Noga Sagi - Short CV:

Noga Sagi is a PhD candidate in the Center for German Studies at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her research analyzes Austrian–Israeli relations, focusing on the role of collective memory in cultural diplomacy and its effect on bilateral affairs. She takes a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses both the Austrian and Israeli perspective and is carrying out her research under the supervision of Prof. Anton Pelinka (Innsbruck University, Austria) and Dr. Tobias Ebbrecht–Hartmann (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel).

Noga’s main academic fields of interest are International Relations, Memory, History, Cultural and European studies.

She holds a master’s degree in European Studies and a B.A in International Relations and the History of Art, both from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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Research proposal

Cultural Diplomacy and Collective Memory: Reviewing Austrian-Israeli Relations

Cultural diplomacy is a term used in the field of international relations as part of the Soft Power theory. It has been defined as the use a country makes in its “soft power” resources (e.g. culture, policy, moral principles), in order to translate them into influence on other countries. Thus, Cultural Diplomacy is a method of exporting the country’s culture and beliefs to achieve supportive public opinion from other countries, and in this way to gain influence (Nye 2004; 2008).

Collective memory, meanwhile, is a term that is rather overlooked in the literature on cultural diplomacy, mainly because it is viewed as a domestic issue. According to this understanding of the term, the practice of collective memory relates to a specific group of people, i.e. a nation, sharing collective memories of a common historical narrative and a shared culture that supposedly cannot be part of the cultural understanding of any other nations. Therefore, collective memory is not seen as a tool of diplomacy and international relations per se.

However, a closer look at bilateral relations between states proves that this is not the case. German-Israeli relations, for example, have demonstrated that the shared memory of the two countries made the collective memory of each dependent on and related to the other (Lavy, 1996; Taberner, 2006). Moreover, memory became a prominent issue in the diplomacy between the two states that share what has been called a “special relationship”.

Following in the footsteps of German-Israeli relations, this research project wishes to review the role of memory in other bilateral relations of countries with a troubled shared past – the relations between Austria and Israel. It aims to determine the use of memory in cultural diplomacy, and to examine how it can re-narrate collective memory in order to influence and to reframe the relationship between two states.

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1 For more information on the special relationship between Germany and Israel, see Feldman (1984), Lavy (1996) and Wolffsohn (1993).
This research project seeks to explain how cultural diplomacy revises collective memory and thus influences and reframes relations between states with a troubled shared past. Using Austrian-Israeli relations as a case study, it reviews why during the 1990s Austria started telling the world a different story regarding its past and how and why this increasing significance of memory was affecting the Austrian foreign policy towards Israel, in form of cultural diplomacy.

Despite taking an integral part in the Third Reich during the Nazi era, Austria was deemed by the Allies to be the first victim of the Nazis’ aggression already at the Moscow Declaration of 1943 (Uhl, 2006). This terminology was adopted by Austria after the end of the Second World War, when it used what is commonly known as the “victim narrative” in the hope of avoiding any kind of responsibility for its part in the atrocities committed at the time (Bischof& Pelinka, 1997; Pick, 2000; Uhl, 2006).

It was only when the Waldheim Affair erupted in the late 1980s that Austria’s “victim narrative” started officially to crack (Uhl 2001; 2006). Several years later, Austria finally acknowledged its shared responsibility for the past and dealt with controversial debates about restitution and commemoration, as well as rising anti-Semitism and a growing right-wing party (Pick, 2000, Hammerstein, 2017).

Interestingly, unlike its relations with Germany, Israel’s relations with Austria were never questioned over Austrian behavior during the war. This changed in 1986 when Austria itself intensively renegotiated its collective memory following the Waldheim Affair, which was also reflected upon and intensely debated in Israeli society and politics (Bunzl, 1997). This turning point marked the “birth” of the memory discourse within Austrian-Israeli relations.

Therefore, this research wishes to explore Austrian-Israeli relations within the framework of collective memory and cultural diplomacy, and to offer a fresh view of the connection between collective memory and cultural diplomacy and their role in international relations, arguing that cultural diplomacy is a

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2 Kurt Waldheim was the leading candidate for the Austrian presidency on behalf of the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP). At the beginning of the election campaign, a publication was leaked revealing his Nazi past in the Wehrmacht. The report stirred up some controversy in Austria and provoked intense public and political debate, which raised powerful questions regarding the “victim myth”. This public scandal is known as the Waldheim Affair. For more information see: Mitten, 1992; Hammerstein, 2017; Uhl, 2006.
carrier mechanism that enables the use and demonstrates the importance of collective memory in bilateral relations.

To do so, this research will adopt Jan Assmann’s interpretation of collective memory as cultural memory, which he defines as a cultural phase of collective memory (Assmann, 1995; 2008). Assmann’s definition allows to examine the effective mechanism of culture within memory and of memory within culture. This will help illustrating the ability of one country to affect the cultural memory of another in a way that serves its bilateral and international interests.

Regarding the term cultural diplomacy, this research will endorse a broad definition so it will include both cultural relations aspects and public diplomacy characteristics; in the past, diplomacy was seen as the relations between sovereign countries, made by their officials, in order to prevent the use of force (Kelley, 2010). However, the last decades brought changes upon the diplomatic world, with the increase in power of non-governmental and supranational organizations that have become crucial and influential players in the political game (Kelley, 2010; Rivera, 2015). As a result, the “new public diplomacy” theory emerged, seeking to address diplomacy as an action of communication between foreign publics and different actors in a state: governmental, semi-governmental, and non-governmental organizations, strengthening the positive image of a state abroad (Melissen, 2005; 2011). Today, many view cultural diplomacy as an integral part of the new public diplomacy, in which the cultural assets of a country are used to communicate and to bridge cultural differences as well as to relay positive aspects to foreign publics (Nye, 2008; Melissen, 2005).

Moreover, the term cultural diplomacy is also often mixed up in the literature with the term cultural relations despite their differences; cultural diplomacy can be defined as purely governmental activity, while cultural relations are non-governmental cultural exchanges between countries (Rivera, 2015). In practice, however, many countries employ semi-governmental organizations that lead cultural exchanges with other countries, enabling them to collaborate with non-official agents and to engage with foreign publics without being perceived as advancing propaganda (Rivera, 2015; Melissen, 2005). Therefore, this research argues that cultural diplomacy should be analyzed from multiple perspectives in order to get a deeper understanding of its effects and power.
The research will be based on historical primary sources, such as archival documents and protocols from the Austrian national archives, as well as on interviews with key figures in Austrian-Israeli relations, and an analysis of cultural acts and organizations, which are operating within the Austrian-Israeli relations. It will examine how different agents, state and non-state actors are using collective memory as a resource of cultural diplomacy in order to reconstruct social interactions and idea-based understanding in interstate relations.

The research will focus on two main time periods: the first will be 1949 to 1986, from the establishment of Austrian-Israeli relations up to the Waldheim Affair, and the second will be 1986 up to the present day, comparing between the role of memory in Austria’s cultural diplomacy towards Israel while it was still holding on to the victim narrative, and later on, when Austria acknowledged its shared responsibility regarding the Second World War.

The research analysis will be organized by decades, examining the historical background and characteristics of the time, key events that might have influenced Austrian-Israeli relations, and the three main actors that applied cultural diplomacy with memory towards Israel: governmental, semi-governmental, and private. The research will then investigate the characteristics of the cultural activity and its nature, showing how these activities served a specific image of Austrian collective memory and affected change in the Israeli perception of Austria.

The last part of the analysis will address the research question from the Israeli perspective, regarding its acceptance of Austrian cultural diplomacy with collective memory. This chapter will examine the “recipient” perspective and will further investigate the role and influence of cultural heritage, shared language, and cultural memory on the Austrian–Israeli relations.

This research may lead not only to a better understanding of Austrian-Israeli relations, but also to broader conclusions regarding the use of countries in cultural diplomacy in order to influence memory constructions and understandings of particular pasts in partner countries, which, in turn, affects their relations.
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