"A past that refuses to go away":

On Recent Historiographical Debates in the Federal Republic of Germany about National-Socialism and the Final Solution.*

On 11 July 1986, philosopher Juergen Habermas of Frankfurt University published a full-page article in the liberal West German weekly, *Die Zeit*, under the title: "A Kind of Settling of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German Historical Writing about the Contemporary Period". By "contemporary period", Habermas obviously meant the Nazi era; and by "apologetic tendencies", a historical writing which minimises the specifically criminal side of Nazism on the one hand and, on the other, revives nationalist themes.

According to Habermas, the renewal of German nationalism is actively fostered by public figures and intellectuals linked to the conservative coalition presently in power. This urge to rekindle national values is expressed, for example, in initiatives to set up historical museums in Berlin and in Bonn, and a national memorial in Bonn to the dead (all the dead) of World War II. One of its most visible foci, however, is the writing of history, possibly the most effective way of creating an adequate national memory. Habermas quotes Michael Stuermer of Erlangen University: "The loss of a sense of orientation and a quest for identity are linked," writes Stuermer. "Whoever thinks that all this does not influence politics and the future, ignores the fact that in a country without history, those who know how to fill in the contents of memory, how to construct the concepts and how to interpret the past, will win the future." In Germany, the contents of memory cannot avoid a rather difficult past: the Nazi era. Hence the new "apologetic tendencies".

Habermas illustrates his argument by quoting extensively from very recent books or articles produced by such well-known historians as Andreas Hillgruber of Cologne University and Ernst Nolte of the Free University in Berlin. These texts will be referred to extensively further on.

* This is the English translation of the original Hebrew text published in Ha'aretz on 3 October 1986.

For Habermas, the dividing line is essentially political: the nationalism he attacks and the "apologetic tendencies" he denounces are, in his view, neo-conservative. German liberal democracy, which succeeded in establishing itself since the war, argues Habermas, "will not be stabilised through some kind of NATO philosophy painted in German national colours": "The only patriotism that does not estrange us from the West", writes Habermas, "is a patriotism based on the constitution (Verfassungspatriotismus). A tie to the universal principles of the constitution, based on conviction, has, unfortunately, become possible in that cultured nation, Germany, only after and because of Auschwitz. Those who, through some rhetorical device such as 'guilt obsession' (Stuermer, Oppenheimer) want to bring back to the Germans a conventional form of their national identity, destroy the only reliable foundation of our ties to the West."

Habermas's article exacerbated what by now, in West Germany, is an ongoing controversy about the nature of German identity and possibly, indeed, about a new German nationalism. But this controversy can be considered on two different levels: the issue of nationalism puts conservatives in opposition to left-liberals; it involves historiography of the Nazi era. But, the revision of various aspects of the historical image of the Nazi era extends far beyond the traditional conservative circles: the "yearning for normality", in the words of Guenter Hoffman in Die Zeit, the need for a relativisation and normalisation of the Nazi past, is present in wide sectors of German society. In his article, Juergen Habermas fused two issues which only partly overlap.

In any event, in this essay, the right versus left opposition will not be stressed and the recent shifts in historiography as such will be the main subject. Three examples (two of which are used by Habermas) will help to clarify the ongoing process. This process can be summed up in a key word: "historisation". The authors whose recent texts will be considered aim, each in his own specific way, for the historisation of National-Socialism.

What is meant by historisation?

Up to the end of World War II, German historiography was deeply rooted in the tradition of historicism, that is, a tradition aimed at restoring the historical complexity and specificity of each period or phenomenon under scrutiny, by considering it in its own right and by attempting to understand it both with the tools of analytic enquiry and with an empathy allowing for a kind of intuitive grasp of its essence.

It goes without saying that in relation to Nazism, historicism had to reverse itself. The Nazi era, because of its specifically criminal aspects, could not be considered in the same way as any other period. It could not be placed within the normal flow of historical development, and empathy had to be replaced with strict distancing.

Describing this situation, the Munich historian Martin Broszat recently wrote that when approaching Nazism, "the historian takes distance.