

Comment on Ian Lustick’s ‘The Holocaust in Israeli Political Culture: Four Constructions and Their Consequences’

Editor’s Note: This Comment is a Response to Ian Lustick’s Article in This Issue of Contemporary Jewry v37(1)

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The Jewish people may never recover from the Holocaust. The damage goes beyond demography—today, there are roughly as many Jews in the world as before 1941—but, perhaps more devastatingly, Holocaust memory infects the very core of Jewish psychological and spiritual life. What Jew has not considered the game Nathan Englander describes in his short story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank”? (Englander 2011) In the story, two couples, old friends from college days, play the “Anne Frank game,” in which the object is to identify which of their gentile friends could be counted upon to hide them in the event of a second Shoah. The resonance of the game and the story is testimony to the continued centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish collective memory. In some sense, we are always living in 1938, and the question is, when will it be 1939? What sort of fool (In his article, Ian Lustick invokes the Hebrew word “*freyer*,” or “sucker”) would not think about this? I admit, I do. I sometimes plan out escape routes before I go to sleep at night—devise ways of protecting my children, transferring my money, and figuring out how to get to Israel.

Ostensibly, in Israel, things would be different. Concerns about the behavior of one’s neighbors in a putative second Shoah should be a thing of the past. And yet, as Lustick points out, Israeli Jews are just as obsessed with the Holocaust as their American counterparts—perhaps more so. For American Jews, worrying about another Holocaust is simply a matter of private neurosis or one other issue on which to vote in an otherwise “secure” society. But, according to Lustick, for the State of Israel, having its Jews stuck in 1938 and viewing the Holocaust as a “template for Jewish life” threatens the existence of the state itself. Lustick puts it this way: “[This] is one of the three reinforcing elements in the constellation of belief and power that dominate the State of Israel, so constraining its leaders and institutions as

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to explain both Israel's failure to embrace negotiated routes to resolve the Israel-Palestine problem and the likely demise of the Zionist project as a whole."

Let's leave aside Lustick's prediction for a moment and concentrate on the analysis. Did it have to be this way? Was it inevitable that a society made up disproportionately of Holocaust survivors and their progeny would come to view the Holocaust as a "template for Jewish life" and the world as implacably hostile to Jews? Given the magnitude of the tragedy, we should not be surprised that the memory of the Holocaust in Israel has been both contested and instrumentalized. It would be strange if this were not the case; national tragedies shape collective memory, and their contested meanings are constitutive of national identity. The American Civil War, for example, continues to yield competing interpretations and political fallout (consider the continued importance of race in American politics) more than a century and a half after its conclusion. The same can be said for the Asia Minor Catastrophe in modern Greece, the conquest of Quebec among French Canadians, and the Armenian Genocide in both Armenia and the Armenian diaspora.

How the Holocaust became part of Israeli life is a function of the way in which it was "culturally and psychologically absorbed," in Lustick's terms. It was not the Holocaust as such that shaped Israeli society; historical events, even momentous ones, do not produce unmediated impacts. Instead, after a period of eerie and damaging silence on the Holocaust,¹ Israel's leaders began to discuss it and think through how society should situate it within the historical experience of the Jewish people. Lustick's important contribution is the fourfold typology of dominant constructs of the Holocaust that partially overlap with each other but also develop chronologically (and as outgrowths of the contradictions in each): the Holocaust as "Zionist proof-text," as a "wasting asset," as an "object lesson" in universal human rights, and as a "template for Jewish life"—the last one becoming hegemonic in the 1980s with "immense consequences for Israeli society, culture, and politics."

What makes this typology so useful is that it genuinely captures aspects of how Israel's leaders have dealt with the tragedy's aftermath. Former Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and his leadership cohort began by defining the Holocaust as proof that life in the diaspora was untenable and dangerous. Resistance and heroism were valorized in this construct, but victimhood remained painfully unaddressed. This changed in the second construct, the Holocaust as a "wasting asset," by which Lustick means an urgency to deploy a sort of Nietzschean appeal to the moral sensibility and political interest of the global perpetrators and bystanders in pursuit of material and political interests of the state, primarily German reparations and American political support. Jews were *the* victims of modern history, and their state deserved sympathy and succor. This construct produced its own contradictions, because accepting reparations from the Germans placed Ben-Gurion in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis Likud Party founder

¹ Zahava Solomon (1995) describes the origins of the study of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Israel in the tragic warehousing in mental health facilities of traumatized Holocaust survivors who mostly needed to talk about what had happened to them.

Menachem Begin's rightist followers, and led to a compensatory witch-hunt for Jewish collaborators with the Nazis.

In contrast to the first two constructs, both of which focus on the particularly Jewish experience, Lustick elaborates a minority position in Israel: the multiple attempts to craft a view of the Holocaust that could be used to educate a new generation of Israelis about the universal lessons of the Jewish people's particular experience. In this view, the Holocaust could be characterized as a case of genocide, a relatively rare but hardly unique event. He highlights two attempts at curricular reform designed to render the Holocaust an "object lesson," both of which, he argues, failed. "Despite these efforts," he writes, "there is no question that of the four constructions of the Holocaust I have described, the 'object lesson' has had the least success in competition for influence over Israeli political culture." This preferred formulation of the Israeli left, although not hegemonic, remains available to be deployed should the rest of Israeli political culture move in a universalistic direction.

Several factors helped to shape the hegemonic rise of the Holocaust as a "template for Jewish life" in Israel—the sympathy for Holocaust victims generated during the 1961 trial of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann, the existential scare before the Six-Day War in 1967, the even bigger shock of near defeat in the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and the rise to power of Likud in 1977 with a leader completely obsessed with the possibility of a second Shoah. The Holocaust in this construct was a global event, and all Israelis were expected to know about, to mourn it, to "experience" it with concentration camps visits, and to mark it with major and minor Holocaust museums. Politicians began to deliver major speeches on the multiple Holocaust remembrance days that dot the Israeli calendar. Eventually, the efforts yielded a new generation of Israelis who consider the Holocaust as the central event in Jewish history. All of Jewish history in the Holocaust as "template for Jewish life" construct is the history of hatred and violence against Jews, and therefore the Holocaust is the norm rather than the exception.

Inevitably, this view of the Holocaust and its meaning (a view consonant both with the Holocaust as "proof-text" and the Holocaust as a "template for Jewish life") created a public determined to see new Nazis in every opponent and critic of Israel. Arabs and Muslims, especially Palestinians, cannot be trusted. In Lustick's words, "When all enemies are Nazis, and Arabs or Muslims are enemies, Arabs and Muslims are Nazis." The impact of this discourse on would-be Israeli peacemakers is highly constraining and possibly paralyzing. When new Holocausts can happen at any time and when all enemies are potentially Nazis, the safe thing to do is to characterize every concession as a "Munich" and every politician who offers a concession as a "Neville Chamberlain."²

² Israel's current Holocaust construct does not prevent it from official cooperation with Holocaust obfuscators and national collaborationist apologists among governments and semi-official public memory institutions throughout post-communist Eastern Europe. To take but one example, Ukraine. The current Ukrainian government valorizes and celebrates a fascist collaborator from World War II, Stepan Bandera. They do so with Bandera statues, street names, and whitewashed history. The same could be said about present day Poland's treatment of its leading antisemitic interwar politician Roman Dmowski or the current Hungarian government's failure to admit to national collaboration in the Holocaust. The Israeli

I wonder, however, whether the construct in question inevitably produces the behavioral responses that Lustick posits. Perhaps it does empirically, but theoretically, this does not have to be the case. I am convinced by the “constructs” but not by all the “consequences.” Could one not accept some weaker version of the Holocaust as a “proof-text” construct (say, Israel is necessary for the continuity of the Jewish people or for normal life in the diaspora)? Could one not also accept the Holocaust as a “template for Jewish life” construct, on the premise that the oldest hatred, under the right circumstances, could indeed produce another Holocaust, and at the same time believe that this only demonstrates the necessity of a Jewish state with a Jewish majority as a condition for Jewish survival? And if one believed this, could one not then maintain that all of this requires a two-state solution?

In sum, all the suspicion, neurosis, and paranoia produced by the Holocaust as a “template for Jewish life,” could as easily be reconciled with a left-wing politics as with a right-wing politics. Why would a desire for a safe and secure Israel that results from an obsession with a possible second Holocaust not lead Israelis to call for a negotiated settlement to their endless conflict with the Palestinians? Indeed, to the extent they believe that the danger to the Jewish people is clear and present, they would want that solution to happen as rapidly as possible. If one accepts this logic, perhaps other factors apart from Israel’s current hegemonic Holocaust construct are responsible for the long-term impasse with the Palestinians.

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Footnote 2 continued

government mostly ignores or does not criticize such phenomena. When I have asked about this in Israel, the response I receive typically runs along the following lines: “Everyone is antisemitic. Who cares about the stories they tell themselves at home about Jews? What matters is not their view of the Holocaust but whether they support Israel in international politics.” This view is to be expected under Lustick’s fourth construct, the “template for Jewish life.” However, this current hegemonic construct does not prevent the Israeli right from criticizing American politicians who justify Israel’s existence by reference to the Holocaust.