



POLITICS, HISTORY, AND CULTURE

A series from the International Institute at the University of Michigan

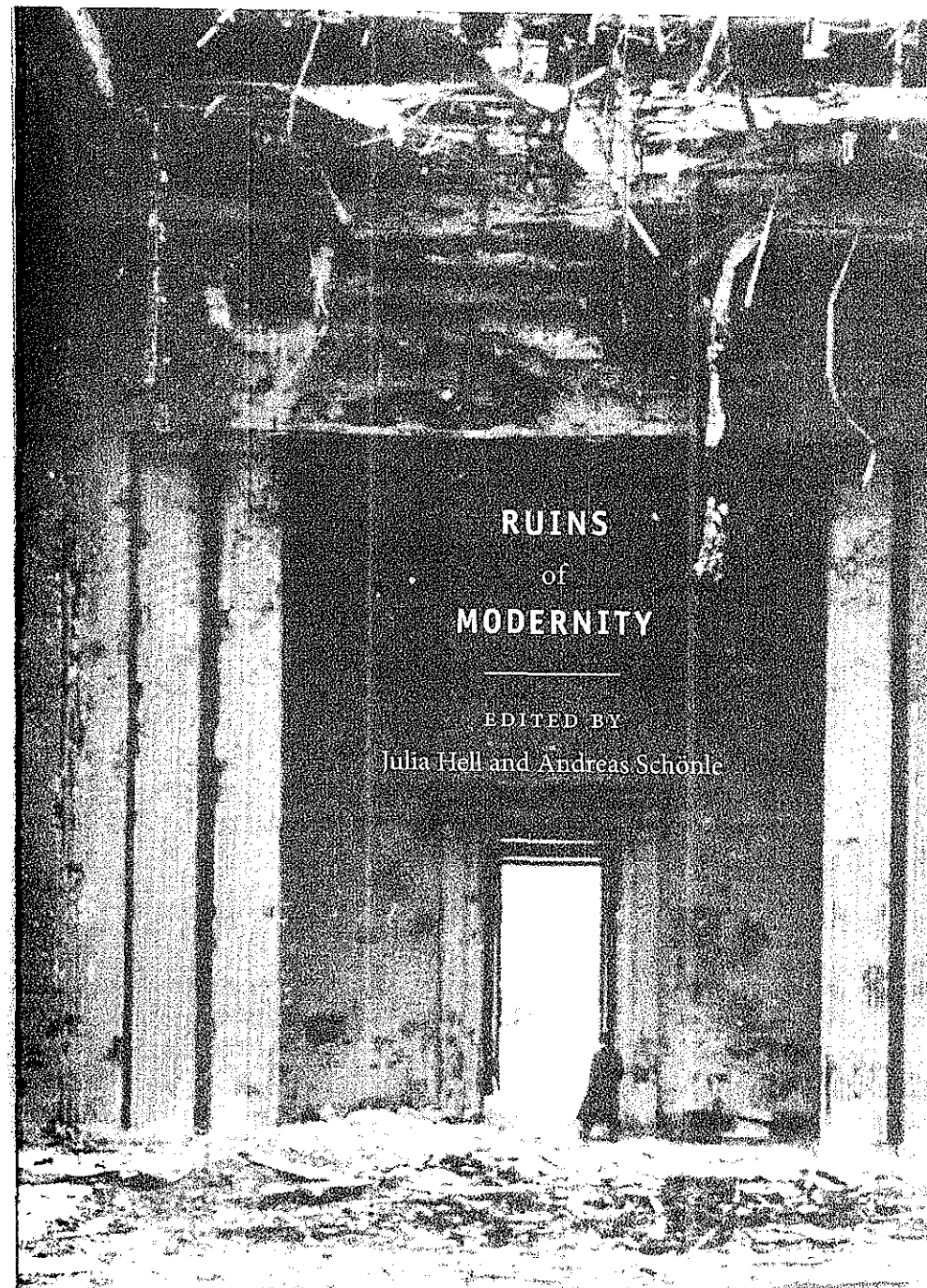
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Sponsored by the International Institute at the University of Michigan and published by Duke University Press, this series is centered around cultural and historical studies of power, politics, and the state—a field that cuts across the disciplines of history, sociology, anthropology, political science, and cultural studies. The focus on the relationship between state and culture refers both to a methodological approach—the study of politics and the state using culturalist methods—and a substantive one that treats signifying practices as an essential dimension of politics. The dialectic of politics, culture, and history figures prominently in all the books selected for the series.



RUINS
of
MODERNITY

EDITED BY

Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle

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essayist, and one of the more intriguing figures of interwar Czech culture, thanks largely to Sayer's *The Coasts of Bohemia* and Hayes's excellent edition *The Journalism of Milena Jesenská*.

26. *Ibid.*, 164.
27. In fact, she had perfected this strategy even earlier, in her dispatches from a starving and impoverished Vienna, written in the months after the First World War. See Jesenská, *The Journalism of Milena Jesenská*, 49–100.
28. Jesenská, "Jak tato doba zahrála na nervech" (How This Time Has Gotten on Our Nerves), in *Nad naše síly*, 139; originally published in *Přítomnost* on November 16, 1938.
29. Neumann, "Úvodem" (By Way of Introduction), in *Československý podzim* (Czechoslovak Autumn), 5.
30. *Ibid.*, 6.
31. See Zeman, *Československá Golgota*, 213–27; Černý, *Křik koruny české*, 88; and Kovárna, "Rozdíly duše" (Differences of Soul) and *Česká střízlivost a český pathos* (Czech Sobriety and Czech Pathos). Zeman quotes one version of Mussolini's statement: "It's clear . . . that when a nation with a large number of men and an extensive arsenal is not capable of a gesture, it is ripe, overripe for its own new fate" (*Československá Golgota*, 214).
32. Kovárna, "Rozdíly duše," 192.
33. Josef Čapek, *Psáno do mraků 1936–1939* (Written on Clouds, 1936–1939), 283.
34. *Ibid.*, 185.
35. *Ibid.*, 190.
36. *Ibid.*, 207.
37. *Ibid.*, 133.
38. *Ibid.*, 220.
39. *Ibid.*, 341.

AMIR ESHEL

8

LAYERED TIME

*Ruins as Shattered Past, Ruins as Hope in Israeli
and German Landscapes and Literature*

Any attempt to understand why ruins such as those of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, the Stadtschloss in Berlin, or the Twin Towers in New York matter so much should begin with the obvious: we are fascinated by structures that disintegrated or were shattered as a result of human action—buildings, sites, and neighborhoods that were leveled in a calamitous war, or destroyed by forces we call political in the broadest sense. Ruins that signify decay or natural decline, however, are fascinating only in protoromantic and thus anachronistic contexts.

In *Stranded in the Present*, Fritzsche discusses Western notions of history in the aftermath of the French revolution. In previous centuries, Fritzsche claims, ruins signified the dignified presence of earlier epochs and a cycle of life and death resembling natural history. In the modern era, ruins came to be understood as objects of observation and study—in short, a target of historicizing. Ruins became the sign of a new approach to the past: no longer could history be seen as the source of a heritage that dictates how we think about our lives, how we act, and how we envision our future. The past became a way to think about our ability to act and influence the world in "circumstances of contingency."¹

No longer signifying simply the cycle of life and death, modern ruins ceased to underscore the power of nature over human creation. Faced with an ever growing rate of change, the ruins of the past—the ruin as an object of aesthetic awe and source of inspiration—became "a foundation for an alternative present."² Ruins lost their magical appeal and the dark fascination surround-

ing the dialectics of culture versus nature. The horrors of human history began to be understood as the result of "a specific historical disaster" and not of an abstract "devastation of time":³ formal insights into the action and mutability of the historical process and into the production of ruins could then be taken to provide, Fritzsche claims, "evidence of abrupt endings and new beginnings, and thereby encouraged the efforts of contemporaries to 'make' or resist history in the present."⁴ Not the ruin, he concludes, but "the ruin of the ruin is the hallmark of modernity."⁵

The ruin, in other words, is deprived of its ability to serve as the source of melancholic retreat and aesthetic experience. Unearthed, hermeneutically explained in service of present-day aspirations, the ruin entered a sphere in which every element of signification is made available for a new and immensely powerful thrust forward. Away from the premodern fixation on history as a shaping, nonhuman substance, the world of humans ceased to be thought of as a hostage to the past but rather as what is given to humans of the present to shape as they wish. With this infusion of energy, the way was paved for the cataclysms of the modern era, a time characterized by unprecedented economical, technological, and social advances and by the previously unknown horrific consequences of attempts to create mankind—or a certain race or class of it—*anew*. This is also, of course, the era of modernism: the notion that artistic creation should free itself from the bonds of known forms and past modes of expression.

It took the devastations of two world wars and the massive deaths resulting from fantasies of a classless world to shake modernity's confidence in its ability to create a world freed of all relation to the past. While the interwar era left intact much of this dream—that we might reshape individual and social spaces in light of futurist projections—the decades following the Second World War were dominated by questions like how we might deal with completely flattened neighborhoods and hollowed-out cities, and how we can make sense of and signify spaces in light of a past of destruction so recent and so unforgettable that it is always at hand. And these questions were asked amid remnants that kept evoking the outcome of some of modernity's most monstrous notions regarding the creation of a new, liberated mankind. In Germany, ruins such as those of the St. Nikolai's Church in Hamburg and the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin were left as *Menetekels*: haunting skeletons which never tire of reminding us of the unprecedented scars inflicted by the world wars. If the historical and temporal consciousness of the modern age can be understood as strandedness in the present, then the postwar era—especially the decades following the Auschwitz trials of 1963–65 and the Eichmann trial of 1961—was littered with ruins and remnants that were seen as almost untouchable artifacts, objects

which would not allow us to historicize them, objects which found their significance in their command that we must always remember.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, public interest in such ruins and the weighty discussion surrounding sites of memory became a significant facet of what Huyssen aptly describes as a new kind of concentration on things past: it reflects an obsession with the notion that the forward gallop of modernity has caused not only memory but the past itself to begin to slip away. We postmoderns "counteract" the fear of forgetting with "survival strategies of public and private memorialization."⁶ Some thinkers even go so far as to describe this new postmodern or late-modern era as barren of a reflective sense of time and history. Jameson, for example, proclaims that our late-modern epoch stands for "the end of temporality";⁷ the capitalist machinery of production, consumption, and profit-driven politics radically reduces our imaginations to the realms of the present and the body.⁸ The modernist emphasis on the now as a way to rethink present conditions in light of future—if not futuristic or utopian—fantasies is gone, Jameson claims, and in its place is a complete strandedness in the now that leads to an obliviousness of human historicity, to an inability to regard the given conditions as the products of human action, and thus, crucially, to an inability to see these conditions as subject to change.

While many of Jameson's examples support his observations, I would like to suggest a more complex picture in reference to the prominence of ruins such as Dresden's Frauenkirche. I would like to argue that the presence of ruins in the faces of our cities, in significant contemporary literature, in cultural criticism, and in the popular imagination implies a modification of the modern concentration on the now in light of unprecedented historical events, that those occurrences demand a renegotiation between overcoming the recent past and maintaining its memory as a way to avoid inhuman modernist fantasies. Furthermore I will suggest that our cultivated ruins—which serve as memorial sites and as multifaceted objects of cultural production and political dispute—demonstrate that space has never completely shattered the modern concern with time and temporality. In other words, the ruins of our postwar era—ruins, that is, of post- or late modernity—are not the material manifestation of a fascination with destruction and demise, not only sites in which memory *qua* memory is ritualistically celebrated. The sites also enable us to think about the historicity of our condition and even experience hope. The significant ruins of our time indicate both the persistence of the catastrophic and the fact that humans—weak and restricted as we might be—are still agents of our histories. Negotiating past and present, these ruins reveal the possibility of thought along lines that move through different temporal realms—between what occurred,

what persists, and what can still occur—and thus suggest the potential for change. What such ruins denote, I will conclude, is not melancholic retreat from human action in time, but rather an awareness—not universal, but not deniable—of the inscription of time, the inscription of human agency in space.

Established in their current political form in the late 1940s, both Israel and Germany have cultural and political discourses that are shaped to a large extent by debates surrounding questions of history and memory. At the center of many of these debates, we find the difficulty of deciding between alternative understandings of what the countries' pasts signify. What does a site of memory denote, and what should it denote? What are the meanings and lessons of the narratives surrounding such sites? What might be the implications of those narratives for the future of the state—its social formation, political discourse, and cultural institutions? In both Israel and Germany, the debate regarding the signification of the past is thus unsubtly related to thorny questions about the present and the future. In Germany, debates about the material remnants of sites such as the Frauenkirche often touch on the tensions inherent in the role of today's German national consciousness in light of Germany's nationalistic past: does the reconstruction of a ruin that for decades symbolized Germany's defeat, the devastations of a war brought about by nationalistic and racial zeal, and the horrific air raids on German cities mean that Germany is now moving away from that past and assuming a new, assertive role in Europe?

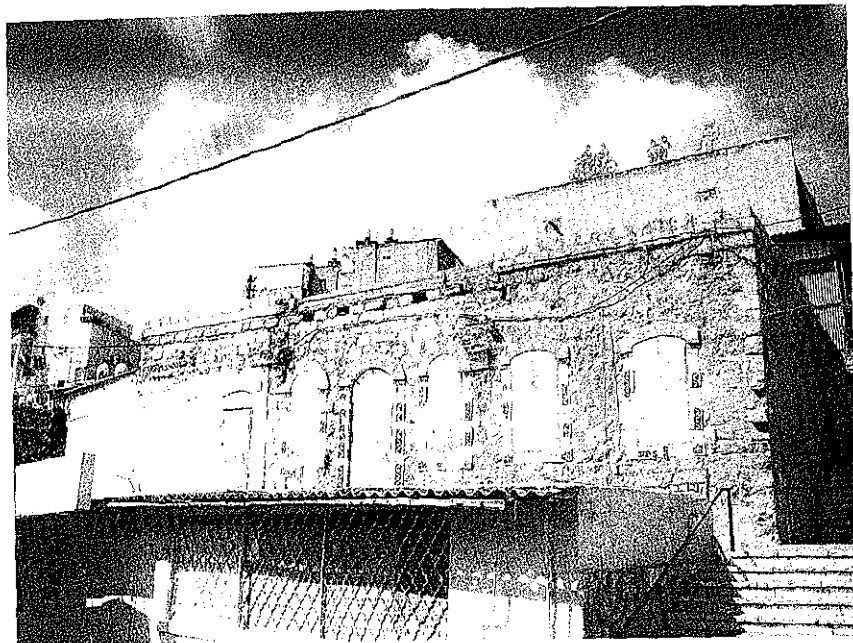
Grounded in the notion that Zionism reconnects modern Jewry to the bygone age of Jewish political independence in the Holy Land, Israel integrated ruins such as Masada and the Western Wall in Jerusalem into aspects of what is essentially the political culture of a modern state. These ruins are often used as settings for national ceremonies, commemorative events, and the taking of military oaths. The underlying narrative of such ceremonies is that of restitution out of destruction: the Jewish state of antiquity is continued or resurrected through the modern sons and daughters of ancient Israel and Judea. The narratives surrounding such remnants as the Western Wall are at the core of many modern political questions. To what extent does the presence of massive stones from Herod's day, excavated and now on public display, indicate the historical right of Jews to settle what has become the Palestinian quarter in Jerusalem? Since the events surrounding the departure of some 700,000 Palestinians from what is now Israel in the 1948 War of Independence are at the heart of the present political struggle over the future of large parts of the Holy Land, ruins and remnants that evoke the flight or expulsion of Palestinians are at the center of bitter political debates.⁹

In addition, the discussion of significant ruins—and hence of the memory of the past—is related in Germany and Israel to their mutual past, the historical event that most significantly informs their cultural and political discourses regarding the past: the Holocaust. In both countries, evoking, presenting, and commemorating past events means rethinking the present in light of both the recent and distant past; in both countries, the Holocaust is one of the most crucial moments that define the current cultural and political landscape. Both material ruins, such as those mentioned above, and ruins in literary works display the layering of time in space, what Koselleck calls *Zeitschichten*. According to Koselleck, historical time is rendered concrete through spatial metaphors. *Zeitschichten* can be observed in marked places such as ruins which indicate the presence of several historical times in one material stratification; break lines that become visible in marked spaces, going through and sometimes connecting different moments in time to a new layer, as in a geological structure.¹⁰ Both the invocation of historical time and the consideration of the connection between different temporal realms (lines connecting Nazi Germany with current German circumstances; lines relating Jewish antiquity to present-day claims over disputed territories) originate at the turn toward narrative. Through narratives, material ruins gain their chronotopic quality: they signify the inscription of history in space; through narratives, ruins promote conflicting notions of the past.

A telling example is the role of ruins in Zionist culture and ideology. Narratives preoccupied with ruins serve in contemporary Israel as a central trope in fostering a sense of community through a connection to the ancient Jewish past. The founding of Tel Aviv on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean in 1909 was motivated by the desire to build a clean, European neighborhood on the outskirts of Jaffa, which was seen as grimy and Oriental. In Hebrew, *tel* is a mound of ancient ruins, while *aviv* means the season of spring. The name of the new city represents the claim that it was built on the ruins of ancient Jewish civilization in the promised land.

Growing up in Haifa, in northern Israel, I never heard the story of Haifa's pre-1948 past in a manner that emphasized the lives of the city's Palestinian population. The deserted, cemented-up houses in the Arab quarter were left silent; no sign explained their haunting stillness.

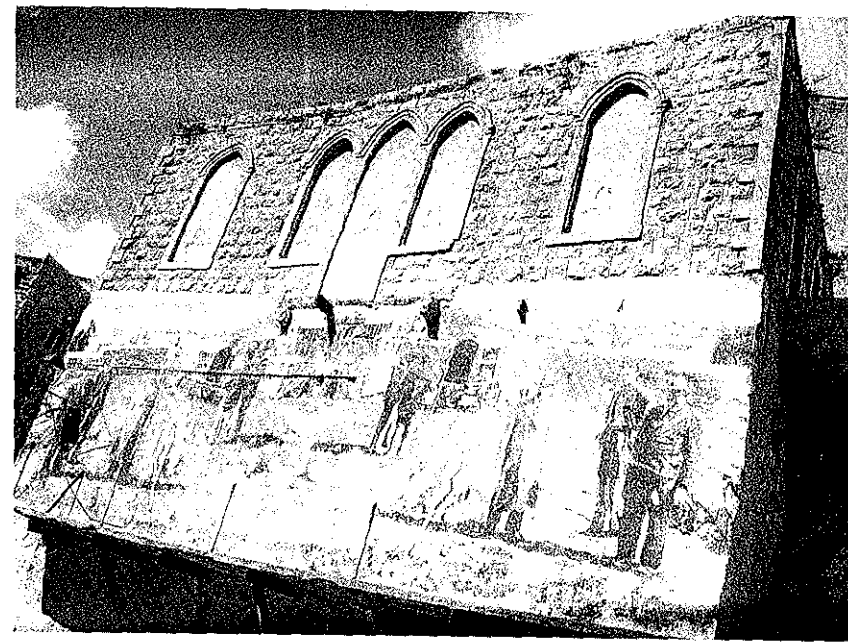
The usual story told about the emergence of present-day Haifa is one of creation out of nothing. Haifa's past, as seen in the silent Arab houses, lay literally in ruins. Much has changed in the city over the last two decades, yet these ominous cenotaphs still stand, calling upon all to tell their story. Hardly any national effort has been made to explain what led to their abandonment. On a municipal level, however, Haifa's Jewish population does address them as



1. Deserted, cemented-up houses in Haifa's Arab quarter, summer 2004. Photo by author.

ruins that memorialize the departure of the city's Muslim population in 1948. In recent years, a variety of street happenings and artistic exhibitions turned some parts of the old Palestinian neighborhoods into an open-air museum of the past and of a future of Arab-Jewish cohabitation. The current artwork near or on the deserted houses indicates not only the traumatic moments of war and exile but also the possibility that new life might emerge in these spaces, and thus the historicity of their present condition. On the walls and windows of one cemented-up Palestinian house, a work by the Israeli artist Igal Shtayim, *Untitled*, brings together images of Haifa's past and of a woman. The images of the woman in the windows project life back into the silent, ruined space, signifying the possibility of a future life in these houses. Where once people used to live, the past and its memory is a haunting presence, yet what is now gone can return through human action. Creating art is one possible action. It does not undo the past but rather suggests adding to it a new layer—a possible new form of life, the return of a vibrant community.

Artwork also covers the walls of other Palestinian houses in Haifa. The windows of some of the houses display poetry—the work of Palestinian or Israeli writers, such as “Le’vad” (Alone), by the poet Nava Semel. Set in Haifa's Arab quarter, the poem disrupts the spatial setting of the decaying wall it is



2. Igal Shtayim, *Untitled*, painted on two unoccupied Palestinian houses in Haifa. Photo by author.

attached to. Displayed in Hebrew and in Arabic, the poem also disrupts notions of monolingualism and marks the space as belonging to more than one ethnic group.¹¹ It proposes that past catastrophes always leave room for hope.

Written by a child of Holocaust survivors who made Israel their home after the Second World War, the poem displays the layering of several times in Israel's metaphorical space: it is written from the perspective of Jewish suffering, but, as it is set in the present and in a new space, it underscores the darkness resulting from the displacement and exile of those who used to live in the cemented-up houses. To be sure, the poem hardly equates the sufferings of those who were exposed to “darkness” in Semel's own biography with the darkness suffered by Haifa's Palestinian population. Instead, it shows that diverging memories can share a single space, and that those who experienced darkness can perceive the sufferings of those around them—in this case, those who lay claim to the same space in what is now Israel.

Another ruin serves as the site around which both remembrance and the possibility of human action in time are considered in a novella by the eminent Israeli writer Yizhar Smilansky, who uses the pen name S. Yizhar. This work gave rise to one of the fiercest public debates in Israeli history, a dispute about the question of Palestinian flight and expulsion during the War of Indepen-



3. Nava Semel, "Le'vad"
(Alone), on a wall in
Haifa's Arab quarter.
Photo by author.

dence.¹² Hirbet Hizah is the name of a fictional Palestinian village.¹³ Written in 1949, the story tells of the Jewish occupation of the village as seen from the perspective of a young soldier. The soldiers were ordered to arrest all the men; gather all the women, old people, and children, load them onto trucks, and transfer them behind the demarcation lines; and blow up their stone houses and burn their huts—in short, to turn the village into a ruin.

When the soldiers have carried out those orders, the novella switches from a mode of description and psychological realism to one of metaphor and symbolism, full of allusion and allegory:

I had to control myself. My guts were screaming. Colonialists. . . . Hirbet Hizah is not ours. Never did the machine gun give [anyone the] right to anything. . . . What didn't they tell us about the [Jewish] refugees. Everything for the refugees, their peace and rescue. . . . Sure, our refugees. Those we expel—that's a different matter altogether. Wait: two thousand years of exile. Whatnot. Jews are killed. Europe. Now we are the masters. Would the remaining walls not scream in the ears of those who would later live in this

village? Would the air not be filled with the shadows, sounds, and gazes, with the sights, the screams that sounded and did not sound, the frightened innocence of shocked cattle, the surrender of the weak, and their heroism, the single heroism of those who don't know what to do and cannot do [anything].¹⁴

The images of the degradation of Palestinians, which earlier in the novella alluded to images of Jews expelled during antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the recent Holocaust, culminates in this section in the repeated use of *karon*, which in Talmudic Hebrew means a vehicle to transport goods, but in modern Hebrew means rail car.¹⁵ The references collapse together the image of Palestinians awaiting expulsion with that of Jews transported to their death during the Holocaust: "like lambs to slaughter."¹⁶

Like Semel's poem, the novella does not equate Israelis' actions with atrocities committed against Jews during the Holocaust. Instead it maps the ways in which the observer retrospectively arranges events and invites the reader (through the formal collapsing together of divergent images) to think of the Israeli War of Independence as both clearing the road to Jewish statehood in Palestine and introducing a set of ethical choices never faced before. In focusing on the transformation of a village into a ruin, the story expands the reader's view of the Zionist endeavor and what Gershon Shaked calls the Zionist meta-narrative—a narrative assuming the creation of the new Jewish national entity on the ruins of Jewish antiquity in Palestine. The novella does not simply present a critical account of what happened during the 1948 war; it also acknowledges, without moralizing, what the narrator terms "colonialism."¹⁷ In speaking out in the face of destruction, the textual ruin underscores what occurred during the war but also reminds us that the destruction of the village is the result of human action, and that the ruin can thus be seen as challenging us to respond to it.

The novella became a literary site of memory immediately after its publication. The poet Leah Goldberg, for example, expressed an early appreciation for its honesty and "civil courage."¹⁸ The *now* coexists with the memory of what the War of Independence involved—the flight and expulsion of Palestinians—and the significance of this event for any attempt to envision the future course of the Jewish state. In signifying the historical layers of this site, the novella serves as a focus for personal and collective reflection: it is through this and other literary sites that the interdependencies between the occurrences of the past and the constitution of the present are made present, showing us that what occurred is an indication of what can still occur, if we choose to address the circumstances and conditions of our lives.

Collapsing together images of the 1948 War of Independence with those usually associated with Jewish suffering during the Holocaust invited—as a literary provocation—individual and social reflection on the relationship between the recent past in Europe and the options that Israelis and Palestinians are facing in its aftermath amid the difficult circumstances of the Middle East. The novella's implied insistence—that the unprecedented Jewish suffering during the Holocaust marks a turning point in thinking through the moral contingencies of our time—is one of the first literary examples of the process by which the Holocaust has become a crucial element in the discourse of globalization. One of the central scenes of this process of debating the connections between the Holocaust as a global signifier and questions of moral conduct undoubtedly is contemporary German culture—not least through its fascination with ruins. The dramatic paintings of Kiefer and the prose of Kluge and Sebald clearly reflect the significance of ruins in imagining the past and thinking through its relevance to culture and the public sphere.

The German version of the memory boom of the eighties and nineties included a broad public debate surrounding a section of Berlin that came to be known as the Topography of Terror. In the rather small area between Niederkirchnerstrasse (then Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse), Wilhelmstrasse, and Anhalter Strasse, both the SS and the Gestapo had their headquarters between 1933 and 1945. This was the ground on which Himmler, Heydrich, Kaltenbrunner, and their staffs walked. Offices here ordered and controlled the persecution of political opponents, the assimilation of all occupied territories, and the Holocaust itself.

After the badly damaged buildings on this site were torn down in the 1950s, the terrain was cleared of debris, only to eventually become—after the erection of the Berlin Wall—a part of the city's new frontier. When Berlin prepared to celebrate its 750th anniversary in 1987, the site and the rest of the Wilhelmstrasse were redesigned to include information boards that refer to Berlin's manifold historical incarnations. Passersby in the Wilhelmstrasse could now look through transparencies depicting the government buildings that used to be where now generic houses stand. Through the street sign which located the site of the president's palace during the Weimar republic, the present became a layer of the stratification of time and history in space.¹⁹

The site of the Topography of Terror was made available to the public through an open-air pavilion displaying the documentary exhibition *Topography of Terror: Gestapo, SS and Reich Security Main Office on the 'Prinz Albrecht Terrain.'* The public interest proved immense, and the exhibition was extended. A commission appointed by the Berlin Senate in 1989 suggested keeping the

Topography of Terror as a site of remembrance and learning, but that triggered an extensive debate over the site's future. Twenty years later, the future of these ruins at the heart of the German capital remains uncertain.

The role of the ruins as initiator of a public debate whose point of departure is the past and whose trajectory is the future becomes evident when one visits the site, analyzes the explanatory texts, and speaks with the staff. The association that manages the ruins has a Web site that provides relevant historical information and displays entries in the guest book by prominent visitors to the site. These entries are reminiscent of the artwork in Haifa's Palestinian quarter: the ruin is recognized as encoding the past, and thus provides a sense of remembrance of the traumatic moment at which a previous form of life came to an end. However, the entries go beyond retrospection to include the decisive element of projection: a consideration of how present-day circumstances might relate to future possibilities. The ruins' potential involves the site's specifics. One view is that the material foundations of the ruins should be solidified as an indication that the past has been integrated into the German consciousness. As the writer Maxim Biller, a German Jew, insists: "In the open-air presentation of the topography of the terror one learns a surprising insight—that during the Nazi period, Germans were tortured by Germans . . . Germans were thus also victims of National Socialism? Why do we know so little about it? And when would this chapter of German history . . . be finally appropriately presented, that is, not only through a few open-air exhibition boards?"²⁰

The ruins signify the same future-oriented thought, the possibility of hope, present in the somewhat abstract words of Christina Weiss, culture minister under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder: "Today we draw together again a strength of vision—with firm view of this reality, we hope for a new communicability."²¹ For Weiss, the ruins are a powerful source of inspiration, serving to mobilize, energize, and enable a more communicative German discourse. During a visit to the site on November 21, 2002, the current chancellor, Angela Merkel, noted that many people today deplore a sense of widespread amnesia. She then emphasized that the notion of community is lost if modern society remains completely stranded in presentness—that is to say, solely focused on the instantaneous and on consumption. Merkel ties together what is lost (gone because of crimes committed by the site's previous inhabitants), its persistence in the present as remains, and the future-oriented notion that such places also indicate communal values: "Memory creates responsibility. The exhibition . . . clarifies what happened, and makes responsibility tangible. . . . [T]he words of Demosthenes . . . apply: 'for the free, shame over the events is the most enormous source . . . of civil courage. For the liberal community, attention to others

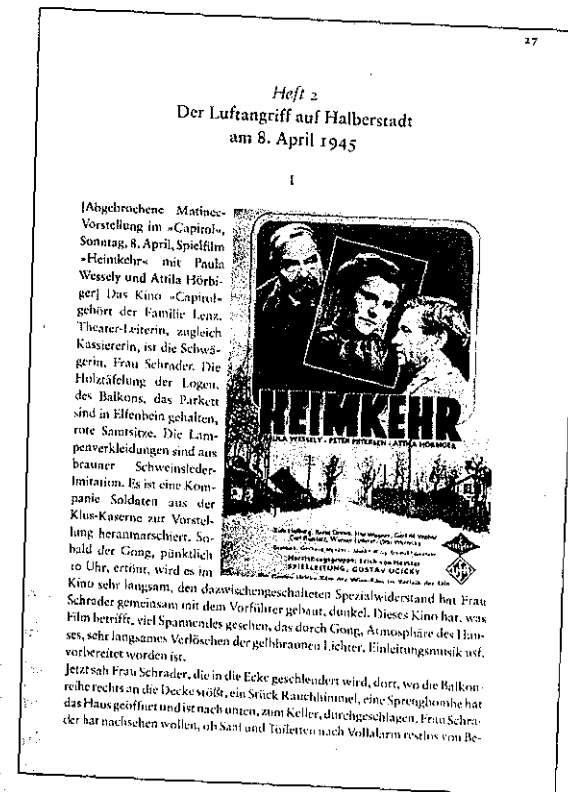
and the adherence to human rights remains the highest requirement.’”²² The ruins serve both as the signifier of an abstract, collective German shame for Nazi crimes that is the encoding of the past, and as a point of departure in a reflection on future human action, the material origin for a foundational agreement reminiscent of the German constitution, which begins with the rather elusive principle “the dignity of humans is unimpeachable.”

Encompassing speechlessness in the face of man-made catastrophe and as a point of departure for reflection on the future, the ruins are also at the core of one of the most impressive pieces of postwar German literature on ruins, Alexander Kluge’s “Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945” (The Air Raid on Halberstadt on April 8, 1945). Kluge shows both textually and visually how large sections of his hometown, Halberstadt, were turned into a pile of rubble during an Allied attack.

What distinguishes his prose is both its themes and its formal choices: the question of precisely when the historical event we refer to as the Allied air raids began seems to motivate the entire narrative. Kluge answers this question not simply by indicating that the explanation for the air raids takes us back to the Nazis’ rise to power but by showing the temporal layering of the moment of attack. He uses a distinctive device to recount the city’s demise: a combination of the history of the devastating attack with the plot of a Nazi film being shown in one of Halberstadt’s cinemas during the raid. The film, Gustav Ucicky’s *Heimkehr* (Homecoming), was commissioned by Goebbels in 1939 and released two years later. It portrayed the Germans living outside the Third Reich as a beleaguered ethnic community “whose survival is threatened by the Poles.”²³ Reversing what actually occurred in Poland after war broke out, the film describes the persecution of exiled Germans by Poles, depicting Germans carted away on flatbed trucks, “like animals.”²⁴ At one point, the Nazi film star Paula Wessely says: “Just think, people, what it will be like, just think, when around us there will be lots of Germans—and when you come into a store, people won’t talk Yiddish or Polish, but German.”²⁵

In combining the image of the ruination of his hometown and a movie that reiterates the main elements of the Nazi racial fantasy, Kluge reverses the notion of German victimhood before the outbreak of the Second World War and thus addresses one of the enduring attempts to justify the war. He also makes it difficult to equate the suffering of Halberstadt’s citizens with those of the victims of National Socialism.

The weaving together of Halberstadt’s demise and the ideologies of racial discourse is made possible by Kluge’s chillingly ironic rhetoric throughout the essay: Frau Schrader, the cinema’s manager, observes the destruction of her



4. Facsimile of the first page of Alexander Kluge, “Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945.” Reproduced by permission of Suhrkamp Verlag.

town, talking to herself in an idiom that reflects a quasi-scientific distance and an utter numbness to what is going on around her: “the obliteration of the cinema’s right elevation cannot be meaningfully related, from a dramaturgical viewpoint, to the film just shown.”²⁶

Upon arriving in the cinema’s cellar, she discovers the bodies of six matinee guests who were trapped there and literally boiled to death by steam coming out of the heating pipes. Kluge shows the absurdity of her reaction: “Frau Schrader wanted to restore order here at least, and placed the loose, cooked body parts, which came apart either through the heating pipes’ explosion or through the bombs, in the laundry room’s laundry basket.”²⁷ Kluge’s irony peaks at the completion of Frau Schrader’s meticulous “cleanup.” She joins her friends, the Wilde family, in a bunker to eat pepperoni sandwiches and pickled pears while thinking to herself that she was now “simply done.”²⁸

By opting for irony, Kluge deprives the reader of cathartic empathy or shock and moves significantly beyond the decoding of what was surely a traumatic event in his life. I would like to suggest that the irony turns the reading experi-

ence into a process of reflection on the conditions that allowed the world he describes to exist, and that led to the thought processes evident in characters like Frau Schrader. The essay is not merely a reflection of occurrences in time but is an invitation to the reader to reflect on the social, political, and cultural circumstances that led to these occurrences, conditions which—at least as far as Kluge is concerned—persisted through the air raid on Halberstadt. While Kluge might recommend that both the images and their ironic conjuring be described as the workings of instrumental reason, the range of possible readings remains unrestricted. The horror of Halberstadt's fall is one moment in a totality of human cruelty and inhumanity that reaches back in time to the beginnings of human history and stretches through the present and into the future. Kluge warns us that "some stories [in this volume] might appear not to be from our times. They take place, however, in our times."²⁹ Benjamin emphasizes that "history is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time."³⁰ He follows in this notion the mystical *nunc stans*, which indicates a form of existence not subject to the limitations of time.

Kluge, for his part, refrains from the mystical. He believes that the past never ends; he extends an invitation to regard the now—including the now of the reading experience—as preserving and relating to the presentness of the past. The now metaphorically becomes a geological structure where there and then exist contemporaneously with here and now. That makes Kluge's texts into histories of the present: stories occurring in the now. The radicalism of his figurative choices is that their ironies, allegories, and symbolism unbind events from their restriction to representation, allowing them to emerge during and after the reading process as events of the now, not restricted in time. In the case of the essay on Halberstadt's demise, the end refers to a study that was apparently conducted in the city by the American armed forces in May 1945 and a statement made by one of interviewees: "At a certain point of cruelty it doesn't matter who began it. It should simply stop."³¹ Beyond echoing Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and without falling back on moralism, the essay describes an event that occurs in the present but for the future: "it should simply stop" continues to sound even when the last survivor of the air raid had passed away. The conditions for stopping man-made catastrophes such as that of Halberstadt remain the issue implicitly posed by the essay, and thus an object of possible human action in the future. What is at stake here is not simply a correct or useful working through or representation of a dreadful event, but also a question oriented toward the future: How can we avoid the sort of cruelty displayed in Halberstadt? Even if we don't accept the essay's suggested redescription of the past and present as the manifestation of instrumental reason, its reflexive and self-reflexive mode (irony) allows us to engage in a broad consider-

ation of the cruelty and madness exhibited in Halberstadt—both in itself and in the context of the German past.

I would like to conclude by returning to a material ruin. Majestically dominating the Dresden skyline with its shining colors, the newly reconstructed and reconsecrated seventeenth-century Frauenkirche could easily be misread as a sign of global amnesia. Others might see in the structure a sign of Germany's emergence (especially in the territories of the former East Germany) from its postwar slumber—a potent sign of German suffering during the war and its gradual overcoming of, or rather obliviousness toward, that distress since reunification. Even those who might wish to forget that this structure lay in ruins for some six decades would never be able to ignore all that was lost once they stepped into the building—the new construction is only a shell, waiting to be filled with new life and endowed with new meanings.

Perhaps to indicate that the ruin's recent past cannot be completely obscured, the designers and builders of the reconstructed Frauenkirche chose to use many of the blackened bricks of the destroyed Frauenkirche. The new walls thus appear as a patchwork of the old and new. The interplay between different bricks is the material manifestation of different histories, the layeredness of all temporal moments in this site.

The ruin of the Frauenkirche that symbolized between 1945 and 1989 the recent man-made catastrophe is now gone. The memory of this event is, however, hardly gone. It remains preserved in the new Frauenkirche that emerged at the same site. Visitors will have to take into account the burned bricks and the old cross which is now found inside a new one. In recognizing all the temporal layers of the edifice, visitors will also engage with the story of its birth and with what led to the destruction of the old Frauenkirche.

Here, then, is one way to answer the question of why such ruins of the modern era matter. They matter because they signify the promise of action—our ability to build, destroy, and build again. They matter because they give us the opportunity to endow even those spaces we destroyed with meanings that not only acknowledge their history but gesture beyond retrospection and mourning. Ruins move us because they inspire thought, debate, and engagement with the traumatic moment of their being ruined—and because they allow us to imagine a moment in which the ruin as the material face of human destruction will be replaced by a new human creation. They haunt us not only because of their past but also because they allow us to project onto them our wishes, desires, and hopes for the future: to see them as a space that is still in becoming rather than a site that merely marks what was.

The fact that ruins invite us to reflect on where we come from and where we are headed does not necessarily mean that such reflections will be progressive, as Jameson and others might wish.³² It does suggest, however, that the visitor to such sites (or the reader of literature dealing with ruins) acknowledges that different times and historical events have flowed through a certain marked space. Such spaces remind us that what is given to us is the result of human action, even if the action seems unintelligible or reprehensible now. Action should be understood here as Arendt conceives it: to act is to begin, to take an initiative, to place oneself as a social actor in the web of human agents that we are born into. The ruin is a material object that displays how people interacted in the past, allows reflection on the preconditions, courses, and disastrous results of human interaction, and offers itself as the substance that invites future action. Ruins indicate the completed actions of the past, and they suggest the possibility of action in the present and the future: turning the rubble of a house in Haifa or of a Berlin synagogue into spaces for human life and comfort. Although, as Arendt never tires of emphasizing, action is neither certain in its outcome nor reversible, it is still the faculty that interferes with the law of mortality, and in our case we can say that it signals the fact of human life after destruction—and the knowledge that what was built anew will also, one day, be gone.³³

Perhaps more than we care to admit, ruins are thus one of the most distinguished spatial manifestations that humans can use to shape their history; unlike objects subject only to nature, ruins are historical entities. Their signification of the movement through time and space of human action allows us to recognize our historicity—since we are not completely subject to nature, we are agents of our own lives. Through narratives of different sorts, artistic and architectural fantasies, public debates and disputes, ruins lead us to make choices and act in our time, to see even through the abysses of human evil the possibility of hope. To quote Arendt again: “There remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only ‘message’ which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom.”³⁴ This is not freedom from the past, but a freedom we should never underestimate: the freedom to shape the present and the future without being stranded in the ruins of the past.

Notes

This essay draws on a book project I am currently completing on the engagement with the past in contemporary literature and culture. This book examines post-World War II German literature as it invokes Nazism, Hebrew literature as it revisits the 1948 War of Indepen-

dence and the Nakba, as well as recent Anglo-American literature’s dealing with man-made catastrophes of recent modernity.

1. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 5.
2. *Ibid.*, 97.
3. *Ibid.*, 96.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 102.
6. Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 18.
7. Jameson, “The End of Temporality,” 718.
8. *Ibid.*, 714, 717.
9. In recent years, this debate expanded beyond the walls of the Israeli academia, where it was a subject of harsh discussions during the late 1980s and the 1990s, and moved on to significant sites of pre-state Palestinian life in the borders of Israel. At this point one should mention the work of the group Zochrot (those who remember), which stages reenactment events such as placing street signs in Arabic where now only Hebrew street signs signify an Israeli space. On the activities of Zochrot and the debates in which they are involved, see <http://www.nakbainhebrew.org>.
10. Koselleck, *Zeitschichten*, 9.
11. Semel, “Le’vad,” in *Yashen Hu Er BeMakom Acher*, 70.
12. Shapira, “Hirbet Hizah.”
13. For those familiar with Israeli topography, the inclusion of “ruin” in the village’s name comes as no surprise. Many villages and cities in the country are built on ruins and include hirbet in their names.
14. Yizhar, “Hirbet Hizah,” 110, my translation. Yizhar completed the novella in November 1948. It was published in 1949 as “Sipur Hirbet Hizah,” in a volume that also contained another novella. In this chapter I refer to the version published as “Hirbet Hizah” in *Arbaah Sipurim* (Four Stories).
15. See Shoshan, *Ha’milon he’hadash*, 1222.
16. The idiom “like lambs to the slaughter” was apparently first used in relation to the Holocaust by the Polish-born poet and activist Abba Kovner. See Segev, *The Seventh Million*, 110.
17. Yizhar, “Hirbet Hizah,” 109, my translation.
18. Goldberg quoted in Shapira, “Hirbet Hizah,” 13.
19. On the Wilhelmstrasse project, see <http://www.topographie.de/wilhelmstr>.
20. See “Topographie des Terrors” website, <http://www.topographie.de>.
21. “Topographie des Terrors” website, <http://www.topographie.de>.
22. “Topographie des Terrors” website, <http://www.topographie.de>.
23. Von Moltke, *No Place Like Home*, 56.
24. *Ibid.*, 57.
25. Quoted in *ibid.*, 57–58.
26. Kluge, “Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945,” 28, my translation. The essay originally appeared in 1977; in this chapter I refer to the reprinted edition in Kluge’s *Chronik der Gefühle*.
27. *Ibid.*, 29, my translation.
28. *Ibid.*, my translation.

29. Ibid., 11, my translation.
30. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 395.
31. Kluge, "Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945," 82, my translation.
32. Jameson, "The End of Temporality," 710–12.
33. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246.
34. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 478–79.

LUCIA SAKS

9

CITIES, CITIZENSHIP, AND OTHER JOBURG STORIES

Citizens have to define their social and environmental aims and ideals and actively participate in shaping their city so that it relates to their culture, provides for their needs, and is safe and healthy.

It is only thus that cities will become culturally relevant, aesthetically satisfying and intellectually rewarding.

AYYUB MALIK, "AFTER MODERNITY"

There is a common accordion effect which cities go through in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Power and money tend to be concentrated in expanding cities. If a city fails to expand, capital will not accumulate there; such a city is in decline. The accumulation of capital means that growth is happening, unless the city is becoming totally unbalanced. In a growing city, building is taking place; people are flooding into the city to work; and wealth is accumulating, which leads to consumption, *flânerie*, and the growth of the service sector. This scenario is common, and as it happens, the city moves outward away from the center, with new ground colonized for the purposes of expansion. If life is seen as expansion, cities are essentially chaotic, for there will come a point at which city planning (the effort to manage available resources for circulation, dwelling, commerce, and industry) is overwhelmed by growth. Since the process of growth is ongoing, the accordion is likely to inflate and deflate over and over again, as gentrification takes place, property in the city center comes up for grabs, and property at the periphery of the city becomes costly and overused. Cities are also characterized by the imposition of order through urban planning, which becomes a race to rebuild what is being consistently broken through: city structure, city life, goals for the city that are reasonable given its