

Credit where it was due

The German reparations proposal met with fierce opposition in the 1950s, but the funds proved vital to the development of the state

By BRIMSHON ARAD

Studying this bulky, 970-page volume, which includes basic documents relating to the debate that raged in Israel over the German reparations plan of the early 1950s, I got the feeling that as with other crucial national dilemmas, stale ideology and reckless factional motivations never fail to nip at the heels of the elected leaders, undermining national causes on behalf of "supreme patriotism." Ferocious assaults were launched in 1951-52 by the sulky Right, joined by aberrations from the hollow fringes of the Left. Politicians at both extremes were trying to manipulate the sentiments of the silent majority, thereby menacing some truly vital national interests.

An earlier alignment of these extreme poles had emerged when the UN partition plan was discussed in 1947-48, and turned out to be the only practical option for attaining an independent state. Opponents on the extreme Left and Right considered the plan a crime.

The German reparations debate in 1951-52 dragged these same forces together, this time against the mature and democratically elected government headed by David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett.

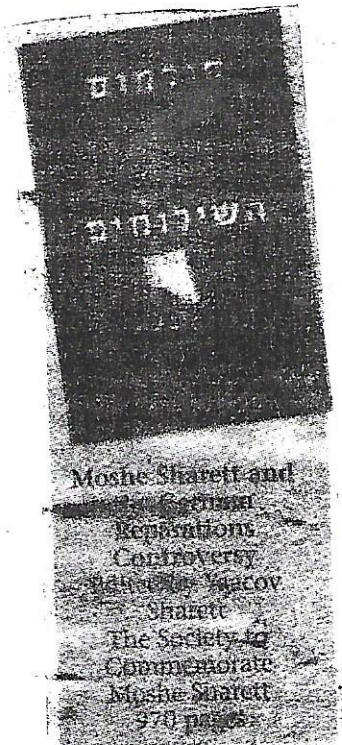
The discussion of German reparations actually started in September 1950. Its initiator was David Horwitz, then director-general of the Finance Ministry. He was terribly worried to see how desperate the economy had become, but also observed signs of impressive growth in West Germany. It dawned on him that there was a possible link between Israel's poverty and German prosperity. He suggested to foreign minister Sharett that Israel approach the Occupying Powers asking for German reparations. At that point, merely five years after the Holocaust, it was considered taboo to mention anything related to Germany.

The discussions that took place in the Foreign Ministry were all treated as top secret. Sharett assumed a leading role in enlisting the prime minister, the finance minister and a few senior officials. Ben-Gurion realized right at the beginning that it would be a grave error if Israel were not to raise the reparations issue with the four Occupying Powers - the US, UK, Soviet Union and France. He was probably the first Israeli leader to anticipate the rise of West Germany in post-Nazi Europe. He was confident that the new leaders of West Germany were committed to democracy, and that Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's Germany was "a different Germany." Most members of the cabinet agreed, and almost all the opposition leaders endorsed Ben-Gurion's vision, although opposition to contact with the Ger-

The press didn't realize that there was no chance of isolating Germany. Nor did it believe that any pressure could lead to the isolation of Israel.

Following Ben-Gurion's and Sharett's concept, the government finally decided in March 1951 to transmit to the four occupying governments official notes outlining the demand for German reparations. The reaction of the US, UK and France was far from encouraging. The Soviets didn't even bother to respond. The three Western countries pointed out that they were not in a position to press the West Germans. Nor were they ready to serve even as mediators. They all counseled direct talks with the Germans. Politicians of all shades deluded themselves that other governments would perform the function for Israel. While the prime minister, the finance minister and foreign minister started early to comprehend that morally, politically and financially the Jewish people ought not to let the perpetrators of the Holocaust also inherit the loot, Menachem Begin on the Right and his colleagues on the extreme Left continued to oppose even indirect contact, ridiculing the possibility that West Germany would ever grant substantial funds to Israel. When the agreement with Adenauer was reached, Israel received machinery, infrastructure and other kinds of aid worth \$883 million over 12 years. Fifty years ago, this was of enormous importance.

Horwitz's concept stated that half a million survivors of the Nazi era would require \$1.5 billion for absorption in Israel, or \$3,000 per survivor. Incidentally, Horwitz and Dr. Nahum Goldmann, of the World Jewish Con-



gress, had secret meetings with Adenauer which helped persuade him that the Israeli case was valid. Adenauer faced strong opposition from his finance minister, but was determined to get the reparations deal through, convinced that it was necessary to rehabilitate Germany's honor and reputation.

This volume is not a contemporary version of what occurred over 50 years ago. Instead, the government's and opposition's statements speak for themselves; nothing is more authentic and revealing. The few participants who are still alive might be startled by coming face to face with their own stupidity. The younger disciples would be ashamed of their leaders' narrow-mindedness. There are few who would dare uphold today the infantile views displayed 50 years ago. Demagogic utterance never had better days

on the extreme Right and dogmatic Left. The leaders counseling restraint and responsibility labored relentlessly to secure the German funds needed to cover the most urgent needs of those early years, and to lift the dejected national mood to that of a vibrant modern society.