Agreement on FRG restitution and on Israelpolitik afterwards. Loud and even violent critics within both the FRG and Israel and beyond were ultimately unable to stop the signing and ratification of the Luxembourg Agreement. The Arab League sought compensation for Arab Palestinians who had fled or were expelled during war with Israel, and they ultimately got some form of this with FRG donations to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA (115). Covert economic and military ties also continued or developed between the FRG and some Arab states even as FRG-Israeli ties grew closer, both before and after the FRG and Israel established formal diplomatic relations in 1965.

The book examines the approaches of both the FRG and the GDR to the 1960 trial of the top Nazi official in charge of planning the implementation of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann, in Jerusalem following the Mossad’s capture of him in Argentina (129-144), although it was not clear to this reader why the author observes that the FRG tried to get Poland to ask Argentina to extradite Eichmann to Poland and how this fits into her broader narrative (137). While others have examined the East and West German approaches to the Eichmann trial, their policies take on greater meaning in De Vita’s book, which places this key episode in the broader context of the Israelpolitik of both German states which sought to protect themselves and harm the other.

De Vita also tells a fascinating story about former SS and Wehrmacht members as well as Nazi scientists who were living in Syria and Egypt. Not only were they against any FRG-Israeli agreements, but the scientists were recruited by Egypt to help create long-range missiles for President Gamal Abdel Nasser that could reach Israel. As DeVita observes, “given that there was no missile work for West Germans, the Nazi scientists were attracted to the Egyptian program” (160). Nasser announced the program’s success in the summer of 1962, and the Mossad responded with Operation Damocles: targeted assassinations against the scientists and technicians who were involved (177-78). The FRG was then able to persuade some of the remaining scientists to return to Germany.

On the subject of German involvement in one way or another in Middle Eastern military conflicts, when it was leaked in late 1964 that the FRG had paid for US tanks to be sent to Israel via Italy, Nasser finally invited East German leader Walter Ulbricht to Cairo, something Ulbricht had long sought and the FRG had long tried to forestall. Upon Ulbricht’s arrival in late February, his first visit outside of the Soviet bloc, he was welcomed by 23 foreign ambassadors (180-85). Yet to Ulbricht’s chagrin, Nasser was only willing to support economic and cultural agreements with the GDR, not diplomatic recognition. Still, Ulbricht’s trip was worrisome enough for the FRG that Chancellor Ludwig Erhard finally supported establishing diplomatic relations with Israel and a freeze on economic aid to Egypt. Erhard also declared that the FRG would stop exporting lethal weapons to areas of conflict, a policy Germany only publicly overturned with the all-out Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (186-87). Once again, the Cold Wars between the two Germanys and within the Middle East were deeply connected.

De Vita notes that Moscow tried to forestall Ulbricht’s efforts to persuade Arab nations to establish relations with the GDR (86). The East German leader was eager to do all he could to expand the GDR’s status on the international stage and thus to gain at least some measure of external legitimacy even if he lacked internal legitimacy. Yet De Vita does not elaborate on why the Soviets kept “reining him in,” perhaps because Soviet policy is not part of her study although US policy is. This Soviet policy was likely influenced by at least three

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5 See Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s speech to the Bundestag, February 27, 2022.
factors: Moscow’s desire to expand its own ties (especially economic) with the FRG and thus not to support actions which might put that at risk; the Kremlin’s distrust of Ulbricht’s independent initiatives more generally; and Soviet wariness of GDR actions undermining important economic and military ties between the FRG and some Arab states.

After the clear victory of Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War, there was more of an appetite in the Middle East to expand relations with the communist bloc than with the allies of Israel such as the FRG. In 1969, six Arab states, including Egypt, recognized the GDR. In the same year, West Germany’s new government under Chancellor Willy Brandt ended the old policy of refusing relations with any state (other than the Soviet Union) that had diplomatic relations with the GDR, thus making it easier for countries who did not want to alienate the West to have ties with East Germany.

De Vita’s book relies on archival and other sources from both Germanys, the US, UK, Italy and the Czech Republic as well as some interviews with former diplomats and others who were involved in the events examined. There are, however, some sources that are missing or under-utilized. On the June 1953 Uprising in East Germany, De Vita cites Arnulf Baring’s 1983 book (101, note 23) instead of much more recent books that make use of archival sources, such as Christian F. Ostermann’s edited volume with documents on the uprising (which she does not cite) and works which make use of Soviet and East German documents, including this author’s own (which De Vita does cite but not on this topic). In addition, the text and notes contain a few typos and other mistakes. For example, it states that West Germany was established in March instead of May 1949 (13).

On the whole, this is a fascinating, well-written book. It will be of great interest to specialists on Germany, the Cold War, and the Middle East, and I can strongly recommend it to students and professors who are interested in these topics.

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Review by Asher Lubotzky, University of Houston

Israelpolitik provides a fresh perspective on the history of the first two decades of German-Israeli relations. While it is not the first account on the topic, Lorena De Vita succeeds in significantly enriching our understanding of these special and multifaceted relations. She achieves this by situating German-Israeli relations in the context of the global Cold War and the intra-German competition for global legitimacy. By doing so, Da Vita attempts to decenter the Holocaust as the sole—or even the primary—factor in shaping German attitudes toward Israel. Morality and emotions of postwar guilt, which are commonly regarded to as the main motivations of German policies towards Israel, are found to be of relatively minor importance in De Vita’s account.¹

Through an examination of a vast array of official documents (some of which are still confidential), press reports, and interviews, De Vita reveals that the West and East German policies towards Israel were inextricably tied to the two states’ respective efforts to consolidate their own contested sovereignties in the postwar era. While the German Democratic Republic (GDR) found new avenues of much-desired recognition in the Arab world, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) viewed relations with Israel as a means to cast itself as the only legitimate Germany, the one that acknowledged and had paid for its past sins. Paying reparations to the Jewish State was a way for West Germany to re-enter the “family of nations” at a time when Bonn had just been allowed to conduct a sovereign foreign policy.² According to De Vita, Bonn desired Israeli approval not just out of remorse or morality, but also because Israeli criticism of West Germany in international venues was precisely what Bonn wished to prevent. Prior to the 1952 reparation agreement, Israel had been protesting West Germany's legitimization efforts. In fact, Israel officially maintained a status of war with Germany, and Israeli passports stated their validity for anywhere in the world “except for Germany” (12). Israel was perhaps the only state outside the Eastern Bloc that constantly reminded the world of Germany’s recent past and protested normalizing Germany’s international status. Getting rid of this obstacle was one of the first sovereign actions Bonn took.

True to her commitment to understanding the role of Israel in Cold War intra-German rivalries, De Vita includes the GDR as a prominent actor in this history. This is a novel contribution, as East German relations with Israel have been understudied and generally omitted from discussions of German viewpoints on the Jewish State.³ De Vita’s inclusion of the GDR also provides an original and highly stimulating perspective on Israel's oscillation between East and West in its early years of existence. This East German perspective that is typically absent from existing scholarship.⁴

De Vita also highlights the fact that the dynamics inside the Eastern Bloc were more complex than the official version of harmonious relations between a Soviet patron and its satellite regimes. As De Vita shows, East German interests vis-à-vis Israel and the broader Middle East diverged from the Soviet line on several

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² See also Jacob Tovy, Destruction and Accounting: The State of Israel and the Reparations from Germany 1949–1953 (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2015).
occasions. The GDR identified remarkable opportunities to gain legitimacy in the Arab world, especially in Egypt, which were unavailable elsewhere outside the Eastern Bloc. De Vita explains how the GDR’s peculiar interests in the Middle East turned it into the most anti-Israeli voice in the Eastern Bloc.

There is much of interest in this monograph for scholars of the Arab-Israeli conflict. For example, De Vita underlines an important nuance about the pre-1967 foreign involvement in the conflict. While the GDR was vehemently anti-Israel, this did not mean that it was more pro-Palestinian than its Western counterpart until the 1970s. The GDR avoided relations with the Palestinians in an effort to stay out of intra-Arab rivalries, while the FRG was one of the world’s major donors to various organizations that aimed at “improving life conditions for Palestinian refugees.” (202).

While focusing on intra-German rivalry during the Cold War, De Vita’s narrative also provides an important contribution to the scholarship about the Middle East and its countries’ relations with the great powers during the Cold War. It is common to consider the US, France, and Great Britain as the main targets of Israeli diplomacy to sustain survival and procurement. But the West German role in facilitating the eventual (yet not inevitable) inclusion of Israel in the “Western world” as one of the most reliable allies of the West in the Middle East has not received enough attention. De Vita’s account helps to fill in this gap in the literature. Similarly, De Vita’s understanding that the West German-Israeli 1952 reparation agreement was crucial in the process of Arab disillusionment with the West is another important intervention that is usually absent from existing analyses of Arab nationalist leaders’ turn towards the Soviet Union.

Yet, there are several concepts that could have been analyzed in greater depth. Anti-fascism was a fundamental narrative for the three states (GDR, FRG, and Israel). While the author briefly refers to it (for example, 211), the question of how this narrative played out in this triangle has been left underdeveloped. It is not only that the FRG and the GDR accused each other of links to Germany’s Nazi past; their war of narratives also involved Israel. The quotation from East Germany which Israel was called a “Hitlerist aggressor” (199) during the 1967 war is not considered for its strong meanings in the context of intra-German rivalries.

Accordingly, the author underestimates the force of the Communist-Zionist quarrel, which was prevalent in the 1950s, regarding who should be viewed as the real anti-Nazi opposition and which political system would provide better protections and living conditions to Jews. This quarrel intensified at the height of the Stalinist persecution of Jews in 1952-53 (during the Prague Trials and the Doctors’ Plot). While De Vita mentions that anti-Jewish purges took place during these years in the GDR (58), she does not discuss their links to the broader schism between Israel and the Eastern Bloc (and between Zionism and Communism) during this time.

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A few other aspects of the relations, at least when the GDR was concerned, perhaps deserve more attention. For instance, the role of Israeli Communists in the GDR’s calculations regarding Israel is underrepresented. De Vita provides interesting anecdotes in this regard (esp. 109-110), but Israeli Communists’ role was deeper and longer and probably affected East German views of the Jewish state more than is described here. Additionally, as a scholar of African-Israeli relations, I would have appreciated a brief consideration of how Israeli-East German relations played out on the African continent. In the 1960s, Israel competed with smaller Eastern Bloc’s states over influence in post-colonial states and development projects in Africa. Was this historical drama important in the grand scheme of German-Israeli relations? Perhaps this is a worthwhile topic for a future project.

There is a natural flow to De Vita’s writing that is quite engaging. Myriad anecdotes, concise paragraphs, and appealing sub-divisions make the book a literary joy, which is uncommon for the genre. The book is not without minor inaccuracies (such when Deputy Minister of Defense Shimon Peres is depicted as Israel’s minister of defense in the early 1960s, [159]). Nonetheless, the combination of a thorough study and an engaging literary style is impressive, yielding a masterwork that is both informative and captivating.

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For Chancellor Angela Merkel it was all a miracle. In 2015, looking back on fifty years of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany, Merkel declared: “We can look back on what we have achieved and, without exaggerating, call it a miracle.”\(^1\) The historian and political scientist Lorena De Vita is less sure than Merkel about designating the coming together of former perpetrators and victims of the Shoah a miracle. In her brilliant _Israelpolitik: German-Israeli Relations, 1949–69_, she instead points to “the contradictions and dilemmas that characterized so much of German and Israeli foreign policy during the 1950s and the 1960s” (208) and yet produced a historic rapprochement between Israel and the Federal Republic.

In her book—which covers the period between the post-war establishment of the two Germanies in 1949 and 1969, the year that a Social Democratic Chancellor first took over the driver’s seat of West German politics—De Vita invites us to refocus our attention away from an atonement-centred approach. Rather than describing the history of German-Israeli relations in the wake of the Holocaust as a tale marked, first and foremost, by a struggle between the apostles of atonement and their adversaries,\(^2\) De Vita persuasively does something different. According to her, the history of German _Israelpolitik_ is the story of three interlocking conflicts: the German-German East-West conflict, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the struggle of both Germanies to come to terms with the darkest chapter of the country’s history. The conflicts in this triangle of struggles are interlocking to a degree that we cannot possibly understand any of them in isolation from each other. All three conflicts are functions of each other. This is one of the reasons as to why De Vita tells the history of East and West German approaches to Israel in tandem.

De Vita tells her story graciously and beautifully. It is refreshing to read a book on Germany’s struggles to come to terms with its past, and on the Middle East conflict, that manages to engage critically with the existing scholarship and to advance an original argument without ever going low and without resorting to insinuations. Her book goes along a way in restoring our faith in the kind of respectful yet hard-hitting academic conversation and discourse that is necessary to break new ground on contentious issue as well as to depolarize academia and to give its traditional mores a new lease of life. _Israelpolitik_ is indeed a great read on a difficult subject. The book of the Utrecht-based scholar is based on prodigious legwork in more than thirty archives in five countries as well as on oral history interviews.

De Vita’s book is full of wonderfully revealing episodes, such as one that occurred at Wassenaar on the Dutch coast in 1952 during the secret West German-Jewish-Israeli negotiations which culminated in the Luxemburg Agreement on German reparations. She describes the tense atmosphere in which the negotiations started and the painfully slow process of translating the conversation of the negotiators between English and German, even though the mother tongue of all negotiators was German. But then on the second day of conversations, Otto Küster, the second-in-command of the West German delegation, passed a note to Felix Shinnar, the head of the Israeli delegation, that read: “I think I detect a Swabian accent in your English. Am I right?”\(^3\) Soon the two men realized that they had in fact attended the same school in Stuttgart, only one year apart. With that realization, the two men had ceased merely being adversaries in one of the twentieth century’s most painful diplomatic negotiations. They sat down together to write a postcard to a teacher who

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2. For an atonement-centered approach, see, for example, Kathrin Bachleitner, “The Path to Atonement: West Germany and Israel after the Holocaust,” _International Security_, 47, no. 4 (Spring 2023): 79–106.
had taught them both and of whom they both had fond memories, and subsequently tried to find common ground in their negotiations.

De Vita puts gripping episodes of this kind in the service of telling the story of how one Germany responded, despite false starts as well as many twists and turns, positively to the Israeli request for restitution of German crimes against Jews under National Socialism, while the other rebuffed Israel. It is the story of West Germany ultimately establishing full diplomatic relations with the new state in the Middle East, while East Germany engaged in anti-Israeli propaganda, which was often steeped in deep traditions of antisemitic conspiratorial thinking, and steadfastly refused to recognize Israel. While this is of course a story that is well known, the motivations and drivers in that story are not.

For De Vita, the history of Israelpolitik is at its core a Cold War story, even if the legacy of the Shoah was constantly on people’s mind when dealing with Israel and the Middle East. As she demonstrates, any engagement of the two Germanies with Israel was indeed structured by how each Germany negotiated the legacy of National Socialist crimes. However, while this structured each state’s foreign policy towards Israel, it was not the all-dominant or primary driver. As De Vita argues, German policy makers’ primary concern in dealing—or not dealing, for that matter—with Israel was how to improve their respective state’s position in the Cold War. And, yet, how they went about doing so was structured by the legacy of Germany’s Holocaust-era crimes. As she writes, “no other country presented German representatives with such complexity in seeking to reconcile past legacy with present interests” (211).

Israelpolitik presents, at least in part, a utilitarian, transactional interpretation of Germany’s approach to its dark past. As she argues, policymakers were willing to weaponize the past, if necessary: “Indeed, the utilisation of the past was integral to the diplomatic efforts of both German states,” De Vita writes. “Discourses on the past could, and did, serve very important functions in the international domain—and they could be, and were, used as a tool against international competitors” (211). In other words, it was their struggles with their respective nemeses in the German-German and the Arab-Israeli conflict that determined the behavior of Germany and Israel towards each other. This is why De Vita contends that “the interplay between Arab-Israeli hatreds and Cold War dynamics ran deeper and started earlier than is generally understood” (213). As “the whole German-German Cold War complex” clashed with “the Arab-Israeli conflict” (6), West and East German policymakers and representatives, as De Vita argues, “sometimes willingly, mostly inadvertently, played a crucial role in polarising the Arab-Israeli conflict along East-West lines, and vice versa that Middle Eastern actors, too, fueled the bipolar rivalry” (4).

De Vita’s book breaks new ground in explaining why it took so long for full diplomatic relations to be established between the Federal Republic and Israel. Initially, there had of course been little appetite in the new Jewish state to strike up official relations with the successor of the state that had tried to kill every single Jew living in its orbit. However, opposition to entering into official relations persisted in West Germany far longer than it did in Israel.

According to De Vita, a confluence of the doings of actors with often contradictory or even antagonistic goals meant that it took until the mid-1960s for full diplomatic relations between West Germany and Israel to be established. They include the old Arabisten in the West German foreign policy establishment who had already served in the foreign service during the Third Reich and had tried at the time to bring about global

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jihad against the adversaries of Nazi Germany, other West German actors, and East German ideologues as well as operatives thinking in terms of traditional power politics.

De Vita lays out how, between 1949 and 1969, the old Arabisten continually tried to undermine any attempts to strike up closer relations with Israel, always stressing that a German-Israel rapprochement would drive the Arab world into the arms of East Germany and thus weaken Germany politically and economically. De Vita, however, leaves it to future research to determine the exact extent to which their pre-1945 political convictions drove the Arabisten in the 1950s and 1960s. Figuring out how much their pre-1945 ideological beliefs still structured their behavior is a task well worth pursuing, not least since the post-1949 warnings of the Arabisten also resonated with people with deep contempt for the Nazi world of ideas. Yet if people with clear anti-Nazi credentials were receptive to their warnings, we also would have to investigate the possibility that at least some of the old Arabisten had disassociated themselves from their pre-1945 ideological convictions and yet believed for different reasons that striking up close political relations with Israel may undermine West Germany geopolitically and economically.

The East Germans also had their hand in the West German reluctance to formalize relations with Israel. Just as with the Arabisten, it is difficult, however, to measure the exact degree to which East German actions slowed down the process of West German-Israeli détente. At the very least, West German diplomats and policymakers were always worried that any decision they took on Israel might strengthen the geopolitical position of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Yet reading De Vita’s book, one starts to wonder how well the East Germans had actually been playing their cards. A common feature of the East German attempt to woo Arab countries was to stress the close bonds between West Germany and Israel, and to engage in fierce anti-Zionism. And yet, the Arab states recognized the GDR only relatively late and more importantly, once they did do so, they did not really damage West Germany. As De Vita puts it, “in focusing so centrally on anti-Israeli and anti-West German propaganda for the Arab world, the [The Socialist Unity Party of Germany] SED regime lost sight of the multiple channels that Bonn’s (often economic) diplomacy was pursuing in the region, managing to reach out simultaneously to Israel, the Arab states and the Arab League” (202).

The very least we can say is that the warnings of the old Arabisten found a receptive audience amongst policymakers and the general public, who shared an existential anxiety about West Germany’s geopolitical and economic position within the context of the Cold War, whatever their political beliefs had been before 1945. For that reason, even Konrad Adenauer, the West German chancellor, himself often tried to slow down, or even backpedal on, West Germany’s rapprochement with Israel. In the West German imagination, Israel became “a Cold War liability” (71), with the result that for a while, the Israeli government grew so frustrated that it instructed all the Israeli diplomats stationed abroad not to respond to invitations from West Germany. Just as with the Arabisten, the warning of the East German ideologues also resonated with people with deep contempt for the Nazi world of ideas. Yet if people with clear anti-Nazi credentials were receptive to their warnings, we also would have to investigate the possibility that at least some of the old Arabisten had disassociated themselves from their pre-1945 ideological convictions and yet believed for different reasons that striking up close political relations with Israel may undermine West Germany geopolitically and economically.

Adenauer’s successor as West German chancellor, Ludwig Erhard was even willing to receive Egypt’s leader,  

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Gamal Abdel Nasser, while refusing to welcome Israeli President Levi Eshkol, citing as the reason that West Germany did not officially recognize the State of Israel.

There is a problem, however, with accounts that, unlike De Vita’s, focus unduly on opposition to rapprochement to make sense of German-Israeli relations in the second half of the twentieth century. There are seemingly a million reasons as to why full diplomatic relations between West Germany and Israel were only established in the mid-1960s. In fact, it would be easy to use the very same million reasons to write an alternative history in which full diplomatic relations would not be established for several more decades to come. And yet, the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel did establish full diplomatic relations in 1965. And it is maybe here where the miracle lies, namely that rapprochement happened in the face of seemingly insurmountable opposition. Maybe Merkel was right after all to call the coming together of the Federal Republic and Israel a miracle. And perhaps precisely by focusing on the contradictions and dilemmas of the 1950s and 1960s, Lorena De Vita has in fact written a book that supports Merkel’s take on things. Israelpolitik is most exciting when identifying the drivers of the coming together against the odds of West Germany and Israel, and when presenting the protagonists of German-Israeli rapprochement.

One of the primary achievements of De Vita’s book is indeed to show how West Germany and Israel grew progressively closer in the 1950s and the 1960s, even when tension and a reluctance to enter into full diplomatic relations was the order of the day. Initially the Israeli government had to fly under the radar when fostering closer links with Bonn, and subsequently it was the Germans who for domestic and foreign policy reasons had to fly under the radar when building bridges with Israel. As De Vita demonstrates persuasively, it was from the mid-1950s that West Germany and Israel entered into a deep security partnership that for the first few years of its existence was so secretive that even most German diplomats, including West Germany’s ambassador to the United States, were unaware of it and denied its existence. The deal, arranged by Israel’s future President Shimon Peres and then-Secretary of Defence Franz-Josef Strauss, saw close intelligence collaboration, the shipment of military equipment to Israel, and the West German training of Israeli military personnel at a time of almost constant existential military crisis.

One of the book’s main accomplishments is its demonstration, contrary to the conventional view in the scholarship, that the secret military and security arrangement between West Germany and Israel was not so much a result of US pressure on Germany to provide military support to Israel. Rather it originated in West Germany itself, even if Adenauer and others officials, for self-serving reasons, would encourage at times the false reading that West Germany had been pressured by the United States into providing support to Israel. It is here that De Vita’s gracious approach to making her case and to engaging with the scholarship of others almost works against the book’s argument. She only politely and fleetingly stresses how much her focus on the domestic West German drivers of the emerging security and military links go against the scholarly grain.

There is more to be said about the West German drivers of the early rapprochement with Israel, much more than could possibly be presented within the scope of this book. Learning more about the agents of change, who, in the face of seemingly insurmountable opposition, pushed on anyway and ultimately prevailed, will allow us not only to understand how Israelis and Germans managed to come together, but will also enable us...
to understand more broadly how repair after conflict is possible. And this will help us to bring into sharper focus the critical role of individuals and their initiative in explaining why repair after conflict succeeds in some cases but not in others, when everything else is more or less equal.

It is thus to be hoped that De Vita or other scholars will explore the motivations and the world of ideas of the protagonists of the West German-Israeli rapprochement and reconciliation. We need to know, for instance, what drew Felix Shinnar and Otto Küster together when they wrote their postcard to their former teacher, beyond the realization that they had attended the same school. What were the worlds of ideas that they and other negotiators and policymakers inhabited? Where did they converge, where did they diverge? Did their respective normative ideas about repair after conflict have common roots? How did their respective religious beliefs—in their Jewish, Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic incarnations—structure and drive their attitudes towards repair after conflict, at a time at which wars and disasters were no longer seen as divine punishment but as humanmade? Did their own involvement in the crimes of the Third Reich determine the way in which German negotiations and policymakers and decisionmakers dealt with Israel? What was the process in which National Socialist promises of deliverance had turned into stories of contamination? What is the extent to which that their engagement with Israel was a consequence of their disassociation with their pre-1945 beliefs? Lorena De Vita’s most remarkable Israelpolitik has superbly laid the groundwork for answering these questions.
Response by Lorena De Vita, Utrecht University

I cannot begin this response in any other way than by expressing my heartfelt thanks to Diane Labrosse for her patient and determined spearheading of this H-Diplo roundtable, to Guy Laron for his thoughtful introduction, and to William Glenn Gray, Hope Harrison, Asher Lubotzky and Thomas Weber for the time and effort they spent engaging with the arguments I make in the book and for their compelling reactions to Israelpolitik. It is very encouraging that the reviewers endorse my reassessment of German-Israeli relations in the aftermath of the Holocaust as an international history.

Israelpolitik places the building of German-Israeli ties in the wake of the Holocaust in the international historical context in which they developed, one in which mutually influencing conflicts played out between a variety of different actors, at both global and local levels. The book engages with the geostrategic tensions of that time, and explores the role of the legacy of the past in the conduct of international affairs.

The pursuit of archival and oral history research in locations as diverse as Berlin, Jerusalem, Abilene (KS), Prague, Washington DC, Koblenz, London, Independence (MO), Cologne and Acre—among others—was crucial to my reassessment of this difficult and complex history. It is therefore rewarding to receive recognition for the “legwork” that went into the research necessary to write this book, and which took me to very different settings indeed—from a retirement home outside Tel Aviv for an unforgettable conversation with the first Israeli ambassador to Germany, Asher Ben-Natan, to the many days spent at the vast complex of the former Lichterfelde barracks in Berlin, which house part of the Federal Archives, which had been recently thoroughly and stylishly renovated, thereby rendering my memo of the former Lichterfelde barracks in Berlin, which house part of the Federal Archives, which had been recently thoroughly and stylishly renovated, thereby rendering my memories of those long archival visits historical in themselves.

The reviewers raise a number of important issues about various aspects of the book’s argument that can be grouped into five thematic areas, which I will address in detail below. Before doing so, however, I want to acknowledge, as Harrison and Lubotzky point out, that despite much effort to correct them, typos remain in the manuscript. As a matter of course, any inaccuracies, flaws or errors in the book are my responsibility alone.

Israelpolitik, Realpolitik, Moralpolitik?

Historians, political scientists, and students of German and Israeli foreign relations have long been debating the relative weight of factors pertaining to moral and strategic considerations in German-Israeli relations after the Holocaust. It is no coincidence that a crucial collection of documents published on the topic by

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1 As a first-time author whose monograph came out at a very difficult time—just a few months after the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic—I am particularly grateful.

Yeshayahu A. Jelinek is titled Zwischen Moral und Realpolitik, thus portraying a history of relations oscillating between morality and realpolitik.\(^3\)

The debate started long before that publication, and in many ways it persists today.\(^4\) Importantly, this historical issue can also have implications for fundamental International Relations questions, such as: what motivates states to act in the way they do on the global stage? Is it the pursuit of their interests in the international system, or (also) other factors, such as the pursuit of ideas, ideals, and the search for legitimacy within international society?\(^5\)

What has proven to be so puzzling for many is that relatively quickly after the Holocaust Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany became close partners across a variety of domains. How can one explain this astonishing historical process? Of course, Harrison is right to point out that Thomas Schwarz’s 1991 monograph, America’s Germany, went a long way to explaining the strategic considerations that are central to West Germany’s foreign policy.\(^6\)

Nevertheless, my book aims to move beyond the “morality vs realpolitik” debate as it has unfolded until now within the historical, political science, and memory studies literature that deals with German-Israeli relations. Israelpolitik appreciates and aims to reflect the complexity of the empirical historical evidence available in a variety of archives across Europe, the Middle East, and the United States.

My book shows that the building of German-Israeli relations in the aftermath of the Holocaust unfolded in ways that cannot possibly be captured in a dichotomic fashion. By shifting the perspective to include both West and East Germany as well as Israel, and triangulating the evidence, one gets a much more complex picture. This should not be taken to mean that pre-existing literature on the topic is flawed; on the contrary, in writing Israelpolitik I was truly standing on the shoulders of scholarly giants. Still, I was interested in complicating existing historiographical narratives by adopting a different perspective, employing an international historical approach.

Engaging with the historical evidence is so crucial because the sources show that key individuals could, and did, simultaneously hold conflicting convictions and identities; that state interests changed with time; that the memorialization of the past matters on the international political stage; and that humans, policymakers included, are unsurprisingly contradictory, ambivalent and complex creatures.

How Can an International Historical Approach Expand our Understanding of the Building of German-Israeli Relations in the Aftermath of the Holocaust?

The comments of Gray, Harrison, and Lubotzky highlight the relevance of such an international historical approach in three main ways. The first relates to the importance of taking the German-German rivalry seriously when writing this history of German foreign relations in the Cold War era. Including the German Democratic Republic (GDR)—its diplomats, its propagandists, its lawyers—in the picture, as well as the

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\(^4\) In addition to the literature cited in fn. 1, a helpful overview is provided by Benyamin Neuberger, ‘Israel und Deutschland: Emotionen, Realpolitik und Moral’, Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte 4 April 2005, Israel und Deutschland: Emotionen, Realpolitik und Moral | Deutschland und Israel | bpb.de.


\(^7\) For an overview, see Patrick Finney’s definition in his “Introduction: What is International History?” in Finney, ed., Palgrave Advances in International History (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1-35.
Federal Republic of Germany, meant taking seriously the agency and, to the extent possible, also the life stories of the actors who became involved in the building and framing of German-Israeli relations.\(^8\) Even though states such as the GDR and Israel entertained no relations, the history of such ‘non-relations,’ too, is composed of the personal and family stories of people who now found themselves representing countries that were at odds with each other (131-33).

The second move involves tracing how conflicting interpretations of the past resounded on the international stage. This also means recognizing Israel’s own role in intra-German rivalries. There is certainly room for further research in this direction, in particular to appreciate the presence and influence of Middle Eastern actors in historical episodes that the historiography has thus far viewed from a merely intra-European perspective.

Finally, my book proposes an appreciation of the “regional Cold Wars” as having been not distinct but interlocking. As Israelpolitik shows, the dynamics related to conflicts that are usually studied separately, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East, or the German Cold War rivalry in Europe, not only overlapped but also influenced each other in ways that one cannot comprehend when analyzing them in isolation.\(^9\) It also sheds light on crucial questions of the agency and involvement of countries that have traditionally been regarded as less powerful in the international system, both in Europe and the Middle East.\(^10\)

What Kind of Power Dynamics Emerge When Analyzing the Israelpolitik of the Two German States in the Early Cold War Period?

Focusing on the agency of the two German states—even at times when they were engaged in a quest to gradually gain greater sovereignty—is a crucial feature of my analysis. Indeed, as Weber notes, outlining how the security ties between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel developed in this period (especially during the Adenauer–Ben Gurion era) is a crucial part of this endeavor. With Israelpolitik, I aimed to contextualize the development of those relations, defying teleological narratives and instead grasping the contingent nature of the developments that led to what analysts often refer to as the ‘special’ or ‘unique’ relationship between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel.\(^11\)

Placing those developments in the historical context in which they occurred was a crucial driver for me when writing the book. And I could not but be surprised to see how certain actors, and certain periods, were somehow forgotten within policymaking circles. While Gray may have a point about my view of Chancellor

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\(^8\) My engagement with the GDR and its international history both stems from and reflects recent changes in the writing of Cold War historiography, German history over the second half of the twentieth century, and in GDR historiography more specifically. Kerstin Brückweh, Jane Freeland, Mario Keßler, Ned Richardson-Little and Daniel Siemens, “What’s Next? Historical Research on the GDR Three Decades after German Unification,” German History 41:2 (2023), 279-296.


\(^11\) On the definition of the relationship between the Federal Republic and Israel as “unique” or “special,” contrast David Witzthum, “Unique Dilemmas of German-Israeli Relations: A Political Avoidance of Tragedy,” in Shahram Chubin, ed., Germany and the Middle East. Patterns and Prospects (London: Pinter, 1992), 55-92, along with with Lily Gardner Feldman’s The Special Relationship between West Germany and Israel (Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1984). Mentions of uniquely strong ties between the two countries are frequently employed by members of the political elites in the public domain, as demonstrated, for example, on the occasion of the recent visit of former Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid to Germany. Bundesregierung.de, “We are friends,” 12 September 2022, “We are friends” (bundesregierung.de).
Ludwig Erhard’s management of the 1965 diplomatic crises, I was struck by how the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel did not even mention Erhard or Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, who were in charge when these diplomatic relations were finally established, and instead focused on narratives that highlighted the—surely important, but preceding—roles of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Prime Minister David Ben Gurion.

From a historiographical perspective, tracing the growing entente between small(er) states—relatively young and isolated countries back then—is a crucial contribution to a Cold War historiography that often still focuses on the two superpowers. Recognizing and tracing the initiatives of the West and East German states, as well as Israel, including those that were at odds with the policy priorities of the superpowers of that time, is especially important in this regard. This also explains some of the friction that existed then between the United States and the Federal Republic, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and the GDR, on the other.

The competing interests of the actors within the Eastern and Western blocs emerge quite clearly from the study of the policies of the two Germanys vis-à-vis the Middle East. This analysis is also revealing of the power dynamics within the Soviet bloc, as Lubotzky notes, and Harrison explains. Tensions between the allies also became clear at crucial historical junctures, such as during the trial of former SS-Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann in Israel (1961). What I meant by including that episode, to answer Harrison’s query, is that the trial remains a crucial turning point not only for those who are interested in the history and politics of international justice, or historical memory, but also for those who study the dynamics of the Cold War as they unfolded in the early 1960s.

How Do Individuals Matter in this History of German-Israeli Relations, and in the Writing of Diplomatic History More Broadly?

It is especially encouraging to find that all the reviewers appreciate the inclusion of individuals whose names have not featured much in history books until now—among them spies, lawyers, negotiators, agitators, weapons producers and procurers, and secretaries. Gray notes how distant this is from a large part of the literature, which often focuses on the “secretive and personality-centred” nature of German-Israeli relations at that time.

The stories of hitherto neglected individuals, who were in many ways at the heart of German-Israeli relations, feature in the book alongside those of more traditional diplomatic actors. For they, too, were diplomats of a kind, and Israelpolitik shows that including their experiences and perspectives are crucial for “dissecting the diplomatic imagination” of that time.

Pushing the boundaries of which sources could be considered insightful in writing the history of German-Israeli relations was therefore a crucial part of the endeavor. It meant recognizing that, for example, the female secretaries stationed in key West German embassies at volatile junctures—such as Moscow in 1955 or Tel Aviv in 1965—would have something meaningful to share, and that their insights could be relevant to understanding both those specific volatile diplomatic crises, as well as some of the key political figures in West Germany whom these then young female secretaries had carefully, respectfully, and more or less


silently, observed throughout the long years they spent working closely together—including Chancellor Konrad Adenauer or the controversial Hans Globke.

1. Photograph taken during the oral history interview with Johanna Müller, former secretary of Chancellor Adenauer. Scattered photographs on the table show the chancellor during meetings and downtime, accompanied by his personal secretaries. Photograph by the author.

As Weber and Lubotzky highlight, Israelpolitik also raises questions about how biographical trajectories, convictions, ideologies, and world views carried forward from the first half of the twentieth century into the second, shaping dynamics of closeness or distance, overcoming boundaries or choosing not to. The schism between Zionism and Communism mentioned by Lubotzky is a case in point, and more research is needed to fully portray the role of Israeli Communists, as is the case with the West German Arabisten, among others. Taking seriously the experiences of men and women whose roles in office were perhaps modest is crucial to distilling the perceptions, and ideas, that were at play within the historical context of that time. From a granular perspective, it is also necessary to further engage with the legacy of biographical experiences, as noted by Weber. And not just those of the key leaders in charge, but also of individuals who had lesser roles yet were at the heart of German-Israeli relations after the Holocaust.


16 This approach informs upcoming work on the topic, such as the PhD thesis of Irit Chen, tentatively titled “The Purchasing Mission in Cologne between Israel and Germany, 1953–1965,” at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
What Are the Questions That Have Thus Far Remained Underexplored and Deserve Attention in Future Research?

From an international historical perspective, my reading of the history of German-Israeli relations allows for mapping how various aspects of that relationship also reverberated in other settings and locations, as exemplified, among others, by West German-Israeli cooperation projects in Togo or Bolivia in the early 1960s (155). Lubotzky is right in calling for more research on the African dimension(s) of German-Israeli ties, and on Africa (among other regions and fora, I would add also the United Nations) as a prime location of German-German and German-Israeli competition—or, in the aforementioned example, cooperation.

Further primary evidence from both Israel and the Arab world will also add crucial pieces to the historiographical puzzle of the ambivalent history of West German-Israeli reconciliation and East German-Israeli estrangement, and will allow scholars to map the broader entanglements of this crucial chapter in the history of European-Middle Eastern relations. Notwithstanding my attention to, and inclusion of, sources from Soviet and Czech archives, the inclusion of more sources from Soviet bloc countries, as referred to by Harrison, will also be crucial. 17

Israelpolitik calls for historians to contribute to our understanding of what, in the past, was the unforeseeable and unpredictable, and to do so by bridging domains that are often treated separately: East and West, Arab and Israeli, pragmatism and morality, formal and informal, personal and political, domestic and international.

To echo the words of Charles Tilly and Robert E. Goodin, “how political processes actually work and what outcomes they produce depend heavily on the contexts in which they occur.” 18 And contexts, ultimately, are made of people, their beliefs and their experiences.

Going back to the archives, taking seriously other actors beyond the usual (diplomatic) suspects, and expanding our understanding of what sources to use when tracing that complex history involves much effort. But it is one that is worth making, if we are to understand the “miraculous,” to paraphrase German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and to unpack the formerly unpredictable.

This is a history whose legacy is still very much present. Harrison is right to link the current Zeitenwende as announced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in 2022 to the fateful—and back then heavily criticized—decision of Chancellor Erhard to stop any federal exports of lethal weapons to areas of conflict, six decades ago. Those early years, too, witnessed the unfolding of specific learning processes that were going to be crucial in the international domain, and we need more research to understand that crucial early period, whose legacy is still visible today.

17 In this regard, it is very inspiring to see the work done by members of the Cold War Research Group established by Jan Koura at Charles University in Prague: https://cwrg.ff.cuni.cz/index.php/en/about/.