

KAYIPLARIN YASINI TUTMAK VE TRAVMATİK DENEYİMLERİ İYİLEŞTİRMEK: IRIS MURDOCH'UN İTALYAN KIZI ROMANI

MOURNING FOR THE LOSSES AND HEALING THE TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES: IRIS MURDOCH'S THE ITALIAN GIRL

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ÖZET

Bu çalışma, çağdaş İrlandalı romancı Iris Murdoch'un *İtalyan Kızı*'ndaki travma analizini ve travmatize olmuş karakterlerin iyileşmesinin edebi temsilini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı Murdoch'un romanındaki ana karakterlerin yaşadığı travma sonrası stres bozukluğunun tasvirini ve romandaki ana karakterlerin bunu iyileştirme yolunu betimlemektir. *İtalyan Kızı*, Yahudi sürgün kimliği ve geçmişle hesaplaşma yoluyla kimliğin yeniden kazanılması ve travmanın ortadan kaldırılması sorunlarıyla ilgilenir. Bu makale, Sigmund Freud ve Jacques Lacan'ın psikanalitik teorilerini ve travma teorisinin ilkelerini kullanarak, romanın yakın bir metin okumasını sunacak ve travmatize olmuş karakterlerin geçmişin travmatik olaylarından sonra kendilerini ve hayatlarını yeniden yapılandırıp inşa etmek için iyileşmelerini inceleyecektir.

Iris Murdoch, mutsuz bir ailenin karanlık sırlarıyla yüzleşme ve onlardan kurtulma mücadelesini anlatan romanında travmayı ve iyileşmeyi aile kavramı üzerinden sorgular. Murdoch'un Edmund Narraway'ın ayrı yaşadığı ailesiyle yeniden bir araya gelişi ve onları karanlık geçmişleriyle yüzleşmeye zorlayan trajedinin öyküsü, annesinin cenazesıyla başlar. Edmund Narraway, annesinin ölümünden yıllar sonra çocukluk evine döner ve ailesinden uzakta yalnız bir hayat seçmesine neden olan gerilimler kendisini gösterir. Olayların ardındaki sır perdesi aralanırken, aile tarihinin trajedileri ve travmaları gün yüzüne çıkar. Travmanın nedenleri, travmatik belirtiler ve iyileşmeye odaklanan bu çalışma, iç içe geçmiş kişisel ve ailesel öykülerin neden olduğu günlük yaşam travmalarını ve çeşitli psikolojik bozuklukları araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *İtalyan Kızı*, Travma, Iris Murdoch.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to study about the analysis of trauma and the literary representation of the traumatized characters' recovery in *The Italian Girl* by the contemporary Irish novelist Iris Murdoch. The aims of this study are to describe the portrayal of post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by the main characters in Murdoch's novel "*The Italian Girl*" and the way of the main characters healing it in the novel.

The Italian Girl deals with the problems of Jewish exile identity and lived experience as well as the recovery of identity and the elimination of trauma through coming to terms with the past. Using the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and the principles of trauma theory, this paper will present a close textual reading of the novel and examine traumatized characters' healing from traumatic past events to reconstruct and rebuild themselves and their lives.

Iris Murdoch questions trauma and healing through the concept of family in this novel, which tells the story of an unhappy family's struggle to confront its dark secrets and recover from them. Murdoch's story of Edmund Narraway's reunion with his estranged family and of the tragedy that shocks them all into confronting their dark past begins with his mother's funeral. Edmund Narraway returns to his childhood home years after his mother's death and the tensions that have caused him to choose a lonely life away from his family slowly begin to surface. As the veil of mystery behind the events unravels, the tragedies and traumas of family history are unearthed. Focusing on the causes of trauma, traumatic symptoms and recovery, this study aims to explore the trauma of daily lives and the various psychological disorders caused by intertwined personal and familial histories.

Keywords: *The Italian Girl*, Trauma, Iris Murdoch.

INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch, one of the leading British philosophers and writers of the twentieth century, deals with the problems of modern man's lack of communication, loneliness and alienation in her works. Murdoch considers liberation from selfishness a prerequisite for the creation of a world of loving, healthy communication. Iris Murdoch is a thinker who cares about combining philosophy and literature as a writer and poet as well as being a philosopher. Murdoch, one of the prolific writers of her age, argued that society needed a moral philosophy and worked on the concept of "goodness", which forms the basis of this philosophy.

Iris Murdoch started writing when she was just nine years old, after having studied six years at Badminton College in Bristol, she went to Sommerville College in Oxford to study classical literature. Iris Murdoch, who knew many poets and writers during her university years, fell in love with Franz Steiner, but Steiner dies of a heart attack in 1952. Murdoch, who became a member of the Communist Party in 1938, also took an active role during the Second World War. After graduating from Classical Literature, he moved to London in 1940 and worked in the Ministry of Economy until 1942. Disappointed by the political stance of the communists, she leaves the party. Working in the refugee camps of the United Nations in Austria and Belgium towards the end of the Second World War, Murdoch was influenced by Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, whom she met in 1940, and turned to philosophy in general and existentialism in particular. In 1948, Murdoch, who started her career as a professor of philosophy at St. Anne College and worked there until 1963, married John Bayley, a professor of English at Oxford University, in 1956, but they had no children. Murdoch, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1997, died in February 1999 at the age of 79 when the severity of her disease increased. Her husband, John Bayley, reveals his devotion and longing for Murdoch with a book entitled *Elegy for Iris*.

Murdoch, who has adopted the traditional story pattern, writes novels that are close to the narrative and techniques of the 19th century writers in terms of form, although she is a 20th century writer. One of the reasons she has chosen the traditional story pattern was that she thought art should be impersonal. For this reason, her most preferred authors are 19th century writers such as Tolstoy and Jane Austen. Murdoch, who does not engage in language games in her novels, is a writer who can always keep the reader's attention open with fictional twists and ambiguities. Murdoch, who can use language more clearly in his philosophical writings, describes her thoughts on language in an interview with Magee Bryan:

“(...) literary writing is an art; it is one of the manifestations of the art form. It may be concealing or pompous, but literature has an artistic purpose. The language used in a particularly ostentatious way in a work that is short or long forms a part of the work. Thus, there is no single literary style or ideal style” (Bryan, 1979, Çev. Kocabaşoğlu, s. 354).

Murdoch's novels reflect how the miscommunication between relationships develops. Hidden deceptions and lies create unhealthy relationships, and people's hypocritical behaviour towards each other develops. Her work *The Black Prince* won the “James Tait Black Memorial” award in 1973, her work *The Sacred and the Profane Love Machine* achieved the “Whitbread Literary Award” in 1974, and her novel *The Sea The Sea* was awarded with the “Booker McConnell Prize” in 1978. Murdoch thinks that good artists should have a sense of reality. Regarding Murdoch's works, who believes that the artist should make the questioning of what exists in life, how and why; John Bayley expresses his view as follows:

“Iris' works are as mysterious as Shakespeare's, at least to me. I never doubted the greatness of Iris as a novelist, although she did not innately need, possess, or try to gain that luminous enchantment power, which is a very important element in the success of wise masters and sages (...)” (Bayley, 2004, p. 132).

In Murdoch's novels, the relationship between two people always appears as a slave-master relationship. People see others as they have envisioned in their minds, failing to realize their potential. However, at the end of some surprising events, they realize that they were wrong and that life has surpassed them. These puzzling events are mostly enhanced by sexual relationships. The relationship between love and freedom, the necessity of looking beyond one's own self, is one of the themes she deals with. Murdoch explores desires that appear to be love but are based on the need to control, manipulate and exploit others. Zoreh T. Sullivan has noted: “Her demons are not literal ones, but psychological and existentialist oppressors whose evil emanates from their obsessive need to define and remake others according to their private formulas for existence” (Sullivan, 1997, p. 49). Murdoch's works exemplify the devaluation of modern man, his violation of human and moral values in the name of his passion for liberation, and his seeing himself as an extension of the subjective worlds of individuals outside himself for the sake of satisfying egoistic pleasures. Murdoch states that healthy and long-lasting interpersonal relationships begin with considering others, and in addition to this “attention, imagination, chance, possibility, transcendence and sexuality are effective and helpful concepts in the birth of love” (Ford, 1982, p. 419).

TRAUMA THEORY

Trauma, which comes from the Greek word for “wound,” designates a psychic wound resulting from a violent, overwhelming experience that has a disruptive impact on the subject's life. To put it another way, trauma is “an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation” (Laplanche, 1973, p. 465). Firstly used to indicate a severe injury as a result of an external factor that disrupts the integrity of the body, trauma then becomes a general term and acquires a psychological dimension as its use extends from medicine to psychoanalysis. Trauma studies reached a broader and interdisciplinary approach than pathological approaches under the name of “post-traumatic stress disorders” in the 1980s. New approaches based on the work of Janet and Freud consider trauma as the result of a repressed past that is postponed and reveals itself at certain times. Childhood experiences and sexual experiences have a very important place in the process of personality development and subjectivity. Sexual abuse experienced by children causes various physiological and psychological damages. Judith Herman defines psychological trauma as “a disaster of the weak” (Herman, 2015, p. 41) and points out that this moment of powerlessness can be seen as the origin of trauma.

Trauma, as Freud first suggested, inflicts itself upon the mind as a psychic wound that cannot be understood at the moment of inscription but only in its belatedness. When a person survives such a traumatic ordeal, the moment of trauma denies its own recognition, and conscious cognitive recall can be rendered impossible. Trauma tends to recur at a later time and place, persistent as recurrent nightmares and waking memories that cannot adequately be integrated with other history because language cannot approximate an affective response. Freud suggests that trauma can be considered as “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). Caruth argues that such wounds do not necessarily occur immediately after the violence, but unconsciously at a later stage in one’s life. She states: “This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4).

The term trauma refers to the action shown by the abnormal mind to the body, which provides a method of interpretation of disorder, distress, and destruction. Freudian concept of psychoanalysis is the major foundation for trauma theory with various accounts of memory and psychological disorder. Trauma theory is a broad category that includes diverse fields with the specific focus about the nature, subject and representation of traumatized events. “Trauma does not stay in the ownership of the traumatised and cannot be described at any time; it haunts the traumatised as a memory that is repeated again and thus trauma is experienced later than at the instance of the traumatic event” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 5).

Today trauma studies is seen as abroad field that includes a number of perspectives and discussions. On the definition of trauma there seems to be an agreement as an overwhelming experience, especially its impact on the individual memory however have remained open to discussion. Important clinicians and theorists in the field have argued that traumatic events are experienced with “inherent forgetting” (Caruth, 1995, p. 8) and the victims remember these experiences later in their lives in intrusive forms which means these memories are not part of narrative or conscious memory. Sigmund Freud’s studies on hysteria and his interpretations on the memories of hysterical patients have specifically reinforced the development of this idea. Prominent trauma scholars of the late 20th century such as Judith Herman, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Cathy Caruth have also supported the idea that victims forget or repress traumatic memories, which appear later and disturb the daily lives of victims. The common ground of these scholars is their emphasis on the extraction of these disturbing memories onto the conscious level to heal the patients.

Earlier trauma studies focused more on the physical aspects of the damages on the brain and spine that were caused by accidents that led to distress. However, later studies mostly give importance to the psychological impacts of trauma. With these developments, the studies on hysteria also began to be the subject of serious investigation. Consequently, “hysterical shattering of the personality consequent on a situation of extreme terror or fright” (Leys, 2000, p. 4) has become the focus of later trauma studies. Psychological trauma is a situation in which a person suddenly faces his own weakness and helplessness and shakes his mental balance. Sexual trauma is one of the most difficult psychological traumas to deal with. It is seen that the majority of people who have been traumatized because of sexual abuse hide this situation within themselves, sometimes because they are afraid and sometimes because they feel guilty. Because of sexual trauma, the person who feels defective, incomplete and contaminated may not consider herself worthy of another person in the relationship. Sometimes, when the person is exposed to the trauma, they unconsciously try to deny this information, thinking that they cannot cope with this situation.

A person who has been sexually traumatized develops a great distrust of the outside world. The outside world and people are bad for them, as these people begin to think that others can hurt, abuse, and harm themselves. With this idea, they begin to be unable to establish close bonds and their existing bonds weaken. People who build an invisible wall to protect themselves may experience scepticism and question the goodwill of others.

AN EVALUATION ON THE TRAUMATIC EVENTS IN THE ITALIAN GIRL

The Italian Girl provides a critical analysis of the problem of trauma, memory as well as the post-war Jewish guilt and mourning for the dead. The novel, in which the weight of sin, that is, repressed, unsatisfied impulses, and the pain of not being oneself is told, conveys an uncanny family relationship through sexuality. The realities of modern society such as humane and moral values, loneliness, and lack of love, alienation, and communication breakdown are described as a confrontation under the family structure. In a 1968 interview, Murdoch commented, "It's not a very successful book. I think Otto, Edmund and Isabel are pretty real, but Maggie and the Russians are not real enough to carry the plot" (Rose, 1968, p. 14). *The Italian Girl* is a "short, closed and crystalline novel with a first-person male narrator and multiple sexual relationships and attractions between the small cast of characters" (Martin, 2010, p. 72). The story consists of the divisions within the family and the substitutions in the pairings of characters because of the renewal of their identity as subjects because of the refugee Russian Jewish brothers coming to work for them. Each character has their own binary opposition and changes to get to know the other to be a morally good person through the events of love, death and sex.

Murdoch's 1964 novel *The Italian Girl* takes place almost entirely in the same family home, in the garden of the house in which the Jewish brothers live. The house, where the Italian caregivers show their love for the children in the family, has turned into a structure that only breathes under the mother's dominance, but is disconnected from each other, but is connected to each other by dark relations. The novel, which is told from the first person perspective of the protagonist Edmund Harraway, begins with the funeral of Edmund's deceased mother, Lydia, and turns into a family epic with its narrative going back into the past. In this memory journey to the past, the tragedies and traumas of family history unfold one by one. Focusing on the causes of trauma, traumatic symptoms and ways out of trauma, this study will focus on various mental disorders and depressions, which are handled in a narrative in which personal and family history are intertwined.

Confusion concept that appears in the victim's mind during the traumatic event is one of the critical processes of trauma. This moment, which creates dissolution at the cognitive level of the victim, causes the traumatic memory to become permanent. The painful experiences his mother gave him and his brother Otto left a deep scar in his mind. Edmund, who was sexually abused by his mother when he was only six years old, describes the painful experiences about his mother in the novel as follows:

"My mother fell in love with me and Otto, so our childhood was filled with jealousy and depression. I remember my mother is first in love with Otto, who was two years older than I was. But by the time I turned six, at the age of ten, and then in the years I went to school, she had begun to love me madly" (Murdoch, 2019, p. 15).

The family is one of the main factors in the development and socialization process of the child, and the support of the family in overcoming childhood traumas is very important, but the family is the main source of trauma for Edmund. Edmund, who was deeply affected by his childhood experiences, decides to leave everything behind and live away from his family. This experience of having to go to another place has a traumatic effect on him. Feeling abandoned by his parents, Edmund feels like he has been sent to another world, even though the house he went to is not far away. This exile creates an intense sense of loneliness in Edmund. Besides his mother, Edmund cannot form a strong bond with his father; his father is like a vague and almost non-existent memory. Edmund and Otto, who see themselves as incomplete individuals due to their father's early death, cannot create a safe space against the threats of the outside due to the lack of a strong bond they cannot establish with their father. For Edmund and Otto, who cannot establish a strong bond with their father and do not have any memories of him, the trauma of their father's death does not leave their minds. Losing their fathers at such an early age continues to torment themselves:

“Nothing about my father remained in my childhood memories, I just remember one day when my mother said that my father was not a good person, and he was a wimp. We had an inexplicable hatred for our father, and later we began to pity him. Lydia beat us, not my father. The only thing left to us from my father was his talent. My father was a sculptor, painter, engraver and stonemason. He had left two incomplete people behind; stonemason Otto and me, engraver Edmund” (Murdoch, 2019, pp. 16-17).

Especially because of his mother’s overprotective and suffocating love, Edmund’s return to his childhood home also brings with it a psychological return to his childhood and the pain and trauma he felt at that time. Edmund’s situation is reminiscent of Freud’s definition of the uncanny as a kind of homecoming, a familiar but unfamiliar experience. Shortly after his arrival, Edmund enters the room where his mother’s corpse is situated and can’t shake off the eerie feeling that his mother may not be dead. The corpse of the mother seems to come to life for the returning Edmund, evoking Freud’s concept of the ‘uncanny’. His scepticism filled with anxiety is illustrated by the lively description of Lydia, the mother’s dead body, her hair appearing “vital still, as if the terrible news had not come to it. It seemed even to move a little at my entrance, perhaps in a slight draught from the door” (Murdoch, 2019, p. 15). The blurred image of the father appears in Edmund and Otto as a metaphor for emotional lack. Edmund’s trauma deepens when he remembers the pain in his memory caused by his father’s death in the face of his surprise that the room covered with his father’s paintings in his childhood home. He came there after his mother’s death, and saw that his mother turned it into a museum or a tomb: “I suddenly felt the pain of my father’s absence; as if it was my father, not my mother, who had just died” (Murdoch, 2019, p. 19).

Edmund’s narration of what happened in his life in the past is not deliberate recalling, but instead involuntary recovery by someone who has been forced by the events of the plot to get his past back. Edmund’s mother, Lydia, had created disharmony in life since childhood. He remembers how possessively she fed him and his brother Otto. Edmund tells his mother, who insists everyone call her Lydia, that everything she touches is destroyed. He cites his brother’s ruined marriage as an example. Edmund says he is like his father, but Isabel points out that unlike his father, he is free of Lydia. She adds, “We are all prisoners here” (Murdoch, 2019, p. 33). Edmund feels sorry for his family, but cannot realize that the whole truth is still not revealed under these people’s surface. Edmund suddenly realizes that he cares about Maggie’s opinion of him, and he asks if anyone would benefit if he extended his stay. She startles him by suggesting that he might benefit. Edmund, although hurt by her bluntness, sees the truth in her statement and resolves to himself to “stay because of some need of my own” (Murdoch, 2019, p. 116).

Survival and healing are seen as forms of power that require the sacrifice of others, for Murdoch survival involves both the compulsive strengthening of power and with it the denial of the traumatic past. This approach is particularly embodied by David and Elsa in *The Italian Girl* who also continue the line of those exile characters. After he discovers the affair between Otto and Elsa, Edmund gets confronted by David with the term of the ‘two kinds of Jew’, a notion that “there are the Jews that suffer and the Jews that succeed, the dark Jews and the light Jews. She is a dark Jew. I am a light Jew” (Murdoch, 2019, p. 68). For David, this kind of duality serves as an evidence to the theory that survival is provided only for those who are able to float in a world of light with the absence of survivor guilt, without the pressure of remembering, passing on their mourning over the past to those who did not have a direct experience on terror. Elsa is a counterpart to this aspect of survival as struggling in the custody of inherited guilt she “is all memory –she remembers so much, she remembers the memories that are not hers” (Murdoch, 2019, p. 68). Owing to her impulse to revitalize trauma, she is the representative of the survivor who is unable to fit into society, and whose fate is suffering and early death.

The allegory of homecoming can be associated with the feeling of rootlessness, one of the basic constituents of minority identity, and freedom with the solipsistic self-deception and the desire of understanding the world in its otherness. David's struggle can be seen as similar to Edmund's; on the one hand they both try desperately to escape from the dark spirits of their past, on the other they strive for holding to the past through their constant recollections of it. The experience of marginality related to exile being involves for David both a rejection of his own Judaism and the traumatic experiences coming from it, and his inability of integrating himself to the dominant culture as well as a deep attachment to his own Jewishness. This ambivalence is dissolved at the end of the novel by the picture of travelling that also implicates for Edmund the possibility for a new life with his substitute mother. The older and wiser Maggie, the 'Italian girl' of the novel, is seen a final return to his roots from David's part. For David, coming to terms with his past is coupled with the recognition of his own minority identity as well as his acknowledgement of grief, pain, and guilt that manifests itself in his reckoning of rootlessness and his return to the motherland. The Freudian term of returning to mother or going back to the mother's womb might be grasped as a destination point of minority existence. Thus, the motherland denotes the return to an inorganic state that supersedes the binaries of life and death through the arrival to a de-energised state of non-existence, and that dissolves the statelessness and past traumas associated with the Jewish minority form of life through the confrontation with the past. The fact that traumatic past events can be healed through remembering and witnessing similar happenings is given as a message in the novel.

CONCLUSION

This study has analysed the representations of trauma and the efforts towards healing in Iris Murdoch's *Italian Girl* in the light of various trauma theories. In that respect, this study has utilized both traditional trauma theories focusing on the immediate and belated effects of traumatic events on the individual's psyche and the alternative models that emphasize the cultural and psychological contexts that shape the interpretations of traumatic experiences by individuals.

In her novel, Murdoch demonstrates the effects of trauma on individuals through multiple representations depending on their age, sex, ethnicity, traditional beliefs, the magnitude of the traumatic events they experienced and their present conditions. In that respect, the individuals' responses to traumatic events can sometimes be similar, such as dissociation, melancholia or fixation, and at other times disparate. Additionally, Murdoch also depicts the diverse paths taken by the characters in order to ease their pain and facilitate possible healing. Rather than portraying the characters as victims living in passivity and a continuous pathological state, through her novel, Murdoch presents examples displaying the individuals' resilience and desire for recovery.

This paper discussed Murdoch's reconceptualization of home, homecoming and homelessness, and the way she uses Freud's *unheimlich* in order to describe how both Edmund Narraway, the novel's hero and the Russian Jewish exile siblings, David and Elsa Levkin, feels homecoming differently. Through an extended analysis of *The Italian Girl*'s two exile characters, this paper connected Murdoch's ethical concerns on the Holocaust to the problem of the Jewish exile identity, explaining how the notions of survival and memory as well as the dilemma of the acceptance versus rejection of minority identity is central to her fiction. The concept of home was identified as both a place of loss and trauma and of identity, and homecoming as a revitalization of trauma.

After a long absence, the hero, Edmund Narraway, returns to his childhood scenery following his mother's death. During his stay, Edmund witnesses to the tensions and tragedies that resurging secrets generate that ultimately shatter the spiritual and existential balance of his family. The Freudian issue, where the hero wishes to recover a time of innocence, is at work in *The Italian Girl*. There is a nostalgia for the past between the characters, yet this nostalgia is mingled with the fears from the horrors that the past involves.

Consequently, *The Italian Girl*, the trauma and the memory of the Holocaust as well as the instinct of survival is closely tied to the dilemma of the Jewish minority existence, the affection for roots and at the same time the past, and the urge to escape from the shadows of the past in a godless world of moral turmoil. The merit of this novel is that through its dramatic description of mourning and survivor guilt as well as the hopeless struggle against them, it represents the psychotic disorder of the last century that was greatly influenced by Hitler's power and the trauma of the war.

In this study, I wanted to demonstrate the ways and lives of some Jewish refugee individuals. Their minority existence as well as their notions of survival and memory constitute an integral part in Murdoch's novel, and the dilemma of the acceptance versus rejection of minority identity is realized through these characters. One of the central subjects of *The Italian Girl* is homecoming that involves the realization of minority identity and with it, the confrontation with the trauma of the past including survivor guilt and suffering is identified. The notion of homecoming also involves the possibility of processing trauma through memory and the endeavour of healing from the past traumatic events. It appears in Edmund's compulsion to return to the mother or, in a Freudian sense, the mother's womb, and thereby to an infantile state of being, while he altogether strives for escaping from her and the past she stands for. His compulsion to go back to his state of childhood can be suggested as a form of healing.

Moreover, although in its end, the ghost of the past haunts all the actions, relationships and personalities of their characters. In my understanding, Murdoch's novel offer a true image on the post-war human condition wherein the shock of the war has transformed our ideas on moral and identity. The characters' ideas on mourning, trauma, survival, healing and memory, and their theories on morals have changed in a fallen world. This paper tries to give contribution to the researches on post-war English literature in connection to the trauma and the post-Holocaust theories.

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