

# 2016

## H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

No. 600

Published on 22 March 2016

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux  
and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

**Carole Fink. "The 'Most Difficult Journey of All': Willy Brandt's Trip to Israel in June 1973." *The International History Review* 37:3 (June 2015): 503-518. DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2014.933745. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2014.933745>**

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR600>

Review by **Jenny Hestermann**, Fritz Bauer Institut, Frankfurt/Main, Germany

---

**W**hen the German chancellor Willy Brandt descended from the airplane that carried him to Israel in June 1973, he stepped on thin ice. The visit to Israel was the last and most critical in a series of "pilgrimages of expiation" (503), part of his *Neue Ostpolitik*.

As a highly symbolic event, the four-day long stay of the Social Democrat and former Expatriate and Resistance Fighter Brandt demonstrated a shift in the relationship between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Jewish state. Carole Fink argues that despite his humble and "affable" (512) attitude in Israel, Brandt mainly promoted the aim of the German government to detach itself from the Nazi-past and to respond (as the administrator of the third largest economy in the world) to the challenges of the Cold War with a newly found confidence, while facing the threat of an oil boycott by the Arab states.

Her arguments and findings challenge the German perception of Willy Brandt as the Chancellor of peace and reconciliation and rather point to the interest-driven changes in German foreign policy under Brandt, who sought to overcome the "special relationship" with Israel formed by the Christian-democratic Chancellor Konrad Adenauer.<sup>1</sup> By combining the still-underrated methodological approach of analyzing a single highly symbolic event within the field of International Relations with an original argument, Fink succeeds in adding new aspects to research on German-Israeli relations. Fink explored source material which was only recently opened and made accessible by the Israeli State Archives.

Fink's article is divided into four major parts. After introducing the general international setting and political context of the visit, she presents the 'prelude' of the visit in the context of German-Israeli relations and more specifically the relationship between Willy Brandt and Prime Minister Golda Meir. The main part of her piece is its analysis of the different stages, the program, the debates and their protagonists. Fink claims that by

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Niels Hansen, *Aus dem Schatten der Katastrophe. Die deutsch-israelischen Beziehungen in der Ära Konrad Adenauer und David Ben Gurion* (Düsseldorf, 2002).

setting a different tone, the visit signaled a shift in the relationship between the two countries, towards a normalization wanted by the German government.

Brandt's visit was part of the new German policy of 'evenhandedness in the Middle East' (*Ausgewogene Nahostpolitik*). Brandt sought to achieve the aspirations of the Social Democratic government to slowly but surely transform the 'special relationship' with Israel into so-called normal relations. 'Normalization' with Israel was the German code for free economic exchange with the Arab states, including arms deals. This attitude was the focal point of the Israeli critique of Brandt. The German chancellor had dispatched his Foreign Minister, Walter Scheel to Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon on a "goodwill visit" (508) before taking off to Israel, thereby putting the evenhandedness into practice. Furthermore, his delegation was a mixture of personages considered critical towards Israel with others considered to be rather 'Israel-friendly.' All these aspects of the visit pointed to a turning away from the emphasis on repentance and the 'special relationship' with Israel that the Christian-Democratic Union of Germany repeatedly affirmed over its twenty-one years in power.

Directly from the airport, Brandt and his delegation rushed to Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, where the Chancellor, according to the international etiquette and ritual, lay down a wreath and, rather unusually, read out some psalms. The fact that he chose psalms calling to a forgiving god underlined the character of the visit of wanting to overcome the past.

The private as well as the official talks between members of the German delegation and their Israeli colleagues were characterized by rigidity on the German side and frustration on the Israeli side. Golda Meir had high hopes for the main three Israeli requests (more weapons, help for the Jews in the Soviet Union and direct mediation with Egypt), but Brandt rebuffed all of them firmly. In this stance, Brandt could rely on domestic support based on the new atmosphere in German society, especially in the radical left-wing in his own party, which denied that the guilt of the past should be a motivator for foreign policy and saw Israel as a politically responsible force in the Middle East.

Furthermore, the program of the visit included a rather casual evening in the Kibbutz of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yigal Allon, in the north, close to the Sea of Galilee, as well as a trip to the historic site of Masada where Brandt almost lost his life in a helicopter accident (511). Due to this incident, the attention of the world press was drawn to the visit.

Most of Fink's sources stem from the Israeli State Archive (ISA), which, in preparation for its fifty-year jubilee, has made much material publicly accessible online. For an integration of her findings into the history of Brandt's chancellorship, Fink draws on the memories of the member of delegation Klaus Harpprecht,<sup>2</sup> and on an autobiography of Willy Brandt.<sup>3</sup> For integration into the research on German-Israeli relations after

---

<sup>2</sup> Klaus Harpprecht, *Im Kanzleramt. Tagebuch der Jahre mit Willy Brandt* (Reinbek, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Willy Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten. Die Jahre 1960-1975* (Hamburg, 1976).

## H-Diplo Article Review

World War II she relates mainly to Markus Weingardt, who wrote a valuable overview about German-Israeli relations from 1949 until 1990.<sup>4</sup>

In the last paragraph of her well-structured article, Carole Fink joins the debate regarding Willy Brandt's responsibility for the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War due to his refusal to mediate peace negotiations with Egypt. The arguments in this German debate from 2012 are, however, mainly politically motivated from both sides, and engaging them serves for an ending a little less convincing for an otherwise thoroughly researched and eloquently presented article.

While political relations between the two states in the frame of international constellations has been subject to a large amount of research, including that of the author herself,<sup>5</sup> the specific event of the State Visits as a bridge between *Realpolitik* and symbolic politics is still understudied.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Fink's article adds a new angle to the existing literature on German Israeli relations by exploring the significance of symbolic politics which was long underrated.

From the way in which Carole Fink's article approaches diplomatic history we can learn how fruitful the intertwining of international relations with the micro-perspective on a single, highly symbolic, event can be.

**Jenny Hestermann** is a post-doc researcher at the Fritz Bauer Institut, Frankfurt/Main in Germany. In her new project, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education, she currently researches the historical development in the cooperation in the Humanities between Germany and Israel. Her Ph.D.-thesis, entitled "Behind the scenes: Visits of German politicians to Israel in the years 1957-1984" will be published in 2016 in German language. She has received scholarships through the German National Academic Foundation, the Leo Baeck fellowship and the German Academic Exchange Service and has given various talks on the history of German-Israeli relations and the symbolic role of state visits.

© 2016 The Authors

[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

---

<sup>4</sup> Markus Weingardt, *Deutsche Israel- und Nahostpolitik. Die Geschichte einer Gratwanderung* (Frankfurt/Main, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Carole Fink, *Ostpolitik 1969 – 1974. European and Global Responses*, Cambridge 2009. Lily Gardner Feldman: *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation. From Enmity to Amity* (Lanham 2012).

<sup>6</sup> On this subject see my forthcoming book: Jenny Hestermann, *Hinter den Kulissen. Reisen deutscher Politiker nach Israel in den Jahren 1957-1984* (Frankfurt/Main, 2016).