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## NEWS

# CUNY Schools Jews on the New Race Regime

Skipped by the university's chancellor for the second time, Thursday's hearings to address allegations of pervasive student and faculty antisemitism ended in bitter stalemate

BY ARMIN ROSEN

**O**f all the signs that the Jewish community's political influence has waned in New York City, perhaps none has been as stark as the City University of New York's frequent spasms of open distaste toward the Jews, many of them Mizrahi, middle class, or foreign born, who attend its dozens of colleges and graduate schools. The CUNY law school faculty unanimously endorsed a student council Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions resolution targeting Israel in May. Those students had also chosen Nerdeen Kiswani, founder of a radical activist group committed to "globalizing the Intifada" against Israeli Jews and their sympathizers, as one of their commencement speakers. The Professional Staff Congress, a union representing 30,000 CUNY employees, had passed a resolution in 2021 condemning Israel for the "massacre of Palestinians" and stating the union would consider an endorsement of BDS sometime in the near future.

Even if one doesn't believe that repeated, organized, and highly selective attacks on the world's only Jewish state are antisemitic, Jewish students and

faculty have often reported a climate of stifling hostility that has forced them to hide outward signs of their Jewishness, and made it impossible to hold or promote even neutral events like Holocaust commemorations. An engine of social mobility for generations of Jewish New Yorkers had become a place where one of the city's largest ethnic minorities no longer felt welcome. Like the high quality of the municipal tap water, CUNY is one of the last points of pride in New York City's rapidly declining public sector. But to its critics, the university administration doesn't care about the antisemitism in its midst, or even recognize it as a problem.

Recourse lies with the few remaining elected representatives inclined to do something about the plight of the average New York Jew, who isn't particularly rich, powerful, or cool, and holds the unhip belief that Israel should exist. The state of New York is in danger of losing its last Jewish member of the House of Representatives; meanwhile the city's most powerful elected Jew, Comptroller Brad Lander, is a progressive from Brooklyn's brownstone belt, someone notably at home in the bourgeois activist world of the anti-Zionist Jewish

Voice for Peace and IfNotNow. The charge against CUNY's alleged complacency is instead being led by one of the city's least powerful elected Jews, at least on paper: A Ukrainian-born, 37-year-old woman who is one-fifth of the 51-member City Council's Republican minority.

Inna Vernikov stood at the base of City Hall steps on Thursday morning in front of rows of activists in blue #End-JewHatred T-shirts. In the back, a man in a blue Keep America Great hat cradled a small dog; on the other side of the plaza facing New York City's beaux-arts capitol building, perhaps the entire male membership of the Neturei Karta Hasidic sect chanted its predictable anti-Zionist slogans, hoisting the same signs they've been bringing to events like these for most of the past several decades. Above Vernikov, a trio of differently patterned Pride flags hanging from a stone balustrade suggested the city had now come under the control of a coalition of very colorful militia groups. This was a typical New York circus, complete with a pro-Israel demonstrator who introduced himself to me as a retired NYPD officer and longtime clown. But the petite Vernikov is a figure before whom nonsense evaporates.

"We have a major problem in this city," Vernikov began, "a culture of antisemitism that's engulfed our college campuses." Vernikov has shoulder-length hair that is almost hypnotically black; her nails were painted the same deep white as her jacket. She delivered her remarks quickly and clearly, in an accent that can only exist in New York—Chernivtsi by way of Sheepshead Bay, containing textures of sharpness and emphasis originating on opposite sides of the planet. The first Republican to represent anywhere in Brooklyn in the City Council since 2002 speaks with a directness that may very well be native to southwestern Ukraine, but which anyone who rides the Q, F, or D trains far enough can instantly recognize.

Vernikov explained that the morning's hearing had originally been scheduled for early June, only to be canceled when CUNY Chancellor Felix V. Matos Rodriguez said he couldn't attend. The meeting was postponed to

accommodate him. In a rhetorical gift to Vernikov, Rodriguez decided at the last second that he wouldn't show up today either. "What a sham," thundered the councilwoman. "What an insult to the Jewish community of New York... This is why we have this problem, because nobody's being held accountable."

The accountability portion of the morning, a hearing of the City Council's higher education committee, could be witnessed by only a small handful of people, thanks to ongoing COVID restrictions in municipal buildings, which are a convenient yet increasingly transparent excuse for the kind of open-ended petty dysfunction that characterizes much of life in New York now. The hearing took place on the 16th floor of a dispiriting ziggurat-shaped high-rise across the street from City Hall, and a line of scheduled witnesses was kept standing in its sweltering lobby for 45 minutes. Among them were Alyza Lewin, president of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, fresh off the organization's victory against Unilever, which the day before had announced it was effectively overruling its subsidiary company Ben & Jerry's boycott of Israeli communities in the West Bank. CUNY's law school had become an area of particular focus for Lewin, who said that student and faculty BDS resolutions, along with the Kiswani speech, were part of a larger atmosphere of intimidation that had made most Jewish students afraid to assert their identities in any meaningful way. "It's as if they've cleansed the law school of any pro-Israel or Zionist student," she said.

How, I wondered, had CUNY become like this? What was it about the politics of the institution, or the politics of the famously Jewish city that operated it, that had allowed the university to reach this point? David Brodsky, chair of the Jewish studies department at CUNY's Brooklyn College and a fellow line-stander, was meticulously nonpartisan in his analysis. The problem is much bigger than CUNY: "Antisemitism is systemic in Western society. It manifests in ways that are under people's radar," the Talmudist explained. "Unless

you recognize where it's coming from systemically, you fall prey to it."

In Brodsky's view, many of his colleagues had succumbed to this hidden and ancient mania, endemic to even the most tolerant and open of societies. He quoted an email from the Cross-CUNY Working Group on Racism and Colonialism addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: "There are not multiple perspectives on this topic. There is only resistance or complicity to genocide." Later, during his testimony before the committee, Brodsky mentioned an incident in which a professor withheld a recommendation letter until a student clarified their position on Israel, the kind of event that only needs to happen once to cause a broader chilling effect, as indeed it had. Jews have "an increasing fear of coming to campus," Brodsky told the committee.

As I spoke with Lewin and Brodsky, Vernikov herself appeared in the lobby to personally assure everyone that they would have a chance to testify, and said she had asked for more people to be allowed into the hearing room. A few minutes later, the sergeant-at-arms announced that an overflow room had been set up just down the hall from the hearing. "She has a lot of ideas, which is good," Karen Lichtbraun, a Manhattan activist with the more hardline Jewish group Yad Yamin, told me at the press conference earlier. "And she acts on her ideas, which most elected officials don't."

It turned out that the hearing was more compelling as a television show—with quick cuts between determined questioners and witnesses calling in from somewhere almost disrespectfully close by—than it would have been as a live event. Glenda Grace, a Columbia Law-educated special counsel to the university, was there in place of Rodriguez and appeared over Zoom. Vernikov earned her JD from the Florida Coastal School of Law, and she approached Grace as a cross-examining lawyer would, attempting to establish a series of premises that built off of one another. In turn, Grace's goal was to avoid putting herself in the position of freelancing university policy by accident or admitting any legally actionable wrongdoing.

Vernikov sought to get Grace to affirm that Zionism was a core aspect of Jewish identity, such that attacks on Zionists as a group would then be considered discriminatory against Jews—meaning that CUNY would have a legal obligation to in some way lessen the impact of these attacks or stop them altogether. “I would have to look to see what our policy says,” was Grace’s consistent, lawyerly refrain, which carefully avoided turning Zionist Jews into a distinct identity group within the CUNY system. “I don’t understand what that means,” Democratic City Council member Kalman Yeger, himself an alumnus of Brooklyn Law School, eventually replied to the umpteenth reference to this suddenly ambiguous “policy.” “I think the word ‘dialogue’ was used several hundred times today,” Yeger later quipped to the committee.

At one point, Vernikov made three attempts at asking: “Do you think Jews can freely express their views on a campus where faculty open discriminate against them?” a question that Grace skillfully filibustered.

Rodriguez’s decision not to testify was a boon to CUNY’s critics, probably more important than anything actually said in the hearing. In the hearing room, the rhetorical deadlock often favored Vernikov, who understood that Grace was there in order to prevent CUNY from committing itself to much of anything. Vernikov asked if the school would denounce the BDS movement, in full knowledge of what the answer would be. Grace claimed that the university had already voiced its opposition to the boycott movement, and was prohibited by a state executive order to join a boycott of Israel even if it supported such a thing, which, to be clear, it did not. Grace even went so far as to say the movement was “wrong.” The word “denounce” was still nowhere to be heard, whatever the subjective importance of a CUNY official saying or not saying it. Later in the day, Vernikov would land a more definitive punch on CUNY union President James Davis, who under the councilwoman’s questioning either temporarily forgot that he was a supporter of BDS or was too ashamed to admit his actual views, even over Zoom.

Perhaps the goal of the hearing was a legalistic demonstration that CUNY and its faculty do not consider a supposedly core aspect of Jewish identity, namely Zionism, to be worth protecting on its campus, thus building a case for some future policy or reform. Yeger and Vernikov attempted to establish, with uneven success, that the administration’s alleged tolerance of organized faculty BDS activity amounted to discrimination on CUNY’s part, on the grounds that the school had allowed a hateful movement to fester among its staff and students. Grace, and thus CUNY, did not share Vernikov’s and Yeger’s apparent views on where the institution should draw the line between protected speech and alleged discrimination. The councilmembers nevertheless proved that no CUNY campus had any serious anti-Semitism “sensitivity training” mandated among students or staff, and that antisemitism is at best an afterthought in the university’s otherwise formidable Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) regime.

One hearing witness was Adela Cojab Moadeb, who has no CUNY affiliation but recently sued New York University, alleging that a failure to prevent the mistreatment of Jewish students amounted to a violation of her rights under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Title VI mandated that “students have to have equal access to educational opportunities” in accordance with their “full identity,” Lewin had explained to me downstairs while we both waited in line. In essence, Lewin said, universities have “a legal obligation to protect students from harassment.” If they can’t meet that obligation, they’ve jeopardized their various accreditations and could become ineligible for government funding.

The threat of lawsuits or the prospect of other Title VI-related enforcement could force the university into action. What kind of action? Vernikov’s prescription included sensitivity training around antisemitism, the appointment of a diversity officer who would handle cases of antisemitism, and CUNY’s adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of antisemitism, which has been widely

interpreted as claiming that anti-Zionism can be a type of anti-Jewish hatred.

The critics’ strategy seems to be to use both the legal system and legislative pressure to force CUNY to more fully include Jews within its existing diversity bureaucracy. This means accepting the divisive logic of this bureaucracy, which would turn Jews into another one of a range of aggrieved and oppressed campus minority groups, complete with their own designated institutional protectors who can supposedly ensure that they are treated with the level of respect that federal civil rights law and the university’s nondiscrimination policy require. This approach comes with its own complications and contradictions. Perhaps it is the sensitivity-training industrial complex that itself creates the current hierarchy of bureaucratic concern, for example, allowing for fashionable bigotries like antisemitism and Israelophobia to fester and bloom while focusing its efforts on what are deemed to be more urgent manifestations of America’s incurable racism.

It is not a stretch to wonder if a pro-Zionist diversity bureaucrat is an ideological contradiction in terms, and if on a present-day campus, the antisemitism-focused officers will themselves be anti-Zionists empowered to define any pesky-enough problem out of existence. In the unlikely event the bureaucrats are in fact Zionists, they might be just as isolated and scorned by their colleagues as many Jews at CUNY apparently are these days.

Perhaps DEI just doesn’t work and training college students, faculty, and administrators to be more sensitive to Jews—and also to fear Jewish students’ hypothetical ability to wreck their lives and careers—won’t have the harmonizing outcome Vernikov and others hope it will. But perhaps there’s no other way now, and at an institution like CUNY, a group must either work within a morally and legally corrosive system with no proven record of solving the problems it claims to exist to solve, or risk having no protections left at all. ■

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# The American Zionist Dream

How William Blackstone, Henry Cabot Lodge, and their fellow Christians saw a Jewish state as deeply American

BY WALTER RUSSELL MEAD

**O**n March 5, 1891, Secretary of State James G. Blaine presented William Blackstone of Chicago to President Benjamin Harrison.

It was a miserable March, and the day was wet and dismal, with temperatures hovering around freezing. But as Blackstone entered the White House, he was bathed in light. The White House of the day was not the austere Federalist mansion that we know today: In 1882 Chester A. Arthur sold the old decorations at auction and asked Louis Tiffany to redecorate the interior in a more modern style. Tiffany's *pièce de résistance* was a 50-foot-long screen inlaid with stained glass that stood across the entrance hall.

In 1891, the rooms were already beginning to look dated. President Harrison had electricity installed that year, though both he and his wife, Caroline, refused to touch the light switches for fear they would be electrocuted. The garish light of early modern bulbs (far brighter than those of today) did no favors for the elaborate iridescent designs with which Tiffany, anticipating illumination by soft gaslight, had painted the rooms. In 11 years, Theodore Roosevelt would strip it all out and take the mansion back to its Federalist roots.

Blackstone's business with President Harrison that day was to present a document that history remembers as the Blackstone Memorial, a petition asking President Harrison to use his influence to persuade European leaders to prevail upon the Ottoman sultan to open the province of Palestine for Jewish

settlement and the creation of a Jewish national home.

Blaine, Harrison, and Blackstone were an odd trio. Harrison was a model of personal rectitude presiding over a corrupt administration that made, like many late-19th-century presidencies, prodigious and unbecoming use of the spoils system. A devout Presbyterian, he had served as a brigadier general of volunteers in the Civil War before entering politics. Afflicted by dermatitis on his hands, when he greeted Blackstone he was probably wearing his trademark gloves. (The president's political opponents dubbed him "Kid Gloves Harrison" in an effort to portray him as a fop and an Anglophile.) Harrison almost certainly would have been smoking; he'd tried to quit and failed, and now relied on a supply of cigars provided by a tobacconist from his hometown of Indianapolis. Harrison was portly and, at five foot six, the second shortest president ever. As of 2022, he was the last bearded occupant of the White House.

James Blaine, in contrast to Harrison, was so famously corrupt that his 1884 nomination for the presidency had caused the Mugwump revolt among Republicans who, like the Never Trumpers of a later time, would rather break with their party than support an unacceptable candidate. Blaine lost a close election to Grover Cleveland, but remained, as he had been for decades, a force to be reckoned with in national politics. As secretary of state, he focused on expanding America's role in Latin America. A Congregationalist, Blaine was also anti-Catholic: Today he's mostly remembered as the man who promoted

the "Blaine amendments" in many state constitutions that limit the parochial school system's access to public funding.

William Blackstone, the memorial's originator, was a self-ordained evangelical minister, a well-known Christian apologist, a best-selling writer, and a close associate of Dwight Moody, the most famous evangelist of the day. Blackstone, like Moody, was a biblical literalist; in the face of the skeptical theologies emerging in response to the critical insights of German biblical scholarship, Blackstone believed that the Bible was the literal Word of God and that it was an infallible guide to past, present, and future events. Like Moody, Blackstone was a premillennialist, believing that the transition from the realm of human history to a post-historical utopia under God would only happen after terrible wars and vast upheavals had overturned the existing order and demonstrated the futility of human reforms apart from God. Blackstone's popularity, and Moody's, reflected the growing power of dystopian fears about the future in the world of American religion.

In the history of American religion, Dwight L. Moody's career marks the beginning of modern evangelicalism. Moody's movement rejected both the increasingly liberal theology of the American Protestant establishment and the reforming optimism of what would soon become the Social Gospel movement. Although a supporter of charitable organizations and movements for individual reform like the temperance movement, Moody held out little hope for political action aimed at producing deep social change. He famously summed up this view by saying, "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said, 'Moody, save all you can.'" Moody's tireless preaching and impressive demeanor sparked major religious revivals in both Britain and the United States, with special appeal among those who felt decimated and dispossessed thanks to the economic and social upheavals of the time, and the views he popularized remain influential in many evangelical and Pentecostal circles to this day.

But wrecked vessel though the world might be, there was one political cause

that, to the eyes of Moody and associates like William Blackstone, had promise. While more liberal and optimistic Christians hoped that Jews returning to Palestine would succeed by adopting American democratic and economic principles and therefore demonstrate to the world that the way to usher in a triumphant utopia was to follow the American example, Moody and Blackstone looked for very different but equally significant consequences to flow from the still hypothetical return of the Jews to Palestine. The contemporary fulfillment of Bible prophecy would, they believed, dramatically confirm the power of the Bible. If texts that were more than 2,000 years old could predict contemporary events better than conventional experts and practical politicians, this would clearly demonstrate the divine inspiration of the holy books. At the same time, the return of the Jews would confirm the theological views that Moody and Blackstone advanced. The Jews would return to Palestine in a darkening world, against a background of crisis and conflict. Their return was not a sign that God was blessing the work of earnest Protestant social reform by ushering in a new era of peace; it was a sign that God's long-suspended judgment was about to fall on a sinful world. The maelstrom in the imperial zone of the Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires, the rising and falling of great nations, the wars and the tumult of wars, like the social conflict and decay at home, were the signs of a great purpose moving toward fulfillment. It was both a terrifying and a reassuring picture; the ship was sinking, but the lifeboat was sound.

There's no evidence that President Harrison had much interest in Blackstone's theology, but he certainly intended to give the minister a friendly reception. Blackstone's associations with Moody were well-known, and like the later evangelist Billy Graham, Moody was a power in the land. In 1865, Moody had entered Richmond with Grant's victorious army. In 1876, Grant along with members of his cabinet attended one of Moody's services. Before his death in 1899 at the age of sixty-two, Moody is said to have preached to 100 million

people in the United States and abroad; before the mass communications technologies of the 20th century, no single person in human history had reached an audience of this scale.

But it was not only the power of Blackstone's spiritual associations that won him an audience with President Harrison. Among the 400 signatures on Blackstone's petition were the names of J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Cyrus McCormick, the editors of most of the leading American newspapers, leading clergymen from the East Coast and the Middle West, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and the speaker of the House of Representatives. It had also been signed by prominent media corporations, including *The New York Times*. Not many such petitions cross a president's desk on any given day, and the bearer of such a document will inevitably receive a courteous hearing even when, as in this case, the petition asks for something outlandish.

We do not know very much about the motives of most of the people who signed the memorial, but it seems unlikely that Episcopalian men of the world like J. P. Morgan or hard-nosed Baptist businessmen like John D. Rockefeller believed that they were hastening the Second Coming and the end of the world by endorsing Blackstone's idea. For many of the signers, the petition merely expressed the long-held belief among both religious and secular people of the 19th century that the Jews, like the Greeks and the Italians, could regain some of their ancient glory and greatness if freed from foreign rule and oppression. Others were moved by the appalling spectacle of deliberate, state-sponsored cruelty in Russia and elsewhere against innocent and helpless people. Some may have been moved to some degree by the spiritual forces that drove Blackstone. Some may have wished to support Blackstone out of regard for Moody and his movement—not because they shared Moody's theology but because many upper-class Americans thought that the spread of revivalist ideas through the urban working class (and Moody's ministry was chiefly aimed at this group) would help keep

socialism at bay. Some no doubt were chiefly drawn to the potential of the Blackstone proposal to divert Jewish immigration from the United States to a faraway land. And it is possible that, even at this early date, there were a few political calculators who understood that to advocate both for the creation of a Jewish homeland and for immigration restriction hit a sweet spot in American politics.

Most American Jews of the day had a different view. Blackstone presented his petition as though it were the brainchild of a joint Jewish-Christian meeting, but he was only able to persuade a handful of Jews to sign it (and only after he had granted them permission to print a reservation about some of the language). In fact, there was significant Jewish pushback against the memorial, which can be summed up in the phrasing of a leading Reform rabbi, Emil G. Hirsch, whom Blackstone had approached early in his project: "We, the modern Jews, say that we do not wish to be restored to Palestine.... The country wherein we live is our Palestine."

Rabbi Hirsch's observation was more than a casual aside. Reform Judaism was originally built around a modernization of Jewish faith that explicitly rejected the goal of a return from exile. For Reform Jews, steeped in the atmosphere of the European Enlightenment and its approach to Jewish emancipation, any talk of a Jewish state was an attack on the ideas that allowed Jews to participate in the life of the countries in which they lived. They not only dismissed the idea of a return to Palestine as a naive fantasy with no hope of realization; they deplored it as an assault on the values that, as they saw things, offered the only possible security for a Jewish minority in a non-Jewish state.

Despite the religious foundations of his interest in Palestine, Blackstone drafted his memorial in largely secular terms. Given the misery of the Jews in Russia, and the mass migration from Russia that was already 10 years old, something needed to be done. "But where," the memorial asks, "shall 2,000,000 of such poor people go? Europe is crowded and has no room for more peasant population. Shall they

come to America? This will be a tremendous expense, and require years.”

The answer seemed obvious. The European powers were already in the habit of carving slices off the Ottoman Empire to create homelands for its various minorities. Why not reserve a slice for the Jews? Or, in the language of the memorial, “Why shall not the powers which under the treaty of Berlin, in 1878, gave Bulgaria to the Bulgarians and Servia to the Servians now give Palestine back to the Jews? These provinces, as well as Roumania, Montenegro and Greece, were wrested from the Turks and given to their natural owners. Does not Palestine as rightfully belong to the Jews?”

The Blackstone Memorial had no immediate impact on history. The president made some friendly remarks of appreciation and referred the document to the State Department, where horrified officials sat on it until all memory of the document, and even the original document itself, had vanished.

Yet the ideas behind the memorial, both religious and political, lived on. For the next 60 years, whenever the Jewish Question emerged into world politics, non-Jewish Americans responded with the logic and program of the memorial. The United States should support the creation of a Jewish home in the Middle East; it should use diplomatic rather than military or even economic means to achieve this goal; and it should not do this work on its own but in concert with other powers.

The Blackstone Memorial was the first draft of America’s proposed answer to the international Jewish Question. Blackstone would live to present a new version of his petition to Woodrow Wilson in 1916, see his principles enshrined in American law in 1922, and, by the time he died in the 1930s, see the establishment of a flourishing Jewish community in Palestine. Had he lived longer, he would have seen President Harry Truman stubbornly stick to the Blackstone principles in the face of bitter criticism until he was able to recognize the existence of a Jewish state that, with American diplomatic (but not economic or military) assistance, had been voted into being by the United Nations.

**“If the Russian  
tsar was  
numbered  
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American Jews  
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help him survive.”**

It took a war to put the Blackstone Memorial back on the agenda. In 1914, the Ottoman Empire threw in its lot with the Central Powers against the alliance of Russia, Great Britain, and France, and plans for its partition and destruction took root in the allied capitals. The Russians, whose emperors considered themselves the heirs of the Byzantine Empire, wanted Constantinople and control of the straits that would give them unrestricted access from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. France had long ties to the Levant; Paris wanted control over modern Syria and Lebanon. The British, already focused on the potential oil riches of the Middle East, wanted to create friendly Arab states under puppet rulers and to bolster the security of the Suez Canal.

At the beginning of the war, Palestine was of little concern to anybody except those who lived there and to the struggling Jewish Zionist movement that, so far, had only managed to settle a few tens of thousands of Jewish settlers in a land they did not seem very close to conquering. But the British, newly attuned on the Middle East after Winston Churchill determined that oil should be the future fuel of the British navy, envisioned a Jewish settlement in Palestine that would cover one flank of the Suez

Canal, and serve as a source of supply for British forces in the region.

Canal security and oilfields, however, were not the only motives behind the Balfour Declaration. A major aim of British policy up through 1917 in World War I was to draw the United States into the conflict. With American help, victory over Germany seemed likely; without it, the war might never be won. But drawing America into the war meant overcoming strong anti-British, anti-Allied sentiment inside the United States. Many Americans were descended from German-speaking immigrants who still sympathized with the worldview of their ancestral home. Many others had Irish backgrounds and were fervently anti-British at a time when the movement for Irish independence was moving to a climax. British diplomats searched frantically for groups they could persuade to support an American declaration of war.

American Jews were also largely unsympathetic to the Allied cause when war broke out. Leading Jews were mostly of German origin, and like other immigrants from Germany, often retained an ancestral sympathy for the fatherland. But if some Jews were pro-Germany, almost all American Jews were fervently anti-Russia. Hatred of the tsar, the most brutal and vindictive enemy of the Jewish people in the world at the time, was nearly universal among American Jews. If the Russian tsar was numbered among the Allies, American Jews did not want to help him survive.

The British government believed, like so many through history, that Jews were more powerful than was the case, more united than was the case, and more pro-Zionist than was the case. Drastically overestimating the power of the American Jewish community, and completely misreading its attitude toward Zionism, the British government hoped that the promise of Palestine as a national home would swing the allegedly vast and united power of the American Jewish community behind the Allied cause.

These geopolitical and political concerns combined with a streak of pro-Zionist feeling that was relatively widespread in a Britain still impacted by the evangelical religious tone of the

Victorian era. Britain's own immigration restriction law had been passed in 1905, limiting ships with more than 20 steerage emigrants from putting in at British harbors; the act effectively put an end to large-scale Jewish immigration into Britain and was supported by, among others, a rising politician named Arthur Balfour.

Around the same time as he pushed the immigration restrictions, Balfour made the acquaintance of Chaim Weizmann, one of the most important Zionist leaders of the 20th century. Over the years, Weizmann would impress upon Balfour that for at least some British Jews, support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East could bring Jewish gratitude even for British politicians who opposed open immigration. In 1917, Balfour himself visited America to float his idea with an explicit eye to this dynamic. Shortly thereafter, with the approval of the British War Cabinet, Balfour as Britain's foreign secretary sent his famous letter to Lord Rothschild: "His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object."

While the British were debating the merits of what would become the Balfour Declaration, the young and fragile American Zionist movement sought to persuade Woodrow Wilson to endorse the plan. After learning that the State Department no longer had a copy of the memorial, Louis Brandeis, then a Progressive activist with ties to Wilson and the most conspicuous leader of the small American Zionist movement among Jews, tracked down William Blackstone. Aged 74, Blackstone busied himself with collecting new signatures to add to the impressive list already on the memorial, including a wide group of important Protestant leaders around the country. The Presbyterian church in which Wilson had been raised and of which he was a loyal member added its endorsement.

The United States had declared war on Germany in April of 1917; by October the first significant American forces were entering the trenches. The Balfour

Declaration was issued on November 2. On December 11, British forces under General Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem unopposed as the Turks retreated, and for the first time since the Crusades a Christian power found itself in control of the city that witnessed the climactic scenes of Jesus's life.

Coming so quickly after the Balfour Declaration, the conquest of Jerusalem ignited a media firestorm across the United States. Allenby, in a piece of inspired theater, entered the city on foot. This was a deliberate dig at Kaiser Wilhelm II, who insisted on opening a gap in the wall by the historic Jaffa Gate (the gap in the old Ottoman walls is still visible today) so that he could enter on a white horse. The contrast between Jesus, who made his own entry to Jerusalem riding a donkey colt, and the imperious Kaiser had been widely noted at the time. Allenby's piety and modesty were notable by contrast; editorialists and preachers around the country noted the difference, and an apocalyptic thrill ran through the American people. Their historical optimism had been sorely tested by the transmutation of the Age of Hope into an Age of Hate, but the Allied victory in Jerusalem and the promise to give persecuted Jews a chance to build a home in the lands of the Bible pointed to a meaning behind all the madness. God was mysteriously at work behind the noise and thunder of the war; a higher purpose was being fulfilled through these human events. A better world could and would emerge from the terrible slaughter.

The next year, Theodore Roosevelt responded to the revival of the Blackstone Memorial by writing that "there can be no peace worth having" until "the Jews [are] given control of Palestine." The American press went wild. As the *New York American* commented in an editorial entitled "Christianity Has Captured Its Capitol [sic], and Jerusalem Is Henceforth for the Jews": "Whatever else is doubtful, it is certainly true that the passage of Jerusalem into the hands of the Allies means the swift establishment of that re-gathered and redeemed Zion for which the world's Jews have dreamed ever since the tribes were scattered in the breaking up of Israel.

... The Universal Jew, who for centuries has been a religion, not a nation, is to come at last unto his own."

Even after Woodrow Wilson's international agenda was stalled when the Republicans regained control of Congress in 1918, support for the Balfour Declaration remained bipartisan. Support for Zionist aspirations in Palestine quickly became part of the boilerplate foreign policy prescriptions of American politicians in both major political parties. This was not only true of Wilson and the liberal internationalists around him; it was true of the Republicans who opposed him and defeated his League. Indeed, from World War I on, one of the foreign policy ideas that united liberals, conservatives, internationalists, and isolationists in the United States was that the United States should offer diplomatic support to the goal of establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Not only Theodore Roosevelt but his cousins Franklin and Eleanor backed this idea; so did Henry Cabot Lodge, Wilson, arch-isolationist William Borah, Herbert Hoover, and Calvin Coolidge.

Supporting Britain's Balfour Declaration was exactly the kind of distant advocacy that the Blackstone signatories endorsed. The United States would not administer Palestine; it would not send troops to defend the peace there; the American government would send no aid to Jewish emigrants. This was the kind of engagement that even isolationists could applaud, and in any case, as Americans understood the situation, support for the Jewish national home in Palestine matched the ideas that were shaping American policy worldwide.

The Blackstone approach would become the law of the land under the Lodge-Fish Resolution, which Henry Cabot Lodge—the Massachusetts Republican who was a close friend and associate of Theodore Roosevelt, an inveterate enemy of Woodrow Wilson, and one of the most influential American foreign policy actors of his times—introduced in the Senate on April 12, 1922. The document, a joint resolution of Congress, read: "Resolved ... that the United States of America favors the establishment in Palestine of the National

Home for the Jewish People, in accordance with the provisions contained in the Declaration of the British Government of November 2, 1917, known as the Balfour Declaration.” After some tweaking, it passed by overwhelming majorities—in fact, unanimously in the Senate—and was signed by President Warren Harding on September 21.

The American Jewish community was less united than the Senate when it came to the Zionist agenda. Most of the country’s most prosperous and powerful Jews were firmly against what they saw as a foolish and dangerous idea. In 1891, *The New York Times* had been under non-Jewish ownership when it endorsed the Blackstone Memorial; by 1922 it had been sold to a Jewish owner, and it subsequently opposed Zionism.

In 1919, 31 of the most influential Jews in America, led by the former ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Morgenthau, presented a petition to Woodrow Wilson as he left for the Paris Peace Conference requesting him to oppose the Balfour Declaration: “We do not wish to see Palestine, either now or at any time in the future, organized as a Jewish State,” they declared. A later edition of the petition signed by almost 300 prominent American Jews was presented to the American peace commission during the postwar negotiations.

In June of 1918, the Zionist Organization of America had asked each member of Congress for their opinion on Zionism and the Balfour Declaration. Sixty-one senators and 239 congressmen (from 43 and 44 states, out of 48, respectively) replied, mostly positively, with few differences in party or region. But one of the few to object was Fiorello La Guardia, at the time a Manhattan congressman. La Guardia, the Jewish-Italian leader who was a leading opponent of immigration restriction and had emerged as a leader in both ethnic communities, wrote, “I do not believe that it is to the interest of the Jews or the world to isolate them or to separate them with an effort to form a distinct and separate nation. While, of course, they are racially one, still the Jews of America, England, France and Italy are no different than their fellow countrymen.”

**“The New York Times had been under non-Jewish ownership when it endorsed the Blackstone Memorial; by 1922 it had been sold to a Jewish owner, and it subsequently opposed Zionism.”**

During the Lodge-Fish hearings, the American Jewish community had to be represented by two sets of witnesses, due to the deep split within it. Rabbi David Philipson read into the record an 1897 resolution from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations: “America is our Zion. Here, in the home of religious liberty we have aided in founding this new Zion, the fruition of the beginning laid in the old. The mission of Judaism is spiritual, not political, its aim is not to establish a state, but to spread the truths of religion and humanity throughout the world.”

The large majority of the members of Congress who supported Lodge-Fish came from states and districts where there was no significant Jewish vote, and most of the congressmen and senators who voted for the resolution had no expectations of significant Jewish financing for their political campaigns. By and large, rich and well-connected American Jews opposed the Balfour Declaration and the Lodge-Fish Act and would remain distinctly cool to the political agenda of the Zionist movement until World War II was well under way.

To most Americans support for a Jewish homeland in the lands of the

Bible looked like the logical application of their general principles on national issues to the unique situation of the Jews. The Jews were a people like other peoples and their natural destiny, which was also their right, was to exercise self-determination in a homeland of their own. Because, uniquely, the Jews were a minority everywhere and a majority nowhere, they needed to build a homeland where they could become the majority and exercise self-determination. Once they had that homeland, they would have a place where they could be safe, there would be no humanitarian case for further Jewish immigration to the United States, and freed from oppression and persecution they could prosper.

This homeland had to be somewhere. Palestine struck most Americans as the natural and obvious choice. It was, historically, the Jewish homeland, and even for Americans who were not particularly religious, the massive weight of the Bible in popular and intellectual culture ensured that this view was widely accepted. That many Americans believed that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land was predicted by the biblical prophets was another reason that such a visionary concept won such ready assent from so many people. Beyond that, in practice, Palestine was the only place to which enough Jews might be willing to go.

That Palestine was inhabited by Arabs struck some Americans, Arab Americans and others, as a problem, but for the majority the obstacle was not seen as insuperable, either morally or practically. Racism played a role in this view; many Americans were not ready at this stage to give equal weight to the wishes and the views of non-European peoples. There was also a cultural distance; just as many Americans today will visit Egypt to see the ruins of ancient Egyptian culture but show no interest whatever in the history and monuments of Islamic times, so most Americans in the 1920s knew little and cared less about what had happened in Palestine between the fall of the last Jewish commonwealth and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The Jewish connection to ancient Judea was more real to many Americans than the

connection of Palestinian Arabs, Muslim or Christian, to the Palestine of the 20th century. This point of view was obviously one-sided, but it was so deeply implanted in American culture that we cannot be surprised at its predominant influence on the political debate.

There were other, at least somewhat more respectable, reasons behind the general American disposition to overlook the claims of Palestinian Arabs to Palestinian land. Americans at this time saw Palestinian Arabs more as part of a larger Arab nation rather than as a unique people. This cannot be attributed simply to ignorance or bigotry. Exporting ideas like “nation” and “nation-state” from the Atlantic world to the Middle East is no easy task, and many Middle Easterners have fallen into difficulties when using categories derived from Western historical experience to describe Middle Eastern realities. In 1917 there were Arabs living in Palestine who identified themselves as members of the Palestinian people. There were others who identified as Arab, or as Syrian, or as Muslim, or as Christian, or as Druze. The strong and vibrant Palestinian national identity that we see today is a product of 20th-century history, a product above all of the conflict with Zionism, but also of the frustration of many Palestinians with the half-hearted and often self-interested approaches that many Arab leaders took toward the Palestinian movement. That the Palestinians are a young nation who emerged in the 20th century does not mean that the Palestinians are not a nation or that their national movement is illegitimate; young nations are as legitimate, and sometimes more vigorous, than old ones.

Yet national identity remains a problematic concept. European-based political categories do not always easily translate into Middle East realities. Does “Arab” translate into European political categories as a civilizational or a national word? Does “Arab” as an identity correspond to being “French,” to being “Latin,” to being “European,” to being “Christian,” or to something else? These questions are still difficult to answer in the 21st century; the answers were even less clear in 1922.

In any case, for many of those Americans engaged enough and aware enough to have opinions on the subject at all, it seemed that to the extent there were two sides to the Palestinian question, it was a contest between Arabs and Jews, not between Jews and a nation of Palestinians. And as Americans saw it, if that was the dispute, then awarding Palestine to Jews seemed like the kind of reasonable compromise that American diplomats supported in similar controversies in other parts of the world.

Americans at the time did not just support Zionism; they supported the creation of independent Arab countries across the vast majority of the territory inhabited by Arabs. Carving out a little sliver for the Jews seemed like the kind of commonsense, compromise solution to conflicting ethnic claims that was guiding American policy in Europe. The entire Arab nation was going to be liberated from the Ottoman Empire, and under League of Nations mandates would be prepared for independence. Rather than taking something away from Arabs, many Americans at this time felt that their Middle East policy preferences, taken as a whole, would benefit Arabs as much or more than anyone else. Both the Jews and the Arabs would gain, it seemed to many Americans in these years; neither would get all they wanted, but that was a universal problem in the imperial zone. Nobody was going to get 100 percent of the territory they wanted; at 97 percent the Arabs were going to do pretty well.

There were two postwar American foreign policy decisions that directly affected Jewish interests, the Johnson-Reed Act that drastically cut Jewish immigration and the Lodge-Fish Resolution in support of the Balfour Declaration. The majority of American Jews opposed both. A vocal Zionist minority was strongly in support of Lodge-Fish, and many other American Jews viewed any increase in Jewish settlement in Palestine as a good thing without embracing the political ambitions of the Zionist movement. But on the whole, right up through World War II, the American Jewish community would have gladly

traded Lodge-Fish away in order to repeal Johnson-Reed. Both laws, however, remained on the books, and they would shape American policy toward the Zionist movement and the Jewish people for many years.

Of the two laws, Johnson-Reed, which American Jews overwhelmingly opposed, had more impact on events on the ground in Palestine. Without Johnson-Reed’s immigration cap and strict quota system, fewer Polish and German Jews would have been trapped in Europe for Hitler to kill, a thought that must always strike the American conscience with a pang, but many fewer would also have made their way to the swamps and deserts of Palestine. Whether the struggling population of idealistic Zionists could have established their state if the Jewish masses had been free to choose between Palestine and America can never be known. The prewar percentages, however, with only 2 to 3 percent of Jewish emigrants choosing Palestine, strongly suggest that without the restrictive American immigration legislation the Jewish population in Palestine might never have reached numbers large enough to build and maintain an independent state.

This, at least, deserves to be remembered: If “the Jews” ran America, immigration would not have been restricted and Israel would likely not exist. This is part of a more general truth: Zionism only succeeded among Jews as it became clear that the options that most Jews initially preferred—integration into the countries where they lived or, failing that, free immigration into more hospitable places—had failed. ■

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# Stop Being Surprised by Germany

Blinded by their own Cold War propaganda, Americans can't see Berlin's Ukraine policy for what it is

BY JEREMY STERN

**G**ermany tries hard to make itself dull, but it still can't help inspiring an unusual amount of exasperation around the world, for reasons that many if not most Germans believe to be deeply unfair. World War II ended over 75 years ago, after all, before the overwhelming majority of Germans today were born. And didn't Germany denazify itself while other Western countries continued to pillage weaker nations in the name of colonialism, postcolonialism, anti-communism, and other isms? Isn't Germany today the very model of a decent, grown-up modern society, repealing a Nazi-era ban on the advertisement of abortion services on the same day the United States turned back the clock on reproductive rights by 50 years? Why must *Germany* always be held to account?

The prevalence in Germany of this type of lament tends to obscure the actual reasons so many people—Americans, Britons, Poles, Balts, and especially Ukrainians—tend to roll their eyes at German policymakers. While world war has indeed been commendably removed from the policy menu in recent decades, the crimes of national solipsism and wishful self-contradiction remain as German as ever. See, for example, the performance of Chancellor Olaf Scholz over the last two weeks, during which he helped lead a pledge for Ukraine's candidate status as a future member of the European Union, then dispatched his foreign policy adviser to clarify that Ukraine shouldn't expect EU membership “just because you're

attacked,” then made an obviously unrealistic demand for more German voting weight in the European Council and greater representation in the European Parliament as a condition of Ukrainian membership. In other words, Germany supports Ukrainian accession to the EU, and the reason it probably won't happen is that Germany will block it—a by-now familiar maneuver that has left many of the states stuck between Germany and Russia rubbing their eyes in disbelief. Trying to keep track of Berlin's decisions and their relation to any underlying policy has been for many like trying to make sense of a drunk who keeps falling asleep.

In the last month alone, while insisting that “Putin must not win this war,” Scholz has blocked a sale of infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine, diverting them to Greece so that Athens could be responsible for sending Kyiv its older stock instead. He has promised to send Ukraine 30 decommissioned anti-aircraft tanks it never asked for—and for which Germany has insufficient ammunition anyway—which are not slated to arrive until later this summer. And he announced his intention to send Ukraine an air-defense system the German Defense Ministry reportedly hadn't ordered yet.

The chancellor also spent the month of May making a show of refusing to visit Kyiv because he believed Volodymyr Zelensky—who was then organizing the evacuation of Mariupol—violated diplomatic etiquette by declining to receive Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Germany's figurehead president and a longtime ally of Vladimir Putin. Scholz

still refuses to say whether he would like Ukraine to win the war, and frequently calls for a “cease-fire” rather than a Russian withdrawal.

There is, moreover, an undeniable Sprockets-like undertone to these policy gyrations, as difficult as they can be to follow day-to-day or month-to-month. On the same day that the strategic Lyman railway hub fell to Russian forces, Scholz tweeted airily from a convention of Catholic pacifists (who were apparently debating whether Jesus was trans), “Can violence be fought with violence? Can you only create peace without weapons?” Indeed, Herr Chancellor.

Needless to say, even well-informed German commentators have been speculating about what kind of *kompromat* Putin might have on Scholz and other Social Democrats, or at least what kind of threats he must be making in private. Other common accusations range from Scholz's supposedly poor communication skills to a more general German capacity for indecision, complacency, administrative sloth, and childlike credulity—qualities not otherwise associated with a country that dominates its political and economic environment with consistent and often ruthless determination.

It's getting harder, in fact, to square the popular impression of Scholz and his cabinet as weak and confused naïfs who see the world as if from inside a Brandenburgian dollhouse with the reality that, for all its twists and turns, Berlin's Ukraine policy has been firmly grounded in both German history and an interpretation of strategic realities more plausible than most of what passes through Brussels and Washington.

While President Joe Biden dispatched the U.S. attorney general to Kyiv last week to advise the Ukrainians on how to prosecute Russians for war crimes, Berlin performed a simple calculation. The German energy firm Uniper, Europe's largest buyer of Russian gas, has seen shipments from Gazprom fall by more than quarter. Gazprom has reduced shipments to Germany via the Nord Stream 1 pipeline by 60%, and is about to shut it down completely for “planned maintenance” of undetermined duration. The longer Ukraine

frustrates Putin's attempts to win a conventional war, many Germans worry, the more inclined he'll be to opt for a total gas embargo on Europe. A gas embargo might cause a German depression. Much of its industrial sector would simply shut down. There would be a fiscal crisis across the eurozone, and the return of a balance-of-payments crisis. European unity would split. Trans-Atlantic cohesion would crater.

There is no sense in pretending that Putin could never afford a gas embargo, German officials have come to believe, given the experience of sanctions. After the imposition of Western sanctions in March, Russian exports *increased* by 8% in April. The explosion in the value of Russian commodity exports means Putin's current account surplus this year may double from last year, making the loss of his foreign exchange assets irrelevant. The West's arrogant miscalculation about the size and importance of Russia's economy contributed directly to ruinous dynamics that routinely convulse Western democracies: spiraling inflation, cost of living crises, a looming rise in immigration and refugee flows as supplies continue to fall. The consequences of the anti-Russia sanctions have been worse, Germans argue, than if we had imposed no sanctions at all.

While Olaf Scholz may have multiple fraud scandals in his past and all the political charisma of a former mayor of Hamburg, a more credible explanation for the gap between German rhetoric and policy with regard to Ukraine is that Berlin simply believes Moscow was right—right that the sanctions regime was doomed to fail, that Western financial and military support for Ukraine is unsustainable, that trans-Atlantic unity will fray, and that Russia will eventually win, no matter what kinds of weapons Germany provides or where it buys its gas. If Germany has a “special responsibility” to “remember history,” many German officials believe, it probably shouldn't risk an economic catastrophe for the sake of the Donbas.

Americans have been especially susceptible to the idea that the German approach to the Ukraine conflict so far—and the two-decade Merkel era of

which it is only the latest expression—represents a dramatic break with the historical legacy of 1989 and the diplomatic achievements of reunification. Yet current German policy appears well-aligned not only with Germany's economic interests, but with the traditional German preference for serving as a “bridge” between Russia and the West—rather than as a bridgehead of the West in the East.

Americans are prone to their own varieties of solipsism in foreign policy, but there is a peculiar and little-understood reason why we seem to be doing a particularly bad job when it comes to Germany today. Paradoxically, it is not Germany's struggle to come to terms with its own history that is to blame, but American Cold War efforts to suppress and replace that history with our own self-serving, tutelary mythology—which became a kind of self-evident gospel with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but which Germans themselves never believed.

The first thing Americans tend to forget about the war and the occupation period is that Germans experienced it very differently than Americans did. When Franklin Roosevelt announced a war policy of “unconditional surrender” in Casablanca in 1943, various U.S. officials opposed it for a number of reasons—but whatever its efficacy, there's no doubt about how the policy was implemented. Allied strategic bombing campaigns killed approximately 400,000 civilians in Germany, wounded 800,000 more, and rendered 7.5 million homeless. The bombing of Hamburg killed 37,000 people in one week; the firebombing of Dresden killed 25,000 people in three days. Civilians, of course, were not collateral damage, but often deliberate targets of the Allied air raids.

There are many good reasons that require no elaboration for why we retain a clearer memory today of the supernatural evil of Auschwitz than of the apocalyptic violence of Dresden. But there is a specific reason why Americans tend not to remember the latter much at all.

In the two years after the Potsdam conference, American priorities in Europe were reaching a settlement with

Stalin, withdrawal, and demobilization. There was nothing about “nation building,” in other words, no intention of “democratizing” Germans or even “liberating” them. (A directive from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Eisenhower shortly after Roosevelt died clarified that “Germany will not be occupied for the purpose of liberation but as a defeated enemy nation.”) But after negotiations with Moscow broke down, Czechoslovakia fell to a communist coup, and Stalin blockaded Berlin, the United States quickly recognized that it would need a noncommunist bulwark in West Germany for the coming showdown with the Soviet Union. Washington initiated talks about German rearmament only five years after Hitler shot himself. The psychological foundation for a new U.S.-German relationship would have to be conceived.

It was far from obvious at the time that the occupation forces—a military dictatorship that owed its existence to the preceding wartime policy of violence maximization—would be able to rapidly convert Germans into a prosperous, democratic people. Nor was it clear whether American voters and soldiers would be open to considering Germans their friends. So the urgent but awkward need to anchor at least half of Germany in the emerging Western bloc gave birth to one of the earliest and still most salient official myths of the postwar American empire: “democracy promotion.”

Americans were henceforth in Germany not as victorious foreign occupiers, but as liberation forces sharing the light of democratic values, market economics, and freedom with the German majority, which had been held hostage by the Nazis but was now open to embracing the American way. And if Germans were eager to repress the recent memory of war and their widespread complicity as individuals and as a nation in a decade and a half of fascist crimes, Americans were suddenly eager to help them. By 1948, the defining image of U.S. involvement in Germany was no longer a sky blanketed by thousands of bombers setting German cities on fire, but of GIs passing out chocolate bars and nylon stockings and dancing with



## American Jewish Tombstones

### A tip from beyond

The tombstone of Harvey Allen Linden (1932-2011) in Albany, New York. It reads, “Hey, hi. Thanks for stopping by. And if you’re at Saratoga, bet the 5 horse in the fifth race. Have a great day, Harvey.”

the natives to Benny Goodman as they broke the Soviet blockade of Berlin.

The way the Cold War ended suggests the democracy promotion myth was both effective and justified. From a distance of 75 years, it is also clear how it warped and in some cases deranged Americans’ understanding of a defining moment in their own history. Four generations of Americans have now grown up under the assumption that a primary legacy of “The Good War” is that the United States brought freedom and democracy to people and places where it had never existed before. In the case of Germany (among others) this isn’t exactly true—Germany before 1913 had a parliament, freedom of the press, and intellectual freedom, in some cases more robust than in the United States at the time.

In reality, the eventual West German growth miracle owed more to German corporatist economic principles, and to the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community, than it did to any free-market values introduced by the United States. It would likewise take a special kind of self-deception to mistake Germany’s greatest postwar achievement—one of the world’s most

effective and admirable welfare states, which harks back to Bismarck’s social bargain with the German labor parties—for a postwar American import. Yet it was the example of “democracy promotion” in Germany (and also Japan) that U.S. politicians and statesmen repeatedly invoked in their later misadventures, from Vietnam to Afghanistan and Iraq.

The democracy promotion myth that American Cold Warriors invented to position West Germany as a key ally and U.S. dependency prevented later generations of Americans not only from understanding themselves, but from ever truly understanding Germany. Beneath the very real achievements of the Nuremberg trials, the Marshall Plan, and the Berlin airlift was the grubby reality that Americans played a remarkably limited role in Germany’s transition out of Nazism. The policy of denazification in particular left little trace: U.S. control of the press and campaigns to force German civilians to visit concentration camps and watch documentary films of German atrocities were brief, and had pointedly little effect on German attitudes during the years of occupation. By 1950, the vast majority of ex-Nazi teachers, bureaucrats, military officers, lawyers, and academics in both East and West Germany had been welcomed seamlessly into the new system. Neither Washington nor Moscow could afford to alienate their German clients for fear of losing them to the opposite bloc.

Nor did ordinary Germans experience life among the American occupation armies as fondly as Americans tend to remember it. Life in the immediate aftermath of unconditional surrender was far worse for most Germans than it had been under the Nazis. There were individuals like Gail Halvorsen, the “Berlin Candy Bomber,” and plenty of other Coca-Cola-drinking, Gary Cooper-miming American eye-fuls (hence the U.S. War Brides Act of December 1945). But life in the rubble of cities like Hanover and Frankfurt was preferable only to the Soviet-occupied East, where the Red Army was officially sanctioned to rape and loot. In the years that followed the division of Germany,

it was the Americans who were seen as prolonging the suffering of Germans by “using” them as pawns in their terrifying nuclear standoff with the Soviet Union. Many Germans thus came to understand and remember World War II not on its own terms, but as a kind of overture to the main drama of the hateful Cold War.

The public American position that Germany should be made whole and free itself masked a deep and bipartisan but private recognition that the division of Germany actually served U.S. interests in Europe pretty well. The emergence of two separate Germanys in 1949 put an end to fears that Stalin might march the Red Army to Dunkirk; even the appearance of the Berlin Wall in 1961 was received with quiet relief in Washington, which had spent 12 sleepless years trying to avoid a nuclear standoff over the Allied status in the city. The foreboding image of an Iron Curtain still suggests darkness and tragedy—but from the standpoint of U.S. strategic interests (as opposed to popular American political aspirations), it was for many years preferable to a united, unaligned Germany playing Washington and Moscow against each other.

The fiction of an urgent U.S. desire for reunification also helped convince Americans over time that East Germans were, for the most part, victims like any other of Soviet imperialism and communist oppression. The 4 million East Germans who migrated to the West between 1945 and 1988—and the 140 East Berliners shot and killed at the Berlin Wall—testifies to the substance of the American assumption. But many East Germans also found in the German Democratic Republic both an escape hatch for uncomfortable memories of the Nazi period (blame for Hitler was assigned by the GDR exclusively to the West Germans and their capitalist overlords) and a familiar type of political system in which many ex-Nazis thrived alongside Jewish communists like the Stasi spymaster Markus Wolf. The writer Peter Schneider (often quoted by Tony Judt) referred to these dynamics as the “double zombification” of East Germans—a reality that contrasted for a while with the idea

of a second Germany eagerly awaiting American liberation.

The effect on Americans of buying into their own Cold War mythologizing was that it eventually became difficult for U.S. observers and policymakers to understand what was really going on in and between the two Germanys. *Ostpolitik*, West Germany's policy of détente with Eastern Europe and particularly East Germany that began after 1969, ushered in more than just a slackening of strained relations. The West Germans took the opportunity to flood East Germany with hard currency, propped up its imploding economy, and invested the GDR with a conspicuous degree of diplomatic and political legitimacy, helping to extend its zombified existence.

At the same time, social unrest in West Germany was providing evidence that the American democratic mythos had sprung some serious leaks. In the 1960s and '70s, much of West German politics and society moved in the direction of the kind of hysterical anti-Americanism that still distinguishes parts of Germany today; as the Stasi and Baader-Meinhof gang murdered and kidnapped their fellow countrymen, West Germans turned out in historic numbers to protest U.S. actions in Vietnam and the location of U.S. short-range ballistic missiles. Popular books began to appear in West Germany on events supposedly not permitted in what would later be termed its *Erinnerungskultur*, or official "culture of remembrance": the mass murder of innocent German civilians during the strategic bombing of German cities; the forced population transfer of innocent ethnic Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Balkans.

Franz Josef Strauss, then minister president of Bavaria and the leader of the Christian Social Union for three decades, famously pronounced during this period that "a people that has achieved such remarkable economic success has the right not to have to hear anymore about Auschwitz." It was in fact not until the generation that came of age in the 1980s and '90s that Germans transformed into a people intimately familiar and intensely conscious of the history of

**"It was in fact not until the generation that came of age in the 1980s and '90s that Germans transformed into a people intimately familiar and intensely conscious of the history of the Holocaust."**

the Holocaust, some of the worst scenes of which had taken place in Ukraine.

By the time the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union imploded, 55 years of mythologizing about the U.S. role in Germany and Europe had provided a ready-made explanation for what Americans saw on television: Communism collapsed because the United States had defeated it. The spirit of near-delirious triumphalism likewise applied to the U.S. interpretation of the significance of German reunification. Americans' incomplete understanding of the Germans and postwar German history was perhaps never more vivid than when they rapturously applauded the return of a unitary German state—the wealthiest and most populous in Europe, stretching from Belgium to the Baltic Sea—before quickly moving on to more immediate problems, like Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

Yet it was not for nothing that Lech Walesa, founder of the anti-communist Solidarity trade union and the first-ever Polish president elected in a popular vote, commented as he watched the wall come down that Poland would "pay the price" for that happy event. Walesa couldn't have known at the time that a reunified Germany would be anchored in NATO, the European Union, and a common European currency, or that a

future Polish foreign minister would eventually come to "fear Germany's power less than her inactivity." He didn't need to. What Walesa understood was that a reunified Germany would once again see itself as a "bridge" between East and West at just the moment the liberated peoples of the former Warsaw Pact were reaching for the long-awaited prize of self-determination: namely, membership in the West itself.

Today, the United States is once again putting itself at the center of someone else's story—invoking Lend Lease and the Marshall Plan and the Berlin airlift to conjure the happy ending we've already determined is required of the Ukrainian nightmare. Rather than aim for a "dirty, contemptible compromise," Washington has—rightly or wrongly—made support for an unconditional Ukrainian victory a litmus test for the American democratic ethos, even as American voters have started to lose whatever interest they had in helping the heroic Ukrainians. Convinced of their own centrality to the drama, U.S. leaders can't or won't understand that many U.S. allies can't and won't stake their futures on whatever the American position happens to be at any particular moment—because according to the internal logic of American partisan warfare, that position will be reversed every few years.

No one fears and loathes this toxic U.S. political dynamic more than our allies in Berlin. For them, Donetsk and Luhansk are simply not worth a Lehman-style contagion in Germany's energy sector. Neither, for that matter, is Odessa, or Kyiv, or Transnistria, or the Suwalki Gap. And why, they ask, should it be otherwise? There is "our relationship with Russia [in the] future" to consider, as Scholz's foreign policy adviser reminded Germans last week after the chancellor's trip to Kyiv. "That is at least as exciting and relevant an issue."

Americans are entitled to wonder what all this means for Germany's status as a member of the Western alliance. What we're no longer entitled to is surprise. ■

*This article was originally published on June 26, 2022.*

## THE REST

→ **Dutch farmers protesting government agricultural restrictions tangled with law enforcement** on Tuesday night, with police firing at protestors and hitting a tractor and arresting several other demonstrators. The showdown was the latest escalation in a series of rallies and blockades carried out by farmers over the past several weeks to **protest new environmental rules**. Last month, to comply with national and European Union climate change goals, Dutch legislators announced new policies that will attempt to reduce the volume of nitrogen compounds produced by farms by 2030. To achieve their targets, lawmakers say farmers in certain provinces will need to reduce their nitrogen emissions by more than 70%, using significantly less fertilizer while liquidating roughly 30% of their current holdings of cows, pigs, and other livestock. But farmers say they haven't been consulted to help shape the new policies, which might satisfy unelected E.U. officials but are divorced from the reality of running one of the world's largest agricultural economies.

→ A weekend of **gun violence has left dozens of people dead or injured throughout the nation**. In Highland Park, Illinois, a sleepy suburb 25 miles north of Chicago, six people were killed and at least 25 suffered gunshot wounds at a Monday afternoon Fourth of July parade when a gunman opened fire from a rooftop into the crowd below. Home to a large Jewish population, as of this writing there is no evidence that the shooting was motivated by prejudice. The 22-year-old man taken into custody as the primary shooting suspect had distributed several music videos online that made explicit reference in their lyrics and images to shooting incidents and confrontations with police, including one in which a cartoon figure with similar physical attributes to the suspect carries out a shooting as the suspect raps, "I need to just do it. It is my destiny."

→ The **rural South is losing hospitals at a precipitous pace**, with 13 hospitals shuttering in 2020 alone. The decline is leaving millions of Americans marooned and without access to adequate health care—especially in emergencies.

→ Americans have **lost faith in almost every single major U.S. institution, including government, media, and business**, according to a new poll from Gallup. Comparing this year's poll to last year's, Gallup found that the largest declines were faith in the executive branch (a 15% decrease since last year) and the judicial branch (an 11% decrease), while "organized labor" was the only institution that didn't lose any faith over the past year—though it did not gain any credibility either. The only two institutions that a majority of Americans still believe in, meanwhile, are **small businesses and the military**.

→ The Food and Drug Administration has asked vaccine manufacturers to tailor their **new vaccines to the quickly spreading Omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5**, which now represent 52% of COVID-19 cases in the United States—and that they hurry to do so in time for the fall. "It is critical that we have safe and effective vaccine boosters that can provide protection against circulating and emerging variants to prevent the most severe consequences of COVID-19," said Peter Marks, a director at the FDA.

## FROM THE BACK PAGES

You'd be forgiven for thinking that the study of Greek and Roman classics has been a particular casualty of the past decade's furious culture wars. Recently, for example, we've witnessed everything from an editorial in *Inside Higher Ed* defending Socrates' death sentence to the YA author of a "sapphic retelling of *The Odyssey*" admitting she never read the original poem in its entirety. More gravely, curricular changes have been considered or implemented, expelling Homer, Virgil, and other classical authors from syllabi, whether in American high schools or Oxford University's Classics department.

Like many apparent novelties introduced by today's social justice movement, however, attacking the classics is a long tradition pursued by writers and thinkers who are themselves luminaries of the Western canon. It's a tradition that extends back to well before even the last round of culture wars in the late 20th century, which saw the publication of paradigm-shattering books like Edward Said's *Orientalism* (which traced the East-West divide back to the *Iliad*), Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (which claimed that Greek civilization derived from African and Semitic sources), and I. F. Stone's *The Trial of Socrates* (which emphasized that the Athenian philosopher was tried and sentenced to death essentially for opposing democracy).

—John Pistelli

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# The #MeToo Rabbi

For Avremi Zippel, getting a guilty verdict against the nanny who abused him as a child was only the beginning. Now he's an advocate for other survivors of sexual assault.

BY ARI BLAFF

**N**early a decade ago, while recovering from a basketball injury, Avremi Zippel was bingeing episodes of *Law & Order* when a scene broke through the fourth wall. A boy on the show had a sexual relationship with his nanny and was told by the detectives investigating the case that he was a victim of sexual abuse. Laid up in bed and “doped on painkillers,” Zippel began shouting at the screen, “No, no, he wasn’t abused. Stop it!” But as Zippel, now 29 years old and an Orthodox rabbi in Utah, told *Deseret*, a local newspaper, “It planted a seed of doubt in my head.”

That seed gestated for several years and finally sprouted following the birth of his son in 2015. The joy and bliss of this beautiful moment was crowded out by darkness and fear. Zippel looked down at his newborn son cradled in the palm of his hand—“this hollering little baby,” as he put it, when we met for coffee one February morning at a Starbucks in Salt Lake City—and his first thought was of his own inadequacy: “Oh my God, this kid deserves a dad and that’s just not me. I am such a flawed human being that will never be good enough.” Fatherhood became, all at once, “the single greatest motivator” for him, provoking a deeper sense of personal responsibility. In the coming days and weeks, Zippel wrestled with his emotions; to those around him, he wasn’t acting like himself—something was clearly off. “Looking back on it, becoming a father really pushed me over the edge,” he told me. “It led to tremendous anxiety and depression.”

The reason Zippel felt undeserving of his beautiful son was a childhood secret

he dared never utter: From the age of 8 until 18, he had been sexually abused by a nanny who groomed him in the belief that she was preparing him to be, in her words, “a good husband.” In those first moments of new fatherhood, the weight of this unresolved past trauma flooded forth.

Zippel’s wife and parents encouraged him to see a therapist. There, within the confines of a professional’s office, he unburdened himself for the first time to another person, acknowledging that he was a survivor of sexual assault. He confessed to his therapist that the only approval he sought during his preteen years “was my abuser’s and, at the same time, she was the last human being on the face of Earth that I wanted to see.” With his therapist’s help, Zippel finally opened up and began sharing his experiences with his wife and eventually with his parents.

Zippel’s personal revelations happened to coincide with broader social changes spreading across the United States in 2017. On social media, stories of pervasive sexual assault and harassment poured forth under the #MeToo hashtag, and the treatment of survivors took center stage. Hollywood’s “casting couch,” an open secret in the industry, became a symbol of misogyny and predatory behavior.

In his third decade, Zippel is still remarkably youthful; you can see the little boy beneath his growing beard. Yet he carries with him a lifetime of maturity; his *nefesh* is wise and humble. As an Orthodox Jew from Utah and son of a well-known Chabad rabbi, Zippel certainly doesn’t fit the stereotypical mold of a #MeToo survivor. But while watching the televised testimony of Olympic

gold medalist Aly Raisman during the 2018 trial of USA Gymnastics coach Larry Nassar, he felt inspired to publicly come forward. Within days of Nassar’s sentencing in late January, Zippel placed a call to the Salt Lake City Police Department. “That decision will probably go down as the most difficult to ever make in my life,” he told me.

After all, there was good reason to be skeptical. As survivor upon survivor emerged from all corners of America—Hollywood, sports, media, Silicon Valley—a common fear among them was that they would not be believed. The public taboo was beginning to crack but skepticism remained widespread.

This was true in the Orthodox community as well. Many members were hesitant about the idea of airing so-called dirty laundry in public. Zippel remembers a conversation he had with a community member as he debated whether or not to go public. The man, who was a rabbinical figure within the Chabad community, acknowledged the ongoing problems of turning a blind eye to sexual abuse but raised concerns about what it might mean for Zippel to go public. “No one is quite sure what will happen to the first person,” Zippel recounted the man saying. “If you’re going to do it, I commend you for that, but I don’t know how you’re going to marry off your kids.” By that point, Zippel had already decided, as he put it, “that was the thing I wasn’t living with anymore”—fear of public shame be damned.

Zippel explains that there was no pressure from community members discouraging him from pursuing this matter, but more so a skepticism as to what going to the police would accomplish. A deeper mistrust of law enforcement within the community, Zippel believes, led many of his closest confidants struggling to understand how publicizing

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his story and pursuing legal measures would accomplish much.

Once more, the weight of fatherhood was never far from his mind. Having a child had clarified for Zippel the importance parents should place on encouraging kids, particularly boys, to speak up about sexual assault. “Society makes shame difficult for boys,” said Zippel, now a father to two young boys, ages 6 and 4. “In every arena they interact in—school, friends, home—I believe as a parent we need to encourage them to speak up instead of sweeping it under the rug.” He hopes his actions will pave the way for others to come forward and feel comfortable expressing vulnerability: “With my own son, I realize the magnitude of the work involved.”

That’s why he finally decided to call law enforcement. “When I think back to my experiences, the most justice-filled moment for me was in my very first police interview,” he recalled. “At the end of the interview the detective looked over at me and said, ‘Look, I trust you.’” This simple recognition was cathartic for Zippel, who had kept that part of his life bottled up for decades. “That’s all I wanted,” he said. “I don’t need 25 years to life. None of that. I just want [my abuser] to know that I’m not OK with what happened.”

Local police investigated the matter and ultimately brought it to trial. However, the outcome was always uncertain, as sexual assault trials have a troubling track record. According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network), for every 1,000 incidents of sexual assault, only 25 perpetrators will be incarcerated. Moreover, two-thirds of victims will not ever report the crime to the police. “There comes a moment that every witness goes through,” Zippel told me. “You sit down with the prosecutor, and they say, ‘Take out all the noise, let’s take out all the factors. What

“At various moments throughout the trial, the defense attorneys referred to him as ‘the rapist.’”

do you want?” For Zippel, the answer was simple. “What I wanted more than anything was for my abuser to stand up and say, ‘I wasn’t doing this to make you a good husband. This was my sickness, my taking out my own issues on you.’”

Zippel felt “extremely blessed” to have the support of his family as well as of a social worker as his case neared trial. Nevertheless, he wasn’t under any illusions: “It became abundantly clear in the lead-up to the trial that [the defense] were going to do whatever was in their power, come what may, to get it done.” Zippel understood then that he would have to share his intimate story publicly, and that the process would likely be extremely painful.

“I definitely dreaded it,” Zippel told me. Driving to the courthouse, he developed a habit that prepared him for the coming day’s events. “I had this one song which really described this journey; it was a very heartfelt first-person conversation between a Jew and God.” The song, “Tatty My King” by the Waterbury Mesivta, became almost a daily ritual. “I would park the car and kind of put my hand, my soul, in the hands of something larger than myself and say, ‘Look man, you know, whatever you want to see happen in there is going to happen.’”

Zippel would play the song “on the highest possible level” before entering

the courthouse—and for good measure. As his witness statement testifies, at various moments throughout the trial, the defense attorneys referred to him as “the rapist,” made a reference to Adolf Hitler in front of a gallery of mostly Jewish trialgoers, and even compared Zippel to Jussie Smollet, the actor who created a hoax hate crime. The trial was emotionally taxing for Zippel, but justice ultimately prevailed. Two years after Zippel first called the police, he walked out of the courtroom following a guilty verdict for his abuser, Alavina Florreich, then broke down and cried in the hallway.

But Zippel’s story didn’t end in that courtroom in Salt Lake City. Like most survivors, he didn’t simply move on. “I still cope with the aftereffects of my experiences, and I will for the rest of my life,” he said. While the scars and wounds he carries may never disappear, Zippel has dedicated himself to advocating on behalf of sexual assault survivors.

In recent decades, Salt Lake City has become somewhat of a hub for survivor activism, of which Zippel now represents a central spoke. Elizabeth Smart, whose story of abduction and survival in the 1990s captivated a generation, is a prominent advocate in her own right and became an outspoken supporter of Zippel; she also served as a crucial sounding board for him during the trial.

Over Zoom, Smart spoke glowingly to me about Zippel, saying she was “grateful” to him for “becoming that voice so many need to hear and being that source of hope for others who contemplate speaking about their stories.” Deondra Brown, another Utah native and advocate for sexual assault survivors, who is also known for being a member of The 5 Browns (a sibling band of piano wunderkinds), had equally moving words about Zippel’s post-trial advocacy, noting that he has “continued to challenge people to be better, challenged them to do better, and challenged them to band together. He’s an incredible asset for those of us who are out there trying to lead change. He has made such a difference already.”

Zippel’s courage has inspired others to share their stories. Speaking on Brandeis University Rabbi Peretz Chein’s podcast

## HISTORY

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in 2019, Zippel helped Chein share his own personal account of abuse. Their conversation, in turn, encouraged the entrepreneur and activist Eli Nash to tell his story in a TEDx Talk, “Escaping Porn Addiction,” that has over 4 million views. Zippel’s father, Rabbi Benny Zippel, who leads the Chabad congregation in Salt Lake City, believes that this terrible incident can “be transformed into a catalyst for good,” as the rabbi put it. “By my son going public, if that can enhance the life of even one person that, itself, is important.”

Zippel, who is now writing a memoir

about his experience to be published by Fedd Books in mid-2023, remains strong in his conviction that his story is neither uniquely Jewish nor particularly Orthodox. “I have been accused of having too hard of a perspective on how my [Orthodox] community sees this issue,” he said. “I think it’s high time that I make this as clear as possible. This is not the Orthodox community’s issue or the Jewish community’s issue. This is a global issue.”

Zippel is indeed a living testament of the complex identities and evolving forms the story of sexual assault takes,

as he stands in stark relief against the picturesque Wasatch Mountains that hug Salt Lake City’s eastern shoulder, his trim beard and black hat seemingly out of place in a progressive city nestled within a state founded as a Mormon refuge in the 19th century. Much like the refugees who preceded him, Zippel is blazing a new trail: a millennial Chabadnik in the middle of Utah, he’s expanding our understanding and empathy for survivors of sexual assault. ■

*This article was originally published on July 6, 2022.*

## COMMUNITY

# The Sexual Scientist

The story of German sex researcher Magnus Hirschfeld, an early activist for gay rights and founder of a clinic performing gender-affirming surgeries a full century ago, before the Nazis targeted him and his work

BY ROKHL KAFRISSEN

**W**hat’s your favorite Yiddish word? Along with *Why aren’t you married yet?*, it’s among my most dreaded questions. There’s a heavy implication that my answer should be something funny or—God forbid—*colorful*.

I’d much rather talk about my *least* favorite Yiddish words, of which there are a few. *Farglivert*, or congealed, is at the top of the list. Even the thought of it is slightly discomfiting, neither solid nor liquid, *farglivert*. I was gratified to find that translator Daniel Kennedy has his own problem with the word, and how difficult it is to translate properly.

Right behind *farglivert* is *geshlekhht*, meaning sex or gender. Feels weird to say that I hate the word sex. But in Yiddish, *dos geshlekht* (sex) has the word *shlekht* (meaning “bad”) right up front! Not to mention that it is an extremely unsexy word to say. For years I assumed

*geshlekhht* and *shlekht* were related, a linguistic remnant of some medieval prudery. However, despite being almost identical, it turns out the two words are completely unrelated.

*Geschlecht* means sex in modern German, too, and it shares a common ancestor with the Yiddish in Middle High German. What’s interesting, though, is that today, the German *geschlecht* has a much broader semantic field than the Yiddish, including “group” concepts such as race, lineage, and dynasty. That the Yiddish word minds its own business and sticks to sex is frankly something of a relief, and makes me hate *dos geshlekht* a tiny bit less.

*Geschlecht* has been on my mind as I’ve been reading about Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935). Hirschfeld was a pioneer in the scientific study of homosexuality, founder of the first clinic to perform gender-affirming surgeries (100 years ago!), and a (sorta) openly gay activist for gay liberation. His title was

sexologist, a job that seemed utterly fantastical to me when I read about it as a kid. Among his published work was the five-volume *Sexology* or, less pleasing to adult me, *Geschlechtskunde*.

You may not know who Hirschfeld was, but if you’ve ever seen a photo of a Nazi book-burning, it’s likely you’ve seen the destruction of his library without knowing it. In 1919 he founded and became the director of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. Within the institute, he collected thousands of books and materials related to his research, many rare and priceless. When Hitler came to power in 1933, he immediately issued an ordinance criminalizing any organization defending or arguing for gay rights. On May 6, Hirschfeld’s institute was stormed by a group of physical education students, members of Hitler Youth. They carted off thousands of Hirschfeld’s books and on May 10, 1933, the books were thrown on one of the Nazis’ first book bonfires.

In 1934, a special police task force was created to target homosexuals, the *Reichszentrale zur bekämpfung der Homosexualität*. According to historian George Mosse, this task force “made the persecution of homosexuals a priority of the state.” Further, in his *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*, Mosse writes that the “close connection between the persecution of homosexuals and the effort to maintain the sexual division of labor was demonstrated

when the same team which combated homosexuals was given the additional task of proceeding against abortions.”

As Mosse further explains, the vilification of nonconforming sexuality was crucial to the working of Nazi propaganda: “All outsiders were to a large degree rendered homogeneous, but Jews and homosexuals, rather than criminals and the insane, were thought to use their sexuality as an additional weapon against society. Whatever the differences in their stereotype, they shared this special dimension of evil.”

In 1934, Hitler ordered the murder of the leader of the *Sturmabteilung*, the openly gay Ernst Rohm. His murder was ostensibly part of Hitler’s campaign against homosexuals, but in reality, it was his way of eliminating competition and/or opposition. After the murder of Rohm, Mosse tells us, “it was the turn of the Catholic Church to be brought into line through accusations of homosexuality against priests and monks.” Between 1934 and 1937, some 25,000 priests and others were accused. “Such accusations,” writes Mosse, “proved a powerful political weapon at the same time that they legitimized the new regime as a bastion of respectability.”

Hirschfeld had been on a world tour at the time of the book burning in 1933. Unable to return to Germany, he eventually fled to southern France, where he died in 1935. He was famous enough that his death was world news. Even the *Tog*, a fairly conservative Yiddish newspaper, carried an extensive and respectful obituary for Hirschfeld, detailing his many achievements, noting that his work in *geschlechtslikhe* research had an enormous influence. The *Tog*, however, could not quite bring itself to print the word homosexual, instead speaking of Hirschfeld’s work to reform the laws around sexual crime. This was an oblique reference to Hirschfeld’s

ceaseless effort to repeal Germany’s Paragraph 175, criminalizing homosexuality. (The code outlived the Nazi regime, and was only completely repealed in 1994.) They did, however, describe him as teaching that there was male potential within each female and vice versa.

This was likely a reference to Hirschfeld’s doctrine of “sexual intermediacy,” with each human a mixture of male and female attributes, in differing proportions. As Ralf Dose wrote in his biography of Hirschfeld, this doctrine “made fluid the border between male and female in an age that still made enormous and unbending distinctions between the sexes and their respective ‘natural’ attributes.”

Without an institution or students to carry on his legacy, Hirschfeld’s work fell into obscurity. But at least for a few years after his death, his name still had currency. Dose notes that after his death, Hirschfeld was still being flogged in the Nazi press as a “Jewish type.” And in 1937, he was named in Hans Diebow’s *The Eternal Jew* as “the most repulsive of all Jewish monsters.”

Hirschfeld turns up in a slightly more surprising place in November 1941. Writing under Yitschok Varshavski, one of his regular *Forverts* pseudonyms, Isaac Bashevis Singer published a long screed about the sexual perversions of Nazis, with repeated references to the work of Magnus Hirschfeld.

The headline is “The Nazi Army and Navy Is Full of Men Who Lead Disgusting, Abnormal Lives.” Bashevis opens by stating his view of male-female relations: Females, whether animal or human, will always choose the strongest male and a human male must distinguish himself in some way while the female waits patiently.

But experience proves, he says, that “in times of war, upheavals return the masses to their ancient instincts.” Not only does war bring out man’s cruelty, he writes, “but for a large portion of women, war causes them to lose every shame, every control,” abandoning themselves to wantonness. Bashevis cites one of Hirschfeld’s books (though he never says which one) supposedly showing how during WWI, German

women lost all sense of morality. And as much as the German soldiers exhibited a wild barbarity, so did the German women show their own depravity. He cites a different scholar to show that “German farm women literally raped Russian and French war prisoners.”

He goes on to say that “it’s a known fact that Hitler, Goering, Goebbels, Hess and the other present day Nazi leaders are homosexuals.” In fact, he says, Rudolf Hess’ bizarre flight to England is easily explained. Hess was actually Hitler’s *vayb* (wife) but they had a fight and Hess did what women do after a fight: pitched a dramatic fit and pretended to leave.

It goes on and on like that. Hirschfeld is invoked again in regard to the gay men who wanted to serve in the German army and Hirschfeld’s involvement in evaluating their cases. Hirschfeld had an interest in proving that homosexuals were just as manly, just as patriotic as any other. He wanted the larger society to see homosexuals and other sexual minorities as fully human, and fully German. The point of Bashevis’ screed, however, is to paint the German military as full of homosexuals and thus, full of depraved men, all of whom have nothing to lose. And it’s not just men. He goes on another long tangent about women who disguise themselves as men in order to go to war. German women, he says, are especially known for doing this, as they have a drive to battle. The whole thing is so grotesque, so lurid, it starts to read more like a *Penthouse* letter than a *Bintl Brif*—though the second part of the article is actually printed on the *Bintl Brif* page.

The piece was written in 1941 and, of course, it’s obvious that those watching helplessly from America would be searching for ways to vent their rage at Hitler’s demonic rampage. But from my own standpoint of 2022, it’s a truly stomach-turning read, an attack on the right people (Nazis) using the innocent and well-intentioned as rhetorical ammunition.

There are, however, some kernels of truth hidden among the steaming heaps. As historian Elena Mancini explains in *Magnus Hirschfeld and the Quest for Sexual Freedom*:

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Hirschfeld, in fact, helped thousands of homosexual men and women, transvestites, and heterosexual women to enter the war by instructing them on how to pass as a “normal” soldier. His *Sittengeschichte des Weltkrieges* (Sexual History of the World War), a two-volume compendium on wartime sexual mores that he edited, is rife with accounts on how male and female homosexuals successfully passed as male soldiers. Although women were officially allowed to serve, they were banned

from the front. Hirschfeld openly argued the legitimacy of their service. In many cases in which homosexual activity was discovered in the military, Hirschfeld intervened, with success, on those soldiers’ behalf to mitigate penalties.

The opening of WWI saw Germans swept up in pro-war, pro-military excitement, and Hirschfeld was no exception. He’s a fascinating figure and deserving of our attention as a pioneer in LGBTQI research and activism. He

was also very much a man of his time, as recent scholarship has shown. Like all people, he was complicated. Indeed, Bashevis, himself a very complicated person, closes his *Forverts* piece with one thing I agree with:

*Lang konen mishugoyem di velt  
nisht firen*

The *mishugoyem* can’t rule the world  
for long ■

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ARTS & LETTERS

# ‘The Oppermanns’ Brings Us Some Bad News From 1933

Everything you thought would prepare you for success  
instead narrows your chances of survival

BY MARCO ROTH

**W**e already know the Oppermanns. Whether or not we admit it, we might even resemble them. There’s the oldest brother, Gustav—snobbish, debonair dilettante literary scholar and intellectual, member at all the best clubs; he entertains his friends with his collection of antisemitic literature and reads *Mein Kampf* “for the lulz.” There’s earnest, anxious Martin, who runs the family’s furniture business and keeps Gustav in clothes and cars, and his Prussian aristocrat wife, Liselotte; their adored son Berthold is the star student of his elite Berlin school’s literature and history program, at least until their humanist professor is replaced by a National Socialist ideologue. There’s wise

sister Klara, married to an arriviste real estate speculator and banker with American connections, a French last name, and an Eastern European Jewish background, and their son Heinrich, Berthold’s more popular classmate and star of the soccer team; there’s Edgar, an ear, nose, and throat specialist who’s perfected a pioneering surgical procedure, and teenage daughter Ruth, whose idealistic Zionism is a source of wonder when it’s not an embarrassment; and then there are mistresses, friends, colleagues, lawyers, servants, and employees, variously loyal and disloyal, envious or admiring, self-centered or selfless who comprise the supporting cast of Lion Feuchtwanger’s 1933 novel that bears the family name.

Writing at the speed of events, Feuchtwanger, a star Weimar novelist who had

been stripped of citizenship and was already a lucky exile in Provence—he would eventually make his way to Los Angeles—produced this symphonic and even leisurely paced twist on the classic German “decline of a family” novel (think *Buddenbrooks* with Nazis) in a few remarkable weeks. The various Oppermanns’ fates are traced out from the autumn of 1932—at Gustav’s 50th birthday party—through the Reichstag fire and the early promulgation of Nazi racial laws; then, with the aid of smuggled letters and testimonies, Feuchtwanger leaps a few short years into a future that would prove far worse than even this remarkably prescient novelist could imagine.

The novel was almost simultaneously translated and published in England, where Feuchtwanger hoped to mobilize anti-Nazi sentiment. As it turned out, Feuchtwanger’s intervention was about as effective as his character Gustav’s belated forays into amateur journalism and spying. In the novel, one of his more pragmatic friends in the burgeoning resistance offers an epitaph, “he merely saw things as they were and could not devise a way in which he could be constructively helpful.” Even so, *The Oppermanns* was something of a “best-seller,” translated into 10 languages and selling around 250,000 copies (an unthinkable large number by the standards of contemporary literary publishing). But, as Joshua Cohen notes in his introduction to this new edition, “[Feuchtwanger’s] example shows that art can



## Album of the Week

### Katie Alice Greer, *Barbarism*

Katie Alice Greer's new album, *Barbarism*, opens with the jarring "FITS/My Love Can't Be," with drumming noises firing. "There's been a lot of talk about what happens when we sleep," she says. We sleep "on the job like the night watch in a heist movie." Suddenly, the listener is in on the crime. "We let them in, didn't we?"

Greer first captured the attention of music tastemakers as the dynamic lead singer of the band Priests, where she declared that "Barack Obama killed something in me, and I'm gonna get him for it!" The politics of her new work is more abstract but just as vibrant.

*Barbarism*—written, performed, produced, and mixed by Greer herself—effuses a DIY spirit that recalls the alt-rockers of the early '90s like Guided by Voices, especially on tracks like "Fake Nostalgia," which uses *The Twilight Zone* to attack the concept in the title, and the dreamy and surreal "Dreamt I Talk to Horses."

Greer has called *Barbarism* an "entire world," and if it is, then it's one that is constantly shifting. It's a collection of songs worth sitting with for multiple listens. *Barbarism* is not built for an algorithm. It's an album built by a human being.

—David Meir Grossman

challenge power, as it were 'powerfully,' yet still have no political effect."

Or lasting literary effect, either. After its initial success, *The Oppermanns* did not become part of the canon of American Jewish postwar reading about the Holocaust or the lead-up to the Second World War; nor did this very German novel with its dinner parties, its refined ironies, and lively philosophical debates between characters about "idealism" versus "pragmatism" enter the postwar West German literary canon.

Its revival now, out this fall under the imprint of McNally Editions (the newly launched publishing arm of McNally Jackson independent bookstores), raises a different set of issues around its reception. Much of what was once fresh, newsworthy, and shocking about Feuchtwanger's novel comes to us with a sense of *déjà vu*. Even if we've never read it, we've already read some version of *The Oppermanns*. We know what's going to happen to these characters before they do and also before the author does. At a moment when the impotence of the world's commitment to "Never Again" has never been clearer, why do we need another story of European Jewry on the eve of their destruction?

Feuchtwanger's now much more widely known contemporary, Walter Benjamin, in his essay on Goethe's novel *The Elective Affinities*, proposes a distinction between a work's "material content" (what we'd now call "informational content") and the "truth content" that arises from the material, the transcendent element of a work that makes it endure beyond the moment of its composition and renders it available to succeeding generations beyond the dusty preserves of scholarship. This is one way to understand the idea of "the classic."

The "truth content" of *The Oppermanns*, nearly a century after the events depicted, remains deeply uncomfortable. Once we get past the fog of our own knowingness, Feuchtwanger's novel reads as a powerful case study of how particular cultures and life-worlds die, the way that F. Scott Fitzgerald says we go broke "gradually, then suddenly." All the Oppermanns' thoughts, their short-term decisions, their ideas, make

perfect sense—and indeed sound quite rational given the environment they'd known and the identities they'd chosen for themselves. The family is doomed by their successes, and their inability to separate themselves from the markers of success they had earned and the institutions that bestowed them. The novel is anthropology or sociology, not satire.

There's a reason why Feuchtwanger divides the novel as he does, crosscutting between scenes at school, corporation, clinic, and the literary world. When Berthold tells his new Nazi schoolmaster that he's "Just as good a German as you are," refusing to apologize for his argument that Gutenberg did more for Germany than the quasi-mythical leader of the Alemanni rebellion against Caesar, "Arminius" (aka "Herman the German"); when Gustav declares his disbelief that "a whole nation of 65 million has ceased to be a cultured people because it has conferred free speech upon a few fools and scoundrels"; when Martin tries to negotiate with the uppity goy who wants to take over his business; when Edgar thinks "German medicine and Jewish medicine did not exist, the only thing that existed was science" and continues to push for the promotion of his "ugly, inhibited" and ghetto-born assistant Dr. Jacoby; these are all habits of institutional mind that can't be unlearned overnight, even if the night in question is the eve of Hitler's appointment as *Reichskanzler*.

If the tiny chess moves that the Oppermanns make in the face of an impending global catastrophe appear to us as naive, then we too are naive in exactly these ways. We may believe that "race is unscientific"; that "markets are self-regulating"; that the phrase "all men are created equal, and they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" may reasonably be expanded to all genders; we might even believe that rights are unalienable. We may say "we are a nation of laws"; we may believe that the excellence of our work counts more than the boxes we check on census forms or the color of our skin. We may think our doctoral degrees guarantee us freedom of speech without consequence; that

the Federal Reserve will keep our economy on course; we might be shocked, shocked to discover that Supreme Court nominees lie to Senate committees, and that those who swear oaths to uphold the constitution one day would threaten violence against it the next. We might think our political enemies—or just the people who want our jobs, who envy our status—are weak-minded, barbarous, cruel, hysterical, narcissistic, immature, mentally unstable, ignorant, and hate-filled. Yet we also believe that

things will carry on much as they have before, with only minor interruptions to the status quo, the way a car might get a tire puncture.

Although Feuchtwanger was a friend of Brecht's and collaborated with him on several early plays, his chosen method in *The Oppermanns* is exactly the opposite of the godfather of 20th-century interventionist, activist avant-gardes. Instead of creating distance and estrangement and shock, Feuchtwanger draws us into the comfortable interiors

where life-damning decisions are really made. *The Oppermanns* presents how extinction feels from the inside. The habits that once kept you alive, passed on from generation to generation, no longer work. Everything you thought would prepare you for future success instead narrows your chances of survival. The news from 1933 is still news, if we know how to listen to it. ■

*This article was originally published on June 30, 2022.*

ARTS & LETTERS

# Clearing a Space

David Milch is the genius behind shows like 'Deadwood' and 'NYPD Blue,' with fundamental insight into the crooked workings of humanity, and the human soul

BY TED MANN

Clear a space," David Milch would say, and the script coordinator or the assistant assigned to transcribe Milch's dictation would hit the return on the keyboard at their desk, creating a blank space on Milch's monitor, empty of all words and images and any trace evidence of prior creations.

Milch has a chronically bad back. He lies on the floor as he works, surrounded by annotated script pages and printouts of the current draft of his work in progress, weaving stories in and out of each other in midair. He performs this work before a silent audience of aspiring writers; paid interns, for payroll purposes.

Milch is a friend and professional colleague I've had the good fortune to work with many times over the last 40 years. He has written and produced hundreds of hours of popular dramatic entertainment, initially for broadcast TV, later for the cable network HBO. Milch's shows, like *NYPD Blue*, which he created with Stephen Bochco, and *Deadwood*, were

popular and commercially successful, but they were even more influential than their popularity would suggest, often appealing to those who don't normally watch popular media. I loved working with David, not only because he was a line-level genius, but because of his insight into the crooked workings of humanity, which he understood fully, with love.

There's no guarantee of popular success for writers, especially writers of genius; writing is a calling, a vocation. For some, it's a curse. It's not a choice, except for the hobbyist. In David Milch's case, his survival depended on the work, and the work depended on prayer.

Other writers and journalists often asked Milch about his "process," or writer's methodology. Writing is a mixture of craft and inspiration around which professional writers often construct elaborate superstitious rituals, just as athletes frequently do. Milch always replied truthfully that his "process" was his reliance on prayer.

Prayer is indispensable to Milch in his work and in his life. Milch works every

day, and he prays every day. His sense of the possibility of a world beyond the one we see on an everyday basis is essential to his art, and to his judgments of men. Even his memorably foul-mouthed demystifying creations like Andy Sipowicz on *NYPD Blue* or Al Swearngen from *Deadwood*, who were so often taken as Milch's own alter-egos, were in constant conversation with the beyond. Inventing characters, he knew whether the soul of a man had passed through previous transmigrations or whether it was one of the "new souls."

As a result of birth, his genius, and despite, or because of his sexual abuse, Milch was destined for a top spot in the mirror world. He might truly have run nations, operated vast covert financial networks, made and broken lesser men. He could have created and captured industries. The kingdoms of the world were on offer, in line with the capacities that were his birthright, and which had been nurtured in him by the traumas and other advantages of his upbringing. Instead, Milch felt called to the work that would save his life, and which benefit our world in ways most of us are unable to really see.

David Milch's father was a prominent Buffalo physician—a surgical innovator, the respected and successful head of his department at the principal hospital of that then-thriving upstate city. Milch's mother was, according to her son, politically progressive. During his childhood, she was occupied with the improvement by education of the lot of

working people; as head of the Buffalo school board, she was preoccupied with that task.

Many of Dr. Milch's patients were "successful Buffalo businessmen" who had prospered greatly in prohibition, and after WWII, were actively engaged in the modernization of bookmaking, loan sharking, prostitution and new gambling enterprises in Havana, Cuba, and later, after Cuba's revolution, with building Las Vegas. Milch recalls his childhood home as often filled with convalescing gangsters under Dr. Milch's care. He also noted that their delicate cardiac conditions often correlated with congressional hearings on organized crime, which the convalescent wiseguys watched with much amusement, their comments providing an education for the young boy in the ways of the real world. "I had one great-uncle we had to visit outside territorial waters on a boat off Florida," he recalled. "There were certain members of the family who would never be seen in public with my dad—not because he objected, but because they didn't want to screw him up."

In 1950s Buffalo, the rackets were a career so lucrative, open and accessible to all, that the work was, if not respectable, a lesser disgrace than being poor. When Meyer Lansky said, "We're bigger than US Steel," he was being modest. If you were part of the world of OC, the mirror world, by birth or elective affinity, you knew cops and crooks were not opposite poles of a moral continuum, but rival predators. (Anyone familiar with the horrendous Whitey Bulger case in Boston will recall how the FBI partnered with Bulger's criminal faction to wipe out the previously dominant Italian mob.)

Milch was a child prodigy. He could read, understand and remember books, songs, faces, numbers, images, and stories. He never forgot anything, a trait that was perhaps not always to his benefit. Milch often tells how, in his childhood, a "family friend, a friendly uncle type," introduced him to a "gang of pedophiles who passed me around from the time I was 8." Even if most people prefer not to think about it, the trade of children is a lucrative feature of the

**“You're a good Jew, Dave, you're a white Jew. I like you,' George H.W. Bush blessed him.”**

mirror world, and the building of pedophile blackmail/control networks is the meat-and-potatoes of every intelligence service.

"The pain of the past in its pastness is translated to the future tense of joy," David Milch liked to say, quoting the great American literary figure, poet, author, and teacher, Robert Penn Warren, Milch's mentor at Yale. Milch had a spectacular undergraduate career at Yale. No undergrad in living memory is recalled by his peers as so brilliant, so charming, so candid, so amusing and so fucked up. Milch graduated first in his class. Of Penn Warren, Milch said, "He saved my life, just in terms of showin' an example of how to live a coherent life. He also engaged me to work on a history of American literature. 'I can't help you,' he said, 'until whatever is troubling you remits itself, but you can study during this period.'"

At Yale, Milch was a member of the same fraternity of which George W. Bush was president. The other brothers were the patrician, moneyed sons of established WASP families. Whatever the qualifications are for a cabinet post in the Underground Empire may be, David Milch, a Jewish doctor's son from Buffalo, met them. Once, on a duck hunting trip to Louisiana with some fraternity brothers, Milch was sitting in a swamp,

slapping flies and attempting to avoid injuring any ducks. He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was a friend's father, then director of CIA, later president himself, who'd joined the hunt. "You're a good Jew, Dave, you're a white Jew. I like you," George H.W. Bush blessed him.

David Milch, whose mother ran the Buffalo school board, whose father tended to gangsters' hearts, and who was passed around by pedophiles as a child, was invited to join the most storied of all secret societies, Skull and Bones. There is a procedural ritual. The invitation is formally made and the candidate advised the only responses accepted are one word, either "accept" or "decline."

Today, Milch's fraternity brothers run Fortune 500 companies, intelligence agencies, and foundations which bend dreams into shapes that fit together in ways that the so-called beneficiaries can't see, but the grant-makers can. A tremendous opportunity for a (relatively) poor but talented Jewish child from soon-to-die Buffalo to have power and make money. Milch declined.

Milch tells a story about a bachelor party in Houston, which perhaps may shed some light on that choice. Milch and several of his fraternity brothers were invited to the wedding of another frat brother. The family jet of the future groom flew the groom's party to Houston for a week of pre-wedding festivities. The high-spirited youths were each given Mercedes to drive, compliments of somebody's father's dealership. The future operators of the world all got drunk and they took those Mercedes off-road, onto a golf course and had a Paris-to-Dakar rally on the local country club greens and fairways. You can imagine there was heck to pay, and quite a bit of shouting. In the end, somebody's father had to pay for the extensive landscaping that was needed to restore the Bob Rees' golf course.

Then came the night before the wedding, and the groom was asked, "is there anything special you'd like to do on this, your last night of freedom?"

The groom replied he'd like to *destroy an original work of art.*

After a brief scavenger hunt, a Chagall drawing was located and ceremoniously incinerated in the wastepaper

basket in the library of a Houston plutocrat's home.

There are mystics who believe it is wrong to retain beyond the immediate needs of self and family, riches that flow from a freely given gift of God. I don't know if Milch believed that. If he didn't, though, his lack of such faith could not be told from his behavior. David Milch made large amounts of money, but he gave it away almost as fast, constantly, in private and in public, making no distinction in persons on religious, racial, economic, or public health grounds, as long as they would share in his wealth.

Milch helped friends, relatives, friends of relatives, friends of friend's relatives, and thousands of strangers. He eased countless family emergencies, helped with hundreds, perhaps thousands of substance abuse disasters, broken cars, burned homes, dead batteries, and felony warrants. Milch was a source of unsecured, no-interest, often no-repay "loans" to the worthy and unworthy alike.

Milch's beneficiaries, erstwhile creditors where they had the brains, would find his advice more valuable than money. Rita, nee Rita Stern, David's long-suffering wife, would periodically purge the charitable rolls, evicting excessively tenacious clients. However, Milch is an earnest member of several recovery communities, which continuously provide an ethnically diverse multitude of worthy and unworthy persons in indubitable need.

Milch, under no illusions, loves them all. He loves the scamps, the wiseguys the perverts and fools, Mormons and Mormon-haters, good and evil; though the latter tended not to hang around long, due to Milch's long friendship and professional association with NYPD Detective Bill Clark. Milch's only close male friend in adult life, Clark is an Irish American Vietnam vet who began his career in NYPD's (then secret) Intelligence Division. On patrol in the jungles of Southeast Asia, Clark developed an eye for hidden trip wires and booby traps. As head of a big city homicide division, Clark's work involved handling hot cases, politically dangerous cases, involving powerful people and terrible

secrets. Many of the stories on Milch's *NYPD Blue* police drama originated in Clark's case files.

David Milch's own celebrated descents into the world of addiction, compulsions, and the demonic occurred at long intervals separated by decades of productive work. The experiences informed his dramas, as did his childhood experience of sexual abuse. He elevated with love that fallen world, this realm with its multitude of addicts, golems, killers and demons inhabiting the walking wounded of diminished capacity. All dramas begin, "Back," Milch would quote the poet William Yeats, "where all the ladders start; in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

Besides opiates and the rest of pharmacopeia, Milch suffered from another, more dangerous addiction: high stakes gambling. He owned racehorses, and won the Breeder's Cup Juvenile back in 1992 with the beautiful filly Gilded Time. For this reason, he was hesitant about doing the dramatic series *Luck*, a story about organized crime and revenge set in the mirror world of horse racing.

In gambling parlance, David Milch was a whale—a high-net-worth individual who meets the definition of hope-to-die gambler, an addict who, once he "gets his nose open," will make million-dollar bets and find it difficult or impossible to stop. Las Vegas bookies offered a million-dollar cash reward for anyone who delivered Milch as a client.

What we know, for sure is that in the end, the house wins. Perhaps the mirror world takes the money back, or a beat forces the gambler to reflect on who he is and what he wants. "We let you walk around like a man for a while, then we turn you back into a little boy," is an old Vegas saying Milch liked to quote. Milch lost, they say, \$70 million. I wasn't there and did not discuss his losses with him; we mutually acknowledged those facts through silence. It *was* a bad beat.

Milch wasn't quitting, though. He thought he might have one arrow left in the quiver. He talked about a show set in a CIA-run bordello in London. The players were Sir James Goldsmith, several Rothschilds and Guinneses, Lords Aspinall, Lucan, and a spectrum

of addicts, occultists, extortionists, and spies engaging in espionage, extortion, entertainment, political blackmail in the treacherous hypersexed milieu of the London clublands.

We were driving to lunch in Santa Monica, discussing the prospective CIA project one afternoon, when Milch said he'd made an appointment with the former director of the CIA, James Woolsey, to meet at the LA airport to discuss the projected U.K. spy-honey-pot project. An important meeting, a necessary conversation. Milch was to meet the former director between planes in the not-so-secret VIP spook lounge at LAX, when something entirely unexpected happened.

"I forgot," he told me.

David Milch didn't forget anything. Ever. We both knew that. If he forgot anything, it was a sign of something awry, an ominous warning of pathology at work. In retrospect, Milch recognized there had been other warning signs. It wasn't long, perhaps a week or two, between that conversation and Milch being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, a progressive dementia for which the only treatments are palliative. "It's not scary," he said soon after his diagnosis, "it's just like ... the world slipping away."

A bad beat. And yet, Milch had rejected the position on offer. He declined membership in the semisecret club, did not sleep naked in a tomb with a stolen skull; instead, by prayer, personal sacrifice and constant lifelong effort, he created redemptive works of dramatic art.

The worlds of *Deadwood*, of *NYPD Blue* and *John from Cincinnati* and every other dramatic world that Milch created stood opposed to the pure materiality and marketing of the mirror world. The economic and popular success Milch's shows enjoyed was outweighed in importance by the powerful and enduring

## ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

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effect on human consciousness of thousands of hours of dramatic entertainment which showed, and which itself is, a work of the spirit.

Prayer is how David Milch thought about his work, and stages of contemplative ascent occur in sequences of scenes. For some, an eschatological elevation of the soul occurs unexpectedly. While Milch always identified himself as a Jew, like another old friend, Kinky Friedman, he is somewhat estranged from traditional, formal practice of Judaism, as I am from the Anglican faith of my birth. My own interests and our

irreligious times inclined many of us, “Christians, Jews and Sigma Nu’s,” as Kinky Friedman likes to say, to a semi-agnostic secularity that did not frown on prayer or the possibility of redemption. Once a fellow writer described the deity in Milch’s presence as “the foul demi-urge that made this world.” Milch was profoundly shocked. Not much shocked him, but his face showed unmistakable horror.

Milch was able to look with love on all the polar extremes of experience, a capacity that is especially necessary and lacking now, as times are changing. The

world has a way of opposing and mistreating unusual people while the person is in the body, and so it is better they remain anonymous while within the world’s reach. When they are beyond it, as David Milch now is, it is better their works be known. He was the “*Rosh ha-Dor*, the leader of his generation, in the spiritual sense of the person who lives in communion with God, but utilizes his power in order to draw his contemporaries upward with him. ■

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ARTS & LETTERS

# Why Read Taubes?

The controversial Jewish thinker leads us to see ourselves as we are

BY BLAKE SMITH

**W**hy do we read biographies? Why do we want to know about other people? Emile Durkheim, the French Jewish founder of sociology, once said that he knew his grandmother was recovering from a bout of illness when she began asking for gossip about the neighbors. A curiosity about others tethers us to our own individual lives. My colleague Derek Duplessie argues in a similar spirit that gossip is the beginning of philosophy. We wonder how other people are the way they are, so strange and different from us, managing continually to surprise us and yet be somehow particular selves of whom it can rightly be said, “how like him to do that!” We begin thinking about what it is within us that takes interest in these forms of human difference.

We are not, to the extent we are not sociopaths or marketers, fascinated by this diversity because we anticipate some personal, practical advantage

from understanding it. Rather, at least if our train of thought is taking us toward philosophy, our gossipy concern with others’ lives seems to be a pleasurable outing that returns us, circuitously and often without knowing it, to a confrontation with our own way of being, and its possible emendation. It makes us ask, when we see the great, terrible, baffling fates of others, how such a thing can befall not such-and-such a person whom we thankfully will never resemble, but a person, any person, and thus us as well. The philosophical question “what is it like to be the beings we are?” animates every otherwise prurient whisper about what other people are up to. We tell each other stories about other people because they are, we forget for the duration of the story and then remember with sudden unwelcome intuition, ourselves.

When we say gossip is a vice, we mean gossip in a deficient mode that never circles back to self-awareness. Once I was bitching to a friend about a colleague who had made what I took to be an absurdly, spitefully big deal about my not

having heard of some author. “Blake,” she asked, “do you think *you’ve* ever gone out of your way to make someone feel stupid?” Oh right. I am, always, what I critique; bitchiness spits into the mirror. I gossip to congratulate myself that I’m not like the person I’m talking about, that I don’t share their sins and weaknesses. If the person is someone I somehow envy, for his mind or body or circumstances, gossip can also relieve my burden of being only myself by discovering his faults and limitations. His life isn’t so great anyway; he pays an awful price for his singularity. This is the gossip to be condemned, if it were possible to separate it from the gossip that awakens us to philosophy and self-reflection.

Jerry Muller’s new biography of Jacob Taubes (1923-87), *The Professor of Apocalypse*, contains much of the two sorts of gossip. It is an erudite and magisterial book that surveys many of the most interesting strands of 20th-century thought by following the life of an idiosyncratic Jewish thinker who, although he wrote little, left an enormous impact

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on Europe, the United States, and Israel by bringing into dialogue the Frankfurt School, German Protestant theologians, Nazi philosophers, New York's Jewish intellectuals, ultra-Orthodox sects, and many others. Muller is fascinated not only by Taubes himself, but by the fascination Taubes exercised on so many of the previous century's most serious scholars, writers, and religious thinkers.

Taubes' influence was often dark and sometimes fatal. His first wife, Susan (née Feldmann) committed suicide shortly after publishing a confessional novel, *Divorcing*, chronicling his infidelities and domineering intellectual influence. He was also responsible for the suicides of Joseph and Miriam Weiss, a couple he met in Israel as a junior scholar. Joseph and he were colleagues, both protégés of Gershom Scholem. They became friends; Taubes lived for some time with the couple, during which he had an affair with Miriam. He added betrayal on betrayal, poisoning Joseph's relationship with Scholem, warning his friend that the senior scholar thought he was mentally unstable. When Taubes' efforts were exposed, Scholem cut contact with him. It was too late for the Weisses, who both committed suicide.

In the face of such evil, it strikes me as at best unseemly to dwell on the sort of details in which Muller sometimes luxuriates and which other reviewers of the book find so appealing. Stories abound of Taubes' genius for passing himself off as more learned than he was (which was, in fact, astoundingly learned). He is reported, in response to a colleague's remark about an obscure medieval text, to have expounded at length on its arguments and influences, without being the least bit embarrassed when the colleague informed him that he had made the book up. Nearly all the pages of Muller's book that are not shadowed by Taubes' maleficence gleam with amusing anecdotes in which he crosses the great and not-so-good with his scintillating mix of cosmopolitan knowledge and self-promoting pomposity. In that sense, the book is mostly a delight, mingling solid, wide-ranging intellectual history with an enlightened form of celebrity gossip (the two genres are after all hardly ever separable).

**“Women flocked to his lectures because of his seductive manner, his good looks and (according to Susan Sontag) erotic prowess.”**

But, as my dissertation adviser so often reminded me, we must ask the essential question of a historian who otherwise might go on forever telling you what happened next—so what? Why be interested in Taubes, or care that other, famous, people were interested in him? Why consider, at great length (the book is 637 pages long) the life of an ethical monster and scholarly charlatan? He left behind, as Muller notes again and again, in almost the voice of my adviser bemoaning the misspent talents of promising students, no great book, no original idea, only critiques and provocations scattered across occasional papers and talks. Is the reader to spend several hours—and has the author spent several years—acquainting himself with a self-serious Zelig?

When Muller considers what others found interesting in Taubes, his answers are almost always deflationary. Women flocked to his lectures because of his seductive manner, his good looks and (according to Susan Sontag) erotic prowess. Gentiles went to hear about Jewish worlds they knew little of—Taubes, son of a prominent rabbi, could move—in German, Yiddish, French, English, etc.—through every sort of congregation with ingratiating charm, and return from them with knowledge to captivate new audiences. He played the same trick

in reverse, spending time in Christian monasteries and theological centers, then impressing Jewish scholars with his ability to shine light from Protestant and Catholic traditions on their own concerns. Muller suggests that Taubes was interesting to audiences and readers insofar as they didn't know better. He implies at one point with particular uncharity that Taubes, and indeed the whole emerging canon of 20th-century German and French-language Jewish thought, including Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, are so widely discussed in our time because they provide a flavor of Jewish thinking for those who have insufficient Hebrew to pursue the real thing. Not only was Taubes a fraud, he almost says, but his admirers are, too.

Biographers perhaps cannot ever be honest about their own autobiographical reasons for pursuing their subjects; who can know his own motives? But Muller's relentless reduction of Taubes to his (many, grave) failings and idiosyncratic character, and account of his career in terms of networks, gives us little sense of what was at stake in his thought, or why anyone would have been set off by it to thinking of his own. After all, what matters in the thought of another person is not, except in a mere antiquarian sense, its objective “originality” (there are only so many ideas; I am not sure we have produced any new ones in the past hundred years), but its power to make *us* think, to make us realize we have not been thinking. And this Taubes does and did.

Here is why I read Taubes: A friend told me to. It was a few hours into one of those intense conversations at the beginning of a friendship, when, with an intensity equal to falling in love—and perhaps with even greater intensity, since there is nowhere in the body for their eagerness to rest, no sex to suspend the conversation—two people disclose their passions to each other. Each wants the other to read his favorite books, to experience again his first encounter with the thinkers that form his personal pantheon, his self-made genealogy of intellectual mothers and fathers. “Come

meet the people who made me!” they say to each other.

My friend told me I had to read Taubes—specifically his posthumously published lectures *The Political Theology of Paul*. I knew Paul from my Southern Baptist childhood as a sublime prophet of love (only just last week, I wept at a wedding while his famous passage “Love is patient, love is kind...” was read) and freedom from the law—and as the condemner of homosexuality (my own form of love) the opponent of women speaking in church, the self-promoting hustler who transformed a nebulous spiritual movement still not clearly distinct from Judaism into a new religion with universal ambitions and a historic hostility to the Jewish people. Lover of love and liberty, hater of gays, women, and Jews, Paul is hard for anyone but earnestly—or unthinkingly—pious Christians to like. I never managed to be one of them.

But Taubes, my friend insisted, gives us Paul afresh. This rabbi’s son, who had studied with such Jewish luminaries as Leo Strauss and Gershom Scholem, developed his radical rereading of Paul through a dialogue with the Catholic and Nazi thinker Carl Schmitt, for whom Paul had seemed to authorize a conception of the Jews as Christians’ eternal foes, and politics as the eradication of one’s enemies. In a conversation with Schmitt toward the end of both of their lives, Taubes posited that Paul had to be understood as speaking to Jews, with the same apparently imprecatory but in fact deeply loving tone as that with which Moses had alternately called on God to destroy and save His people. Paul was, Taubes held, Jewish through and through. Nor was his political teaching, as Schmitt made it seem, one of accommodation to the powers of the world and the ruthless enmity they bear toward those who oppose them, but an opposition to all forms of “law,” whether from religious or state authorities. Priests and rulers already meant nothing to the inner freedom of the believer, and soon even their outward authority would disappear with the advent of a messianic age. The question for us, Jews and Christians and those who live, like it or not, in the shadow of our

“Priests and rulers already meant nothing to the inner freedom of the believer, and soon even their outward authority would disappear with the advent of a messianic age.”

fathers’ faiths, is do we want Messiah? Taubes read Paul, and read and spoke to Schmitt, because they lead him to this question we must keep asking.

We read the books our friends recommend in part to get to know them better by knowing what they love. As I read Taubes, it struck me that he must have been for my friend, a Jewish political theorist who is one of our generation’s most thoughtful elucidators of Schmitt, a model of how one might engage such a powerful but noxious mind as that of the Nazi regime’s court legal theorist. Taubes confronted Schmitt directly, in person and on his own terrain: the New Testament. His critique of Schmitt was all the more powerful, I realized, because even as it took the fascist philosopher head-on, it refused to accept Schmitt’s simplistic binary of “enemy” and “friend” (a move that would later be made by the other brilliant Jewish critic of Schmitt, Jacques Derrida, in what may be the late 20th-century’s supreme defense of democracy, *Politics of Friendship*). Even as, with more honesty than Schmitt’s left-wing apologists in the academy, he exposed the antisemitic core of his interlocutor’s thought,

Taubes pursued a close-but-confrontational intimacy with this thinker who horrified and dazzled him. At least for a moment in the ecstasy of thinking together, it may seem not merely that an enemy becomes perhaps a friend, but that the very notions of enmity and friendship both fall away as an inescapable connection is uncovered, one in which two people are held in conversation by the text that address them.

Nothing cancels the wickedness and wasted gifts of Taubes’ life; nothing cancels the world-historical guilt of Schmitt—least of all a gossipy interest in the glib externals of their brushes with other well-known figures or appearances on scenes of power and influence. But the two men’s encounter, which Taubes brought to other listeners, and still to his true readers today, contains essential human questions that we try to escape through moralizing condemnation or trivializing curiosity about the men who pose them. It stands as a model of how we are to hear the call that resonates from the Bible and from every human life.

The book and our neighbors, equally enigmatic, by turns beautiful and horrifying, speak to us in and incite us to stories, at the end of which we ought to discover, as the prophet Nathan said to David, that we are the ones about whom they are told. History, biography, theology, and every other field of study are, if not animated by the spirit of Nathan that turns us back to know ourselves at last, more or less pleasant, pointless diversions. Taubes fascinates not, in the end, for all the sociological and psychological reasons Muller gives, but because he leads us to see ourselves as we are, as the people whom the perennial questions address. ■

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# Potato Kreplach

BY MICAH SIVA

## INGREDIENTS

FOR THE DOUGH:

- 2 cups all-purpose flour**
- Zest of 1 lemon**
- ¼ tsp sea salt**
- 2 large eggs**
- ¼ cup water**

FOR THE FILLING

- 2 Tbsp olive oil**
- 1 medium yellow onion, hopped**
- 2 cups leftover mashed potatoes**
- ¼ tsp sea salt**
- ¼ tsp black pepper**

FOR ASSEMBLING THE KREPLACH

- 1 Tbsp cornstarch**
- 2 Tbsp water**

## PREPARATION

TO MAKE THE POTATO KREPLACH DOUGH

Combine the flour, lemon zest, and salt in a food processor. With the blade running, add eggs and olive oil. Add additional water, as needed (1 tablespoon at a time) until a dough forms. Roll into a ball, and cover with plastic wrap. Refrigerate for 15-30 minutes.

TO MAKE THE POTATO KREPLACH FILLING

Meanwhile, prepare the filling: Heat the olive oil in a pan over medium heat. Add the onion, and cook until softened and golden, about 15-20 minutes. Add to the leftover mashed potatoes, and season generously with salt and pepper.

TO MAKE THE POTATO KREPLACH

### Step 1

Combine cornstarch and water in a small bowl.

### Step 2

On a lightly floured surface, roll the dough to ⅛th inch thickness. Use a paring knife or pizza roller to cut the dough into 3-inch squares.

### Step 3

Using your finger, run the cornstarch mixture around the edges of each square. This acts as glue.

### Step 4

Place 1 to 1½ tsp of potato filling in the middle of each square.

### Step 5

Fold into a triangle, and join the ends.

### Step 6

Place on a floured tray, and repeat with all the filling and dough.

### Step 7

Bring a large pot of salted water to boil. Cook the kreplach for 2-3 minutes or until they float to the surface.

### Step 8

Serve with broth, or alongside fried onions.

**Yield:** 2½ dozen

