

**Michman, Dan: Holocaust Historiography – A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues.** London–Portland (Oregon) 2003, pp. 303-328.

**Summary: The Relationship between the Holocaust and the Middle East Conflict**

*In a paper on German-Israeli relations of November 2006, which was also called “Manifest”, a group of German peace researchers and political scientists, myself included, argued that Germany bore not only historical responsibility for the Holocaust but also (via the change in the demographic “correlation of forces” in Palestine through Jewish immigration resulting from Nazi persecution in the 1930s) for the escalation of the Middle East conflict and the ensuing tragedy of the Palestinians. In several variations of articles I qualified this reasoning by putting immigration in the 1930s in the broader context of the history of the British Mandate and of European nationalism, anti-Semitism, and colonialism. After reading Dan Michman’s chapter on “The Relationship between the Holocaust and the Birth of Israel” and after doing more research on Jewish immigration in Palestine, I would like to qualify this argument even further. Here are my conclusions:*

1. Historical responsibility for the Holocaust (the murder of millions of Jews) lies essentially with Nazi Germany. This requires (among other things) **a special responsibility of Germany** today to support the rights of Jews to live in peace and security in Israel and elsewhere. (This has never been in doubt, and I repeat it only because of a few highly unpleasant misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the original document.)

2. Historical responsibility for the Middle East conflict lies essentially with Europe, its nationalism, anti-Semitism, and colonialism. While there are many connections between the Holocaust and the Middle East conflict (particularly in the realm of legitimation and legitimacy), the material-historical relationship is important yet not decisive. So there is a special **European** responsibility to try to mediate in the conflict and to support not only the right of Israel to exist in peace and security, but also the political and human rights of the Palestinians.

3. Current responsibility for the Middle East conflict rests essentially with the major conflicting parties themselves, with the regional powers and the United

States playing important secondary roles and the rest of the international community (mainly the EU and Russia) in a much less relevant tertiary role. There is room for legitimate controversy about the respective responsibilities of Israel and the Palestinians. In my view, Israel's continuation of the settlement programme beyond the borders of 1967 and the continuing denial of Israel's right to exist among important segments of the Arab and the Islamic communities are the major obstacles to an agreement and to the end of violent conflict.]

[Other points which may need further discussion, but are not related to my recent research:

1. Much of the criticism in the "Manifest" of Israel's decision to go to war against Lebanon and of the war's conduct (from a position of friends of Israel having its best interests in mind) has essentially been corroborated by the debate in Israel itself. Yet the document may have underestimated the threat to Israel from radical Islamists.
2. Criticism of constraints on the discussion in Germany in the "Manifest" may also need qualification – in both directions.]

### **1. Michman's Analysis**

Michman approaches his subject in a very systematic and comprehensive manner, and he has no obvious axis to grind. He pleads for historical objectivity, a plea which I would only use with a large grain of salt, since I consider it one of academia's ambivalent rituals: if you claim to be objective, then by implication all the views which you reject are not. Michman is not fond of the Post-Zionists, so much seems clear to me, he is more of a conventional historian; yet I find his analysis very solid and quite convincing. He integrates a lot of fairly recent Israeli historiography from the 1990s in Hebrew, which I don't read, unfortunately; and he is just as critical – or analytical – of some Zionist or quasi-official Israeli views or assumptions as he is of others.

I found no radical surprises (with one potential exception, see below on Soviet decision-making); in general, I consider my position – which puts the birth of Israel and the Middle East conflict in a broader context than the Holocaust (and

by implication German responsibility) – confirmed, even though Michman does not directly deal with the conflict itself and certainly not with the origins or the context of the mandate. His topic is the relationship between the Holocaust and the birth of Israel, which is related but not the same.

The following two conclusions from Michman's chapter seem the most important to me:

a) The controversy about the relationship between the holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel is *not* one between Jews on the one hand and non-Jews on the other, quite to the contrary; it is a highly controversial issue among Zionism and in Israel as well. A large section of Michman's criticism is directed against what he calls Zionist or Israeli (national) mythology, which not only legitimizes Israel with the Holocaust and the fight of many Jews alongside the Allied Powers against Hitler – for both see the Israeli Declaration of Independence, e.g. —, but in several cases (even if in different traditions) establishes a direct causal connection: it can be a religious connection (as with Misrachi Zionists) or a secular one (as with some Post-Zionists or even Zionist historians such as the famous Yehuda Bauer and his followers). I quote:

“(...) The *Wiedergutmachung* (reparations) negotiations and agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany in the early 1950s were based on the understanding that the State of Israel was the natural heir of the Jews murdered in the Holocaust. Gradually, especially from the 1960s onwards, Israel's image worldwide and in internal Israeli and Zionist interpretations of Jewish history and fate became linked to the Holocaust – by secularist educators, historians, lay people and religious thinkers (...) The fact that this mythical perception was so powerful and became widely accepted in Jewish circles and elsewhere very quickly proves, in my eyes, that for many people it satisfied an inner need to invest history with meaning. This ‘meaning’ of the Holocaust (with a ‘happy ending’) provided some solace for the tragedy of the past and justified massive self-mobilization for the collective ideals of the State especially when Israel had to contend with growing opposition beginning in the late 1960s.” (p. 317)

The Arab side has its own mythologies, one of which Michman analyses in the same kind of friendly ideological criticism (i.e. myths or rather *some* myths have at least some foundation in reality, and are understandable, useful and perhaps

even respectable collective interpretations of origin and purpose): If the basis for the establishment of Israel was the Holocaust as a major reason for the Western strategy of “imposing the Jews on Palestine”, then what could the Arabs do? This myth helps to preserve Arab honour and to lessen the pain resulting from their own historical catastrophe. When I call this kind of mythology understandable and even respectable, I don’t want to imply that it is good and healthy; it may be healthy in some respect, but certainly not in general: it is a placebo, not really good medicine. Usually, even benign myths lead to serious mistakes in the relationships to others, particularly in conflicts.

(Other much less benign Arab or Islamic myths exist, which Michman mentions but does not discuss at great length: e.g., that Israel and the colonial powers used or use the Holocaust as a hoax to legitimize their “imperialism”.)

b) As for the material historical connections between the Holocaust and the birth of Israel, Michman discusses several on the Jewish/Israeli side (particularly immigration and manpower as well as motivation) and in international decision-making.

As far as immigration between the end of WW II and Israeli independence is concerned, Michman focuses on Yehuda Bauer’s (and his school’s) famous argument about the importance of the DPs (Displaced Persons). He disputes Bauer’s conceptualization of the connection between the Holocaust and the DPs, arguing that Polish anti-Semitism after the war, which was responsible for a large number of new Jewish refugees, had nothing to do with the Holocaust, it was based on traditional eastern European local anti-Semitism. Many Jews also left and went to US-directed DP camps in Germany or directly to Palestine, because they could not re-establish themselves economically and/or because of the general insecurity at the time in Poland.

As for international decision-making, Michman points out that the issue of the DPs did not make the Americans vote for a Jewish state but for a bi-national one, at least at first. He also argues, based on archival research, that decision-making in the UN was “wholly uninfluenced by the issue of the Holocaust, let alone by guilt feelings”, both in the period between the UNSCOP committee vote (which did not give the pro-Zionist proposal a two-thirds majority) and the General Assembly vote and before this November 1947 link: “What finally tipped the

scales at that moment were general issues related to the beginnings of the Cold War, the decolonization process, a certain Christian pro-Judaism (in some cases), other minor considerations, and a series of mistakes made by the British and the Arabs.” (p. 310)

I had never considered that, at the time, the issue of decolonization was working in favour of partition and a Jewish state, at least in some places – one more of the many ironies in the history of the conflict. And I had not known that the Soviets – this is also based on new archival material – “started to link the effects of the Nazi persecution of the Jews with the establishment of a Jewish state as early as 1943. This was not (only) due to considerations related to the onset of the Cold War, but because the Soviet Union did not want the burden of uprooted Jews in its sphere of influence after the war.” (p. 320) [*The sources are one in Hebrew and Y. Ro'i, “The Soviet Recognition of Israel: In the Light of New Soviet Archival Sources”, in: Sh. Aronson (ed.), New Records – New Perspectives, Jerusalem 2002, pp. 179-188.*]

As for Jewish motivation, Michman argues that the Zionists’ decision to “go for the state” was influenced by the British White Paper of 1939 and the Biltmore Conference in the US in 1942 more than by the Holocaust which had not been open knowledge by then. In general, he points to the ambiguous effect of the Holocaust on Zionism. On the one hand, the Holocaust strengthened Zionism, but more among Jewry than in international decision-making. The major rivals within Jewish nationalism disappeared, they no longer existed physically, and many formerly non-nationalist Jews came to support Zionism because of the Holocaust. After all, the Yishuv was one of the few Jewish centres which had remained intact. At the same time, Zionism had been greatly weakened, because of the murder of eastern European Jewry, its mainstay.

In summary, there *are* many connections between the Holocaust and the birth of Israel, but they are stronger on the Jewish (and ambivalent) than on the international side. “Israel was established neither as a colonial trick nor as a ‘reparation gift’ to the Jews from the Western world as compensation for the Holocaust (p. 321).”

“(…) most important, of course, were some general factors. We have mentioned the general process of decolonization, which in Britain was accompanied by

weariness of international affairs after the demanding years of World War II. Then there was the general Arab weakness, with the additional reservations evoked among the Western powers by the role played by the Mufti as a fanatical supporter of Hitler during the war. And then there was what actually happened when war broke out in Palestine after the UN resolution in 1947. The Yishuv infrastructure, developed over decades by the Zionist movement, was of major importance. Another factor was the capability demonstrated by Israeli diplomacy and military experts to obtain sufficient finances and supply routes for the newly established army despite a UN-imposed embargo. Moreover, immigration by many Jews from oriental countries shortly after independence helped to stabilize the state.” (pp. 320-321)

Let me add here that Rashid Khalidi, while not denying unfavourable asymmetries, is making a strong point of Palestinian and Arab co-responsibility for their own misery, presently as well as historically. (In his new book: *The Iron Cage. The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*, Boston 2006.)

My personal conclusions from the chapter are ambivalent. On the one hand, I have become more reluctant to accept (or take seriously) some of the vehement criticisms of the “sin” of establishing the connection between the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel (and by implication the Middle East conflict), particularly since it is so strong in Zionist and Israeli discourse itself. The problem is the implication, which is difficult to accept for many Israelis (or Jews in general), by no means for all, maybe not even for a majority. Quite independent of the question of a *causal* connection and the debate about it, the moral and political symbolism (even if sometimes misused for domestic or nationalistic purposes which Michman freely admits) of Israel as a haven for Jews is so obvious and legitimate – after all the Holocaust confirmed Herzl’s worst presentiment fears – that a *special responsibility for Germans and for Germany* to accept and support this general idea (even if it is part of a national mythology), particularly to strongly support the rights of Jews to live in peace and unharmed in Israel and everywhere else, remains beyond any doubt. (This has never been disputed by the “Manifest” group; quite to the contrary, the original document emphasized it strongly. The debate is about the best and most legitimate ways to secure these rights.)

On the other hand, I have also become more reluctant to hold on to one of the central points in the original statement, which is German responsibility not only for the Holocaust but also for the Middle East conflict, and this despite of what I consider two weaknesses in Michman's chapter.

## **2. Potential Weaknesses in Michman's Position**

First, I believe Michman downplays the influence of the Holocaust on world public opinion (excluding the Arab countries or region) and on political decision-making in "the West" relating to Palestine and the emerging/existing conflict between the Yishuv/Israel and the Arabs: sympathy for the Jewish fate in light of the sheer horror of the Holocaust and thus by implication the Zionist cause and yet also fear of anti-Semitism in case of immigration by (too many) survivors, DPs, or new Jewish refugees. At least three important Western sources establishing a direct connection between Nazi persecution of the Jews and the importance of a Jewish state in Palestine come to my mind: the British White Paper of 1939, Franklin D. Roosevelt in his talks with Ibn Saud in 1944, and a statement by John F. Dulles to Lebanese politicians in the early 1950s. I do accept, however, that these kinds of considerations were not decisive. So I agree with the basic thrust of Dan Michman's argument: Western (including Soviet and "Southern", we easily forget the role of South American states in the UN) support for the division of Palestine and thus for a Jewish state was not a kind of "reparation".

Secondly, Michman mentions immigration in the 1930s in connection with the Holocaust. He does this in the context of one of his major conceptual arguments, which is the time frame in the research on the relationship between the Holocaust and the birth of Israel. Actually several renowned researchers let the Holocaust begin in the 1930s, i.e. they regard the early discrimination and persecution as part of it. In fact, the central point in the original "Manifest" was not the Holocaust in its narrow sense. We argued that Nazi persecution *in the 1930s* had been a decisive factor in the development of the history of the Middle East conflict, with immigration from Germany considerably changing the demographic correlation of forces in the region and thus contributing to the final escalation and the war.

Unfortunately, Michman does not re-integrate the discussion of the "early phase" of the Holocaust into his general theme. I don't think he would dispute the fact

and the effect of immigration in the 1930s, both Jews and Arabs were aware of its importance to their respective political goals. I would like to add several empirical and conceptual qualifications to our original argument, however.

### **3. The Issue of Jewish Immigration in the 1930s**

#### a) General (and uncontroversial) Observations

Reliable and detailed data on immigration in Palestine in the 1930s are not easy to get, it is a highly charged subject and the data are used in different analytical and political contexts. Several basic facts seem uncontroversial, though: The “fifth aliya” (the wave of Jewish immigrants in the 1930s) brought about 200.000 Jews into Palestine (net immigration) between 1932 and 1938. Immigration was particularly strong in the four years between 1933 and 1936, changing the “correlation of forces” between Jews and Arabs in the region significantly; in 1932 Jews represented close to 18 percent of the population in the British Mandate, in 1939 around 30 percent. There is also broad evidence that both sides were aware of the importance of this change.

#### b) The National Composition of Immigrants

At first glance, it also seems that this wave of immigrants was a result of the first phase of the Holocaust. I give two representative quotations:

“As German dictator Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party rose to power, about 144.000 Jews, primarily from Germany, immigrated to Palestine in the early 1930s to escape increasingly ruthless persecution.” (msn encarta, Israel)

“Between 1933 and 1936, more than 164.250 Jews fled Germany and entered Palestine, thus doubling the size of the Yishuv.” (*David E. Lipman, The Jews in Palestine respond to Nazi anti-Semitism and genocide, 1929–1945*, [www.myjewishlearning.com/history](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history). In light of what I have to say later, this is definitely wrong. It should say: “more than 164.250 Jews fled *Europe*”.)



In the early 1930s, people in the Yishuv itself often thought of the fifth aliya as the “German aliya”, the „aliya of the Jeckes“; yet the data speak differently. (*Mordecai Naor, Eretz Israel. Das 20. Jahrhundert, Tel Aviv 1996, S. 178*). Many historians from various perspectives put the share of Germans in the immigration of the 1930s between 15 and 25 percent. Abu-Diab has about 120.000 immigrants in 1933-1935, with slightly above 18.000 from Germany. According to Yehuda Bauer, 20 percent of the immigrants in 1933-1938 came from Germany. (Both cited in Lenni Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators. 13: Choosing the Chosen People – The Doctrine of “Zionist Cruelty”*, [www.marxists.org/history/](http://www.marxists.org/history/). The article is from the *Middle East Archive* of the *Encyclopedia of Trotskyism*, so it does represent an unusual point of view. Yet the tendency does not influence the presentation of the data mentioned.) Timm writes the share of German, Austrian, and Czech immigrants, which usually had been around 2.5 percent, suddenly rose to about 25 percent in the early 1930s, and even up to 55 and 71 percent in 1938 and 1939. By then the absolute figures had decreased significantly, however, and Timm adds that towards the end of the 1930s the German-speaking Jews were still a small minority in the Yishuv. (*Angelika Timm, Israel. Geschichte des Staates seit seiner Gründung, Bonn 1998, p. 32f.*). Meier-Cronemeyer emphasizes that even in the strongest year of immigration less than 6000 German citizens immigrated to Palestine. (*Hermann Meier-Cronemeyer, Geschichte des Staates Israel 1, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Schwalbach 1997, p. 91.*)

So one might as well discuss, why – compared to the events and perspectives in Germany – so few German Jews emigrated to Palestine. (For most Jews in Germany, more than for Jews from Eastern Europe, emigration to Palestine would in all likelihood have meant social decline. Most were strongly assimilated German Jews, and they hoped the worst would soon be over. And while the Nazis at first supported Jewish emigration – there even was some cooperation with Zionist organizations –, they also put economic constraints on it from the very beginning and made it continuously more conditional and difficult until near to impossible in the late thirties.) The by far largest group, more than 40 percent, in the particularly strong immigration years came from Poland. (*Brenner, and Naor, Eretz Israel, p. 177 plus the graph on p. 185, Meier-Cronemeyer, p. 194*). And this Polish emigration had nothing or very little to do with the situation in Germany. Would one conclude from this that Poland bears special responsibility for the Middle East conflict? I doubt it.

### c) The reluctance of other countries to accept Jewish refugees

In the internal discussions in the United States in the 1930s about the issue of Palestine and Jewish refugees, representatives from Arab organizations often pleaded for more generous immigration quotas for Jews. The impact and consequences for such a large country as the US would be much less problematic or precarious as they would be on Palestine. They were not successful, as we all know. Neither was Eleanore Roosevelt, who later pleaded to let more persecuted Jewish children into the country. This points to what Dan Diner called the “Katastrophe vor der Katastrophe – Auswanderung ohne Einwanderung“ in an article on the shameful general unwillingness of the international community to accept Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria in the 1930s (in: Dirk Blasius/Dan Diner (eds.), *Zerbrochene Geschichte. Leben und Selbstverständnis der Juden in Deutschland*, Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 138-160). I am not saying this to shift blame. The basic fault and the original cause of the problem was and remains Nazi Germany, of course. I am saying this, because this denial of urgently needed assistance became part of the Jewish experience and has been a strong objective argument for the Zionist cause to this day.

### d) The time frame

Even if we hold on to the original argument, i.e. the importance of immigration from Germany in the 1930s for the development of the Middle East conflict (German immigration definitely contributed not only to the demographic, but also the financial and industrial strengthening of the Yishuv), we need to broaden the time frame even more and ask, why did these Jewish emigrants go to Palestine? They did it and could do it only because of Zionism, the Balfour Declaration, and the history of the British Mandate. I do not need to expand on this, because I have made that case in my papers for the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the *Friedensforum*, and Reiner Bernstein's website [www.genfer-initiative.de](http://www.genfer-initiative.de).

## **4. Conclusion (see also the summary on p. 1)**

In conclusion, what does this all mean for the question of German responsibility not only for the Holocaust, but for the Middle East conflict? What I have learned from Dan Michman's chapter apart from many details is the importance of conceptual issues, particularly the time frame which we use in our analysis. In its narrow sense of the term, the Holocaust definitely strengthened the legitimization (and the legitimacy) of the Zionist cause (and of Israel) among Jewry in general. It strengthened not only Zionist desperation, but also their sense of purpose, their determination and resolution vis-à-vis the Arabs (and the British) in the civil war and the war of independence – and beyond. And it has made world opinion and international political decision-making more sympathetic to the Zionist purpose. Yet it has almost certainly not been the decisive factor in the establishment of Israel (and by implication the Middle East conflict).

As for the early phase of the Holocaust and the immigration from Germany in the 1930s, I believe that it was important for the growth for the Yishuv (and by implication for the development of its conflict with the Arabs), but again not decisive. And we need to take into account that the increase in Jewish immigration in the early 1930s and the reaction to it from the Arabs also was the major reason for Britain to strictly curtail Jewish immigration later. If we broaden the time-frame again, as we should, we must regard the immigration of the 1930s as *one of several* important aliyot from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the late 1940s/early 1950s (we could even add more recent immigration from Russia), relating to anti-Semitism and pogroms in Eastern Europe, including those in Poland after WW II, and to pressure and persecution in Arab countries. *Growth rates* of the Jewish population in Palestine had also been very high in 1925 and 1926, and in 1925 higher than in any year in the 1930s – even if from a much smaller base. And we must not forget that the Holocaust in its second phase destroyed not only much of European Jewry (we know that), but with it the mainstay of Zionism. In this sense the Holocaust even contributed to the potential *prevention* of a Jewish state in Palestine and by implication the Middle East conflict – which explains the sad fact of sympathy for Hitler among many Arabs.

While the Holocaust is definitely connected to the conflict, on both levels of collective narratives/understandings and of material historical development, I regard the material historical connections not obvious and strong enough to justify the extension. I place the responsibilities for the current conflict on the major conflicting parties themselves (to what degree on which side being a question of

legitimate controversy) plus regional and external actors (Germany being of minor importance in this context), and for its historical origins and thus by implication the origins of the plight of the Palestinians on the more general problems of European nationalism, anti-Semitism, and colonialism. I suggest that we stop talking of a *special German* responsibility for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while of course maintaining a *special German* responsibility to fight anti-Semitism and support the rights of Jews to live in peace and unharmed. There certainly is a special *European* (in which I include Zionism) historical responsibility for the conflict, beginning with the Balfour declaration and reaching into the 1960s, but there is also a special *Arab* (or Muslim) co-responsibility, beginning with the pressure on and expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Jews in the late 1940s and the 1950s and the in parts continuing denial of Israel's right to exist.

*Dr. Gert Krell, Hofheim,  
January 3rd, 2008*