

## Introduction

### *The Golem Condition*

On January 28, 1922, a severe storm descended on Washington, D.C.; in some parts of the capital, snow mounted twenty-eight inches high. That day, at the seventeen-hundred-seat Knickerbocker movie theater, the accumulation of snow collapsed the theater's new roof during a sold-out screening of a silent comedy. Ninety-eight people died, and many more were injured. As reported in the *Washington Post*, following a moment of "applause and laughter" in response to a funny bit on screen, there was a "crash . . . and then, after one concerted groan, there was silence—and Crandell's Knickerbocker theater, previously the temple of mirth, had been transformed into a tomb."<sup>1</sup>

The theater's collapse bore an uncanny resemblance to one of the central scenes in Paul Wegener's film *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (*The Golem, How He Came into the World*), released in Germany in 1920 and first screened in the United States only a few months prior to the Washington catastrophe. In the film, Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague arrives at the court of Emperor Rudolph II together with his creation, the magical clay giant referred to as the "golem." Asked to entertain the Emperor and his entourage, Rabbi Loew projects onto the wall of the palace "moving images" of wandering Jewish ancestors and warns the courtiers not to laugh at the spectacle. But they do nonetheless. An explosion follows, and the ceiling of the hall begins to collapse. Panic ensues as debris tumbles down, and people fling themselves out of the windows. The rabbi orders the golem to hold up the ceiling beams, saving the lives of the courtiers. But he demands something of the Emperor in return: to annul a recent edict that ordered the expulsion of the Jews.



FIGURE I.1. Paul Wegener in *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*, 1920. (Courtesy of Deutsches Filminstitut, Frankfurt am Main)

While the collapse of the roof at the American theater was an unexpected disaster, it became symbolic of the destructive nature of modern technology, particularly as this technology served the growing mass entertainment industry. The Russian-born Zionist writer and journalist Reuven Brainin (1862–1939) published in the pages of the Yiddish New York daily *Der tog* (The day) an article titled “The Golem (Concerning the Theater Misfortune in Washington).” He metaphorically evoked the clay monster to address the Washington tragedy and offer a critique of technological progress. Brainin drew on the popular golem story to portray modern mechanistic society as soulless, frivolous, and destructive. He even suggested that the theater in Washington was itself constructed “like a golem” since it eventually collapsed and killed those who consume modern entertainment, just as the golem, in some

story variants, grows too large and, when deanimated, collapses on its maker.<sup>2</sup>

The association of the golem with cinema and technology at large is a modern, twentieth-century development, but we find that throughout the long and complex history of the golem, it has been linked with the different linguistic and material “technologies” of human artificial creation. The Hebrew word *galmi* (my golem) first appears in Psalms and later in the Midrash. There, *galmi* refers to the unfinished and unformed human shape prior to receiving a soul.<sup>3</sup> Centuries later, in the medieval and Renaissance periods, the golem was an object of Jewish mystical speculation and interpretation that drew on the ancient Hebrew mystical treatise *Sefer yetsira* (*The Book of Creation*). In the early modern period, stories of artificial creation ascribed to particular historical figures began to emerge, often composed by Christian authors. By the early twentieth century, there existed several variations of the golem story that located the golem either in central or in eastern Europe. What they all had in common was the presence of a rabbi who artificially molds a clay anthropoid and magically brings it to life through Hebrew writing, either engraved on the body or on parchment. Though it exhibits extraordinary strength, its lack of intelligence and its inability to speak mark the golem as inferior to the human being. From here, the Yiddish term *goylem* figuratively came to denote an idiot, fool, or clumsy fellow. Created to serve the rabbi or, in twentieth-century narratives, to protect the Jewish community against anti-Semitic attacks and redeem it from oppressive conditions in the diaspora, the golem ultimately runs amok and attempts to destroy its surroundings, causing “a good deal of damage.”<sup>4</sup> To animate and maintain a golem is therefore a dangerous enterprise. The rabbi risks his own life and that of his community when he imitates the act of divine creation.

Although golem stories began circulating in Europe beyond the Jewish world during the seventeenth century, it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the golem enjoyed mass appeal. In this later period, the golem became more commonly known

and seemed representative of both the wonders and the burdens of our modern human condition. The ascendance of the golem into the sphere of popular culture took place during World War I, an unprecedented historical event in terms of both the enormous loss of human life and the new technologies that enabled such loss. The golem was a wartime celebrity, particularly in Germany but also worldwide. The war era witnessed a proliferation of golem texts and films; Gustav Meyrink's 1915 *Der Golem (The Golem)* became the *Da Vinci Code* of its day, and Paul Wegener released three distinct cinematic adaptations of the golem story between 1915 and 1920. Meyrink's mystical thriller sold approximately 150,000 copies during the war and close to 200,000 copies by the early 1920s. It also appeared in a special pocket edition intended for soldiers on the front lines.<sup>5</sup> The wartime fascination with the golem story was further augmented, as in Meyrink's rendering, through its perceived connection to Jewish mysticism and occult practices. This connection rode the wave of fascination with spiritualism and "unmodern" or "myth-ridden" phenomena "in the midst of a war representing a triumph of modern industrialism, materialism, and mechanism."<sup>6</sup>

The Galician-born Chajim (Chayim) Bloch spurred the wartime interest in the mystical golem, publishing his serialized tales in 1917 while serving as a soldier, and the book *Der Prager Golem (The Golem: Legends of the Ghetto of Prague)* in 1920. It was a German rendition of Yudd Rosenberg's popular Hebrew and Yiddish chapbook about Rabbi Loew and his golem, *Nifla'ot Maharal* or *Seyfer nifloes Maharal (The Golem and the Wonderous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague)*, published in 1909.<sup>7</sup> In Bloch's first preface to *Der Prager Golem*, signed in a prisoner-of-war camp where he was stationed, he notes that in the preceding few years, the golem had risen to European "stardom." Having emerged from the confinement of the (Jewish) ghetto, the legendary golem figure was now familiar to the entire Western world. Moreover, the world itself had become golem-like (*vergolemt*) in its wartime rampage. A "dreadful golem-atmosphere rages and demolishes everything," writes Bloch, "and no wise Rabbi Loew can be found who might calm the golem down."<sup>8</sup>

In the immediate post–World War I period, the Polish-born Yiddish writer Israel Joshua Singer claimed that the “tragedy of the world” was encapsulated in the conflict “between creator and mass, between spirit and golem.” For Singer, the golem embodied both the soulless masses that could be manipulated and crushed and the world at war: he imagined World War I as a giant golem that destroyed everything in its way.<sup>9</sup> In the piece on the Washington catastrophe, Brainin maintained that while the golem of lore was animated using the ineffable name of God, the “modern world-golem,” a fully technological being, has lost its connection to the divine and, with the name of God removed, clumsily carries out its work of destruction. World War I incarnated this modern-world golem, for “he used to once be made of clay—now he is made of steel.” The steel golem of war is no Messiah figure; it can no longer bring about redemption.<sup>10</sup> Brainin’s deliberate conflation of the technologies of war and entertainment through the figure of this clay monster and its destructive tendencies is paradigmatic of the golem’s larger evolutions and shifting relevance in early twentieth-century Western culture.

The World War I years thus marked a significant shift in the circulation of golem stories and in the interpretation of their significance. The mute monster became a means to reflect on how battlefield technologies have altered human lives, as well as a way to experiment with the visual and verbal expression of war’s chaos. In 1917, the philosopher Martin Buber evoked the golem tale in an address to his “Prague friends,” Jewish residents of the city who might find themselves in “danger” or in “captivity.” As long as Europe is still at war, he declared, “the Sabbath has not arrived yet! First we must remove the name from under the tongue of the golem.” In other words, while the golem story evoked the threat and violence of war, as experienced also by Jewish populations, it also pointed to the route for resolving the condition of warfare and ushering in a peaceful era (Sabbath)—that is, by deanimating the golem.<sup>11</sup> In 1921, the Yiddish writer H. Leivick published a lengthy poem, *Der goylem* (*The Golem*), in which he dramatized the tension between the “two sides of the messianic event” in Jewish thought: catastrophe and utopia.<sup>12</sup> Leiv-

ick's Rabbi Loew molds a powerful redeemer that, he hopes, will usher in brighter days. Instead, the rabbi is confounded by the golem's misery and ultimate violence. In this postwar text, as in other works of the world-war period, the golem represented an apocalyptic unleashing of destructive forces, but its aggression was also associated with the (failed) promise of messianic deliverance.

This association of the golem with technology and violence is not an obvious one, however, even though it has become increasingly prevalent over the past century. Whereas traditionally the golem figure is made of a decidedly "low-tech" substance—clay or earth—and brought to life through the manipulations of written letters and/or spoken language, rather than through any scientific, chemical, or physical processes (in contrast to, say, the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*), many twentieth-century writers remolded the golem in the image of war. It was now made of lead or metal rather than clay, facilitating its resignification as a mechanical weapon on the modern battlefield.<sup>13</sup> Even when portrayed as a monster fashioned from earth, the twentieth-century golem often exhibited a toughened exterior, as though its entire body were a shield. The golem's growing association with war technology literally reshaped this monster and its narrative of creation and animation, enabling it to express the horrors of trench warfare and, later, of nuclear warfare.

While the golem was made of clay, it was also imagined, especially in the twentieth century, as an automaton, "a machine that mimics a living being."<sup>14</sup> Already in the industrial era, machines no longer operated in a harmonious manner but "came to be regarded as a superhuman entity of enormous and sometimes mysterious force," explains Minsoo Kang. Post-World War I depictions of automata revealed the "destructive, dehumanizing, and maddening aspects of modern technology," cementing thereby the link between the figure of the golem and that of the automaton.<sup>15</sup> Both are human-like machines that could turn against their creators and human society at large, wreaking immense havoc. In a 1924 satirical piece, "Dem Golem auf der Spur" ("The Golem"),

the Czech Jewish journalist Egon Erwin Kisch's narrator compares the golem to a "robot" or, literally, a "humanautomaton" (*Menschautomat*) that has been subordinated to the will of others and forced to work for foreign benefit. In view of the mistreatment of human beings in industrialized societies, God wills that this golem-automaton remain irretrievably buried.<sup>16</sup> From here, it was only a short step to compare the golem with the robot, a term first used in the 1920 play *R.U.R. (Rossums Universal Robots)* by the Czech writer Karel Čapek.<sup>17</sup>

A combination of equal parts astounding creation and wanton destruction, the golem has come to epitomize the contradictory condition of modern human life. And yet the golem's transnational significance and its role as a cultural image of wartime violence have not yet been thoroughly explored. Instead, scholars have tended to focus on the evolution of different golem narratives across literary genres and aesthetic movements, oftentimes neglecting the historical and social contexts that have made the golem story a relevant and popular one.<sup>18</sup> While in *The Golem Returns: From German Romantic Literature to Global Jewish Culture, 1808–2008*, Cathy Gelbin has convincingly unraveled the ethnoreligious construction of the golem primarily in the German-speaking world, she has not dealt with the specific prevalence of this figure in the context of warfare and its cross-cultural import. In the lay imagination, moreover, the golem continues to nostalgically represent only the Jewish communities in central and eastern Europe.

By contrast, this book examines the ways in which the newly visualized and widely disseminated golems of the twentieth century have enabled artists to explore the violent uses of technology, particularly in the framework of modern warfare. This association of the golem with war and its technologies can explain, in part, the figure's strong and long-lasting grip on the popular imagination. Commenting on the spread of the golem story and its ability to traverse linguistic and national borders, Brainin proclaimed, "Modern culture shouts: the golem is coming! And he comes with gigantic steps."<sup>19</sup> Whereas previously the golem was confined to certain genres (Jewish chapbooks published in central Europe

or Romantic German folktales), the golem's first gigantic steps were entwined with the new media and art forms that so profoundly came to shape the twentieth century, as well as with their new modes of circulation. The myriad of recent golem renditions—in belletristic writing (*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, *The Golem and Jinni*), television (*The X-Files*, *Supernatural*, and *Sleepy Hollow*), film (*Inglourious Basterds*), comic books (*Breath of Bones*), and even video games such as *Minecraft* and *Assassin's Creed*—attests to the ongoing relevance of this narrative of artificial creation.

The spread of mass visual culture, whether in the form of the moving image or that of the printed comic book, was one of the main catalysts for the globalization of the golem story and its newfound significance. Paul Wegener's 1920 cinematic adaptation made its way across the Atlantic and was screened in New York, exerting its influence on local Jewish American culture in Yiddish. During World War II, Paul Falkenberg (the editor of Fritz Lang's *M*) and Henrik Galeen (the screenplay writer of Wegener's 1914 golem film) developed a film treatment in which Jews in the ghetto mobilized the fear of the golem to combat the Nazis.<sup>20</sup> Then in the post-Holocaust period, particularly in the 1970s, the golem resurfaced in American popular culture, specifically in comic books, as an all-powerful monster that could vanquish Arab and German enemies alike. Less human than Superman and his successors such as the Hulk, the golem was imagined as a deterrent avenger—a thuggish weapon—rather than as a full-fledged superhero.

The modern golem narrative has been adapted and readapted, written and rewritten by Jews and non-Jews alike, evolving into a kind of multivalent palimpsest of Western cultures. In order to understand these modern incarnations of the golem, this book begins its historical and cultural analysis with the surge of the golem's popularity during World War I. We then will see how in its "travels" from Europe to the United States and to Israel, the golem figure continued to offer insight into the perils of war and the dilemmas of the human condition throughout the bloody twentieth century. In Israel/Palestine, the golem attained a

dual and even contradictory significance: on the one hand, the Hebrew-language press of the pre- and immediately poststatehood period mobilized the clay monster as a metaphor for the new nation's enemies. On the other hand, Israeli writers cast the golem as a wounded soldier, using the story to evoke the state of living death caused by war.

In examining versions of the golem story across twentieth-century cultures, languages, and media, this book focuses on the story's continual reshaping in the context of modern, as well as postmodern, warfare and its implications for Jewish populations and nations.<sup>21</sup> While the figure's clay substance linked it metonymically to the mud of the trenches during World War I, more broadly and metaphorically, the golem lent itself well to wartime and postwar depictions of the violence and injury associated with technological power. In the post-World War II period, the golem continued to be linked with mass destruction and the threat of nuclear weapons, as well as with cybernetic systems, both disembodied computers and hybrid cyborgs. In the pages that follow, we will see how intercultural contact and exchange, through literature, film, and print media, enabled the "golem epidemic" to spread, rendering this figure an emblem of modern destruction.

### Monstrous Metaphors

Especially around World War I, the golem fulfilled in the European popular imagination the ideal of an infallible, all-powerful war machine. In contrast to the "inapt" and "docile" body of the modern soldier that, according to Michel Foucault, must be plied and mastered, rendering it more machine-like and automatic, the golem is already created an apt and powerful soldier. Although both soldier and golem are molded out of the same "formless clay," in Foucault's own metaphor, and are meant to be transformed and used by others, the artificial golem epitomizes a triumphant and vital militarism, an ideal body far from the weak human soldier who requires constant training.<sup>22</sup> Thus, one of the reasons for the appeal of the golem story during times of war was that, unlike the

“docile” body of the soldier, this clay “machine” could be constructed easily and was not constitutionally delicate. Formed in the image of the human, the golem is a double that also functions as “an extension of man,” able to perform tasks that go beyond ordinary human capacity.<sup>23</sup> Already in the 1940s, an Israeli journalist imagined that golem-like weapons would soon render the human soldier redundant on the battlefield. People would control these “golems” from a safe distance, with the actual fighting playing out between masses of robotic machines—not unlike our use of drones today.<sup>24</sup>

In tandem with the idealization of the golem as a war machine, the narrative of an artificial creation that goes awry and must be put to rest or terminated also reminded readers and audiences of their mortality and self-destructive powers. Meyrink’s 1915 novel portrays the golem as a ghostly and menacing presence, rather than a stolid clay giant, that returns to wreak havoc in the ghetto every thirty-three years. In Wegener’s films, the golem’s existence is precarious, controlled by others, and ultimately short-lived. In this respect, the golem resembles the soldier who is intensely exposed to his own mortality and that of others. Writers from divergent backgrounds, the Galician S. Y. Agnon, the Russian H. Leivick, and the Czech Egon Erwin Kisch, all used the golem story to explore the ways in which war and civil strife ravage the fragile human body and psyche, resulting in states of psychosis or else utter immobility and apathy.

From these contradictory impulses emerges what I call the “golem condition”: the golem forces us to recognize that the fantasies of expanding our capacities and transgressing our natural boundaries are always curbed by the inborn limitations of human existence. Hence, in most golem works created during or after a period of conflict, the strong protector turns into a violent destroyer, a rebellious monster that exposes its fallibility and the vulnerability of those who created it. The golem as artificially “born” and controlled by others might appear at first to offer the promise of escaping the most basic human condition of birth and death, as described by Hannah Arendt in 1958. However, in its living-dead state

of artificial existence, the golem collapses natality and mortality into one event, embodying a lack of spontaneity and constantly reminding us of our own mortality.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the golem's (often) erratic behavior when misused makes it both a test case for the rebellion against our mortal limitations and a cautionary tale. The golem condition thus describes the dire repercussions of focusing our human activities and endeavors on murderous wars and their technologies.

The golem figure has run amok in the twentieth century in part by exceeding the realm of a literary tale and becoming a metaphoric embodiment of our technologies, specifically advanced weapons technologies. As the Yiddish American writer Isaac Bashevis Singer commented in 1984, on the occasion of a new production of Leivick's 1921 *The Golem* at the Delacorte Theater in New York, the "golem drama of our epoch" forces us to wonder whether we are capable of exerting our free will to stop the nuclear menace and whether we can divest the golem monster of its all-too-real contemporary powers, reducing it back to "fiction and folklore."<sup>26</sup> Such sentiment is not new to the nuclear age, however. Brainin, for one, had already expressed such anxiety in 1922 when he wrote that "the golem is now no longer a legend but reality. A golem epidemic."<sup>27</sup> Be the fear one of technological tyranny or of nuclear extinction, the problem is the same: as an embodiment of technology, the golem can easily be re-created and refined, but it cannot be fully controlled. For many thinkers, the soulless golem is a metaphor turned all too literal. In 1965, the scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem proposed to name one of the first computers constructed in Israel "Golem Aleph." In the inauguration speech for the computer, he exhorted this "golem" and its creators, "Develop peacefully and don't destroy the world."<sup>28</sup> The enduring link between the golem and modern technology offers a frightening analogy: the golem, like some of our greatest technological creations, has the power not only to enhance but also to destroy our world.

The success of the metaphor depends on the golem's conceptualization as an inherently malleable entity, one that has been molded and re-

molded, animated and deanimated throughout modern cultural history. Victor Turner reminds us that metaphors in general work as a “species of *liminal monster* . . . whose combination of familiar and unfamiliar features or unfamiliar combination of familiar features provokes us into thought, provides us with new perspectives.”<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, monsters such as the golem and the zombie have become master metaphors in Western culture and beyond. As in the case of the rebellious Frankenstein, the golem metaphor may itself “rebel” and become too literal.<sup>30</sup> Through the golem, the violence of the metaphoric yoking of tenor and vehicle is further concretized, as is the tension between progress and destruction. If the resemblance between the Prague golem and the golem of the nuclear age “stagger[s] the imagination,” it is because of the folkloric golem’s “uncanny power” and its uncontrollability.

Whether adapted by Jewish or non-Jewish artists, the golem narrative has predominantly dealt with Jewish-related subject matters, so that the general “golem condition” needs to be framed within this specific cultural and social context. During World War I, the golem came to stand for the real and imagined contact zone between western and eastern European cultures. The encounter with eastern European Jews on the front lines “dramatically enlarged the scope and magnitude of the cult of the *Ostjude*” amid German Jews, according to Steve Aschheim. They imagined the culture of eastern European Jews as spiritual, premodern, and whole.<sup>31</sup> Bloch, for example, endowed his golem tales with an aura of authenticity and a folkloric appeal by attributing them to a Polish Jew from Chelm whom he met at the prisoner-of-war camp. In supposedly transposing the Yiddish text of these stories into “western European” German, he claimed to have retained the “simple” and “heartwarming” language of the original.<sup>32</sup> Reviewers of Wegener’s first 1914 film similarly associated the golem with eastern European Jewry, a poor, servile, and abject people who seemed to live in the past of their old traditions, including the “esoteric doctrine” of medieval kabbalah, as allegedly taught by Rabbi Loew, creator of the golem.<sup>33</sup>

Hence, despite the fact that World War I mobilized Jews on both combatting sides, molding them into soldiers in much the same way as the rest of the population, the Jews of eastern Europe functioned in the popular imagination as the transmitters and mediators of the “golem cult.” They were perceived as a source of “authentic” Jewish culture but were also derided for their mystical inclinations, as manifest in these narratives of artificial creation.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, the golem functioned as the powerful weapon of a powerless people. Precisely because Jews were an often-persecuted minority, especially with the rise of racially inflected anti-Semitism in Europe and the early twentieth-century pogroms in eastern Europe, they appeared to need a strong protector of fantastical proportions.

The indeterminate golem, in my reading, is a form of reverse “ethnic drag”: rather than heighten the performativity of *Jewish* identity, it constitutes an exaggerated enactment of the Jewish ability to transform into the *non-Jewish* masculine ideal. The hypermasculine golem alerted readers and viewers to both the enormous potential and the danger of such border crossings.<sup>35</sup> Performed on behalf of Jewish populations but not by Jews themselves, the golem’s violence evokes anxieties concerning the refashioning of Jews into more powerful, bellicose combatants. Even when suggesting a revitalized, combative Judaism and Jewish masculinity, the golem was inevitably associated with diasporic Jewish culture. For this reason, Israeli writers and artists often spurned the golem as an exilic myth in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Yet the discourse of the “new Jew” or “muscle Jew,” encapsulated in the Zionist leader Max Nordau’s famous call for a Jewry of muscles to counter stereotypes of male effeminacy and degeneration, only partially accounts for the twentieth-century popularity of the golem story.<sup>36</sup> According to Judith Halberstam, “monsters are meaning machines”: their bodies represent a variety of categories, commenting on constructions of gender, class, race, nationality, and sexuality. Their monstrosity derives from the ability to “condense as many fear-producing traits as pos-

sible into one body.”<sup>37</sup> Because it destabilized and confused conceptions of ethnicity, gender, and religion, the indeterminate golem was able to facilitate reflections on the purposes, justifications, and aftereffects of both Jewish and general forms of mass violence. Embodying both the fantasy of war and its failure, the golem was simultaneously a product of Jewish society and a marker of the shifting borders of Jewishness: at one extreme, this creature even came to represent German soldiers blindly obeying their Nazi leaders.

Whether imagined as Jewish or non-Jewish, Israeli or German, human or robotic, the golem of war persistently appears as a masculine being and, oftentimes, an object of female attention and attraction. Female golems do exist in both Jewish and Christian scriptural and literary sources, from the German Romanticist Achim von Arnim’s *Isabelle von Ägypten: Kaiser Karl des Fünften erste Jugendliebe* (Isabella of Egypt) (1812) through the American novelist Cynthia Ozick’s *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997) to Helena Wecker’s *The Golem and the Jinni* (2013).<sup>38</sup> But the works I discuss in this book feature masculine-appearing golems because of the overwhelmingly predominant male service in the front lines of twentieth-century wars. In the 2013 comic book trilogy *Breath of Bones: A Tale of the Golem*, a Jewish grandfather molds a golem to combat a German attack on his village during World War I, informing his grandson, “it will only work if you give it strength.” The next panel shows the boy’s clenched fist, covered in mud, underscoring the direct connection between male physical “strength” and the resulting clay monster.<sup>39</sup> As we shall see, when writing about a cyborg created to defend a futurist Jewish community, the author Marge Piercy claims that “he must be male, the golem,” since it needs to fulfill the archetypal male roles of “killer” and “protector.”<sup>40</sup> Performing an exaggerated form of male aggression—or else of male vulnerability in the case of the injured, living-dead soldiers—the inherently indeterminate golem figure served writers and artists in varied cultural contexts to criticize the militarization of society but also to give free rein to fantasies of (Jewish) revenge.

## Violent Precursors

The golem narratives and images that developed around World War I and have continued to circulate since World War II do not, by any means, constitute a complete break from past imaginings of this anthropoid. The golem's violent tendencies were already present in seventeenth-century renderings of the tale, though this motif attained additional war-related meanings in the twentieth century. The destructiveness of the golem figure in pre-twentieth-century writings was thus an important precondition for this new twist in the evolution of the golem theme, and twentieth-century writers and artists drew heavily on precursor stories.

Since at least the seventeenth century, the golem has been associated with Polish Jewry, specifically with the figure of Rabbi Eliyahu Ba'al Shem of the city of Chelm. An influential Latin letter written by Christoph Arnold to the Christian Hebraist Johann Christoph Wagenseil in 1674 took up such a narrative about a Polish Jewish community. Arnold's version tells of a clay anthropoid animated by an amulet inscribed with the Hebrew word for truth, *emet*. This golem performs domestic tasks for its master, the Polish Ba'al Shem. But when the golem grows extremely tall and strong, threatening its creator, the Ba'al Shem has the golem bend over so he can erase the letter aleph, transforming the word *emet* into *met*, meaning "dead." In the process, the deanimated golem falls over his maker and crushes him.<sup>41</sup> This story was translated into German in 1689 and used as alleged proof of Jewish sorcery, so that, according to Gelbin, it was now "filtered through the lens of Christian writers and imbued with the stereotypes that their time held regarding Jews."<sup>42</sup> The golem's destructive aspect needs to be understood from within this intercultural and interreligious framework, the result of Jewish-Christian interaction.

In 1714, the Christian Orientalist Johann Jacob Schudt, drawing on Arnold's letter and other sources, compiled a lineage of tales concerning the golem. His aim was to prove that Jews performed sorcery and abused

the name of God. Schudt's text served as the basis for Jacob Grimm's golem tale of 1808, a rendition that inspired the rewriting of the story among a number of Christian German nineteenth-century Romantics, such as Ludwig Achim von Arnim and E. T. A. Hoffmann. In Grimm's succinct version, the Polish Jews who create the golem verbally pronounce the explicit name of God ("*Schemhamphoras*") in order to bring the anthropoid to life, and they use it as a servant until it grows threateningly large and ultimately crushes its creator. Grimm universalized the narrative by omitting the specific site of Chelm in Poland and the figure of the Ba'al Shem. He also reconfigured the golem story as a "minimal folkloric report" rather than a fairy tale written in the style of his famous *Children's and Household Tales*.<sup>43</sup>

In response to these Christian variants, particularly to the Grimm tale, Jewish writers sought to reattach the golem story to a specific place (Prague of the Jewish-tolerant monarch Rudolph II) and to a historical figure (Rabbi Loew).<sup>44</sup> The "migration" of the legend from eastern to central Europe occurred in the 1830s and 1840s, with the appearance of written versions that associated the clay figure with Prague and its Rabbi Judah Loew ben Betzalel, also known as the Maharal (Our Teacher) of Prague. Edan Dekel and David Gantt Gurley explain that precisely because the historical Rabbi Loew was *not* known as a practitioner of kabbalah, he could lend Jewish mysticism more authority, in contrast to the Christian view of kabbalah as "some kind of Jewish thaumaturgy." Even more so, the Jewish Prague versions emphasized the holy written word, the act of writing the secret name and animating the golem in this manner, unlike the Christian account of verbally performed magic.<sup>45</sup> The drama of the Prague variant, initially recorded in an 1836 text by Ludwig August Frankel and, later, in an 1841 work by the journalist and folklorist Franz Klutschak, still revolves around the threatening nature of the golem: when the rabbi forgets to deanimate his creation on the Sabbath eve, the golem becomes mad and begins to destroy the rabbi's house.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Wolf Pascheles's 1847 German-language collection of Jewish tales, *Sippurim*, included the influential Prague story by Leopold Weisel,

in which “the magic servant became enraged, tore down the houses, threw rocks around, uprooted trees, and thrashed around horribly in the streets.”<sup>47</sup> An “instant success,” Weisel’s narrative went through many reprintings and became “the standard for the rest of the century,” until the publication of Rosenberg’s more elaborate tales sixty years later.<sup>48</sup>

Significantly, the Maharal of Prague emerges unscathed in these nineteenth-century Jewish versions, rather than being crushed by his gigantic servant. He manages to subdue and deanimate the golem before the Sabbath, thereby preserving the sanctity of the Jewish ritual. The story of the Prague golem may therefore be understood as a corrective to Arnold’s and Grimm’s texts, in which no such heroic affirmative ending is to be found.<sup>49</sup> In the Prague tale, the golem runs amok when Rabbi Loew forgets to remove from the creature’s mouth the animating “formula” with God’s name; but order is subsequently restored, and the rabbi returns to perform the Sabbath ritual. Moreover, in Pascheles’s *Sippurim*, Rabbi Loew appears as an enlightened philosopher, and the golem narrative is treated as “a well-known story” that does not require lengthy elaboration.<sup>50</sup> Yudl Rosenberg’s 1909 *Nifla’ot Maharal* continues this trend of praising the Jewish creator of the golem and harnessing the golem’s strength toward successful Jewish ends. His golem is a God-sent protector of the Jewish community from Christian persecution. Although the golem uses physical violence to round up Christian agitators and deliver them to the police, in Rosenberg’s text, it does so only for the sake of communal self-protection and preservation.<sup>51</sup>

By contrast, in the decades before the publication of Rosenberg’s chapbook, two prominent Jewish writers, Isaac Leib Peretz and Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovitch), wrote short narratives in which the golem carries out its role as protector of the Jewish community in a highly problematic manner. It is worth pausing and reflecting on these stories, first, because of the degree of violence found in them and, second, because they foreshadow the ways in which relations between Jews and non-Jews become a central component of the golem narrative, starting in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the twentieth.

For both Peretz and Scholem Aleichem, the protective function of the golem devolves into senseless and uncontrollable violence, so that the stories ultimately warn their readers against the hubris of Jewish creation and the attempt to bring about, via the golem, a significant rupture between the Jewish and Christian worlds.

In Peretz's brief tale, written in Yiddish and first published in 1893, the Maharal animates a golem in order to protect his community from rape and slaughter, but then, at the mere threat of violence, this monster is preemptively sent outside the ghetto to thrash the enemies of the Jews. Once set into motion as a mass murderer, the golem never tires, and Prague becomes "filled with corpses." As in Rosenberg's later text, Peretz's golem directs its violence outward, toward the Christian world, rather than crushing its Jewish creator to death or destroying his home and the Jewish ghetto at large. The Jews finally complain to their leader, "The golem is slaughtering all of Prague! Soon there won't be any Gentiles left to heat the Sabbath ovens or take down the Sabbath lamps."<sup>52</sup> The Maharal therefore summons the golem by reciting the Sabbath Psalm and deanimates it, although he retains the clay remains in the attic of the Prague synagogue in case future generations of Jews might need the golem's help.

Peretz's tale ironically conflates the golem's servitude with its violent rampage, as described in the nineteenth-century Frankel and Weisel versions. Rather than interrupting the Sabbath Psalm in order to subdue his servant, the rabbi utters the Psalm as a means of bringing the slaughter of Christian Prague to an end. Peretz thus marries the revenge narrative to a critique of (religious) Jewish hypocrisy. The amorality of the Jewish community and its leader comes to the fore in the motivations for calling off the slaughter. It is not so much that the Jews mind the killing of Christians as that they still need their *shabbes-goys*, Christians who are willing to work on the Sabbath. If Jews are to maintain their particularity, the golem must be stopped, since they are dependent on others for the observance of their religion.

In 1901, Sholem Aleichem published a similar narrative, most likely inspired by Peretz, in *Ha-dor* (The generation), a Hebrew weekly pub-

lished in Warsaw and edited by David Frishman. This text was swiftly translated into German and appeared in the more widely read Viennese weekly of the World Zionist Organization, *Die Welt* (The world). In Sholem Aleichem's narrative, said to be adapted from a "Jewish folktale," the persecution of the Jewish community also precedes the golem's creation and justifies it, since before the golem, "the blood of the innocent flowed like water." Rabbi Loew forms out of clay a robust humanoid with "iron-strong hands" and places it on the bridge over the Moldau River; whenever a Christian seems about to harm a Jew, the golem throws him into the river. Soon the river begins to fill with "countless human corpses," symbolically balancing the scales of justice. But, as in Peretz's story, the Jewish population is not pleased; through the loss of important mercantile relations, the golem has caused more harm than all the foes of the Jews past and present, they claim.<sup>53</sup>

The depiction of the golem as a mass murderer in both texts is startling; it draws on the theme of the sorcerer's apprentice that circulated in German literature starting in the late nineteenth century but pushes it to an extreme. Instead of a flood, we witness a bloody massacre, an overflowing of corpses that cannot be stopped until the rabbi utters the word. In this respect, these tales caution against the Jewish abuse of power, even while they give free rein to a fantasy of mass retribution against Christian populations. Such turn-of-the-century renditions, Rosenberg's included, use the revenge fantasy to transform the story of the Prague golem from a mere "corrective" to negative Christian depictions of Jewish sorcery into a compensatory spectacle of Jewish aggression executed by a monster figure that nonetheless cannot be fully identified with its Jewish creator. Leivick's *The Golem* likewise grapples with the issue of the golem's violence, although Leivick is most interested in the golem's destructive impulses toward his creator and the Jewish community. The themes of Peretz's and Sholem Aleichem's stories reemerged in full force only in the second half of the twentieth century, after World War II. In the popular medium of comics, for instance, the golem was imagined as a figure of revenge that expressed the Jewish desire for physical and technological power.

In writing these ironic cautionary tales, Peretz and Sholem Aleichem were also reflecting on the significance of Jewish folklore amid the rise of Zionism and the rush to secularize and modernize. Even while retelling the golem narrative and so assisting its spread and continuity, these writers imply that such a tale is perhaps irrelevant at a time when Jews no longer believe in their God and when the integrity of the community can hardly be preserved in the face of the forces of capitalism. In this context, the golem story also becomes a parable for the overdependence of Jews on their surroundings and the need to instill a new sense of national and cultural independence. If controlled properly, such a nationalist “superhuman” could be harnessed for the good of the Jews, even when it appears as a double-edged sword or weapon in the framework of traditional, observant Jewish society. As we shall see, carrying over this issue into the twentieth century, Israeli writers such as S. Y. Agnon and Yoram Kaniuk, as well as Americans such as Michael Chabon and Marge Piercy, have used the golem story to comment on the dangers of militaristic nationalisms that harness technological force to protect their enterprises.

To sum up, starting in the seventeenth century, the modern history of the golem story is one of intercultural negotiation over the significance and uses of artificial creation. The Jewish creator of lore has the power to bring an inanimate object to life through his belief in a divine force, and this power can be presented in a negative light (as in the early Christian sources) or in a more positive one. But rather than consider the golem story as a site for the projection of pro- or anti-Jewish notions and images, this genealogy reveals that the golem’s violence was productive on an intercultural level, generating an ever-growing body of renditions and adaptations that enabled critical reflections on Jewish-Christian relations in modern times. What marks many twentieth-century versions, starting with the turn-of-the-twentieth-century narratives just discussed, is a more extreme vision of the violence perpetrated by Jews, albeit in self-defense, and an ambivalent position toward golem creation as an act that marks Jewish separatism. The brutal precursor golems de-

picted in both Christian and Jewish sources of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries paved the way for such new associations in the twentieth century.

### A Brief User's Manual

The focus of this book on twentieth-century rewritings of the golem story and its metaphoric uses has led me to select texts that address the dilemmas of the “golem condition.” Through this specific lens, the book traces the golem’s appearances both within particular national frameworks of cultural production and across cultures, revealing the golem to be a powerful means of transnational exchange regarding the monstrosity of war. To investigate this exchange, the book deals only with those works that cast the golem as a figure of war-related violence. By situating these texts, films, and productions in their respective historical and social contexts, and by uncovering unknown sources and suggesting fresh juxtapositions, my discussion offers new insights into the sheer pervasiveness of the golem narrative. Since “the traditional division of high and popular cultural has been a political division rather than a defensible intellectual or aesthetic distinction,” my aim has been to reveal the constant cross-fertilization between “highbrow” and “popular” works, both visual and literary.<sup>54</sup>

If ever a monster was created perfect for the task of revisiting the very notion of the “popular,” it is the golem, since, as Gelbin maintains, “modern Jewish popular culture . . . reveals the heterogeneous nature of all popular culture, particularly because it is not tied to one particular language or national context.”<sup>55</sup> The golem not only became a highly transportable figure that traversed national, religious, and ethnic boundaries; it was also transformed by the emergence of new media and of modern publication and exhibition practices. The intense cultural work that the golem performed in the context of twentieth-century wars can be located in the works themselves, at their borderlines, through prologues and scores, and in reviews and advertisements. The reconstruc-

tion of the golem's diverse resignification as soldier and weapon can take place only through a comparative and intermedial approach that brings the more well-known works—Paul Wegener's *The Golem, How He Came into the World*, S. Y. Agnon's *To This Day*, H. Leivick's *The Golem*—into dialogue with the lesser-known but equally pervasive golem metaphors and texts of their day.

Chapter 1 concerns the popularization of the golem figure in World War I Germany through Wegener's three films of 1914, 1917, and 1920. With the help of Wegener's wartime diary and his unpublished letters and notes, I argue that his approach to the golem materials and their aesthetics underwent a pronounced shift after he returned from fighting on the front lines, where he came very close to death and experienced the killing and wounding of many others. If, in 1914, the cinematic golem is a ready-made object dug up, sold, and employed for mundane, familial purposes, Wegener's 1920 golem, a product of Jewish mystical and astrological practices, is a heroic figure used to teach the Christian emperor and his courtiers a lesson in empathy toward the Jews. The cinematic golem, however, is not merely a weapon that defends Jews from the threat of expulsion; it is also an animated, evolving being that ultimately attains a semblance of humanity. Drawing on early twentieth-century film theory by the Hungarian writer Béla Balázs, I show how Wegener and the architect Hans Poelzig designed expressive and animated cinematic spaces that enhanced the vivacious quality of cinema itself and pointed to the need for national recovery and reanimation.

In the summer and fall of 1921, Wegener's third golem film was screened in New York to much acclaim, accompanied by a new musical score and live theatrical prologue, orchestrated and performed by Jewish artists. These American framing devices, reconstructed for the first time in chapter 2, underscored the status of the Jews as a persecuted and expelled minority in Europe and posited the golem as a fantastical savior figure. In the context of the deteriorating status of German Jews around World War I and the violent pogroms against eastern European Jews during this period, the American golem "cult" addressed some of the

pressing issues of the day: the quotas placed on Jewish immigration to the United States and the responses of Jews to anti-Semitic violence. Wegener's film sparked a wave of popular American golem performances, including Max Gabel's 1921 Yiddish production *Der goylem: Muzikalischer legende in dray akten mit a prolog* (The golem: A musical legend in three acts and a prologue). Gabel replicated Wegener's costume as the golem, but he also drew inspiration from the film's American prologue and, likewise, depicted the creation of the golem as a response to the condition of Jewish homelessness. This chapter juxtaposes Gabel's forgotten operetta with Wegener's famous film and Leivick's modernist poem, published in New York in the same year, to reveal that these works all contend with the contemporary issue of Jewish uprooting and immigration. "Permitted to shed blood" in defense of the Jews, Leivick's golem is unique, however, as an utter outcast, a disposable defender and abject being that violently turns against the Jewish community.

In comparison to the American enthusiasm for the golem story, in both the pre- and post-World War II periods, its relative lack of popularity in Israel/Palestine is noteworthy. Chapter 3 shifts to this particular geopolitical arena, showing that while Zionist culture did not take up the golem story with the same "cultish" zeal as in Germany and the U.S., it nonetheless evoked the figure in the context of twentieth-century wars, both external and internal. The Hebrew-language press of the 1940s used the golem metaphor primarily with reference to the enemy other, whether Nazi or Arab. No longer bearing the name of God, these metaphoric golems were mere mechanical monsters (German pilotless airplanes) or else artificial creations (the Arab League), formed to deter the small Israeli army.

Only in post-1948 Hebrew literature was the golem story rewritten as a tale of war injury, in which the dichotomies of us and them, friend and foe, break down in the face of the overall devastation of war. In *To This Day*, the Israeli writer and Nobel Prize winner Agnon responded to the German golem "fad" in its various manifestations, recasting the clay being as a brain-injured German veteran. Through

this apathetic soldier, Agnon criticizes the wartime desire—which he sees in World War I Germany just as in his own Israel—to produce an infallible military man and demand self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation. In the 1966 novel *Ḥimo, melekh yerushalyaim* (*Himmo, King of Jerusalem*), the Israeli writer Yoram Kaniuk similarly uses the golem moniker to refer to a war-injured soldier, in this case one severely disabled in the battles of 1948. Setting this golem narrative in a makeshift military hospital in Jerusalem, Kaniuk focuses on the Israeli home front to reveal the internal tensions between Jews and Christians, as well as between local Sephardic Jews and recent Ashkenazi newcomers. Over and against the Zionist rejection of the (diasporic) association of Jews with the golem figure, these Israeli works convey the ongoing relevance of the golem for narratives related to the founding of Israel and its militarized society.

In contrast to the internally directed destruction of Leivick's golem and the bifurcation of Israeli golems into evil enemies and injured, living-dead soldiers, American popular culture of the post-World War II period provides us with full-fledged fantasies of Jewish retribution, particularly for Nazi persecution. Chapter 4 traces the motif of the golem as a violent avenger and deterrent weapon both in comic books of the 1970s and in millennial works of art and fiction. The latter include Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds*, and James Sturm's graphic narrative *The Golem's Mighty Swing*. This chapter shows that a Jewish revenge fantasy undergirds many of these popular American rewritings of the golem story, with the Holocaust serving as a common backdrop. The superheroic golem is no longer bound by any ghetto walls and, drawing on its imagined nuclear power, can beat Nazis to a pulp. Yet the link between Jewishness and vengeance was apparently too unsettling to be fully developed, even by Jewish cartoonists proficient in spinning popular lore. The American ambivalence toward the golem as an icon of retribution is evident in its typical portrayal as an inhuman, all-too-powerful figure, susceptible to transmuting into a destruc-

tive, even evil, monster. Only in the irreverent *Inglourious Basterds* does Tarantino give full rein to the fantasy of an unleashed Jewish power, linking his character of the murderous “Bear Jew” with the golem as an “avenging Jew angel.”

Chapter 5 takes the association of the golem with technology, war, and destruction into the Cold War age of cybernetics. It discusses how the golem was used to grapple with the ethics of new and intelligent computational machines put in the service of governments and their armed forces. The chapter pairs Norbert Wiener’s philosophical *God and Golem, Inc.* (1964) with the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem’s *Golem XIV* (1981), and Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1983) with the American writer Marge Piercy’s *He, She, and It* (1991), to explore how the golem story became a heuristic device and a narrative tool used to address the military implications of cybernetics and computer technologies. In the aftermath of World War II, Wiener argued for the need to rein in the intelligence of “learning machines,” warning of their ability to overcome their human creators in unpredictable ways. Following Wiener, Lem imagines a future in which computers of superior intelligence become independent, self-controlling interlocutors that turn pacifist because of the “illogical” nature of American war strategy and world domination. The name golem, intended to suggest the strategic powers of these computers, comes to symbolize their practical and philosophical rebellion. In contrast to Lem’s dehumanization of the golem-computer, Piercy portrays a cyborg that veers from its creator’s plans not by becoming less violent but by desiring to participate in its society as a human and a Jew. In Piercy’s dystopic work, set in a futurist world ravaged by nuclear warfare and environmental catastrophe, the golem embodies the fantasy of a steadfast cyberprotector for the isolated and embattled Jewish community. He ultimately rejects his own violent programming and destroys the capacity to re-create a “conscious weapon” akin to himself, the cyborg. In so doing, like Wegener’s cinematic monster, Piercy’s golem exhibits a divine spark, transforming from “it” to “he” and revealing its human face.

Singer aptly summarizes, “I am not exaggerating when I say that the golem story appears less obsolete today than it seemed one hundred years ago. What are the computers and robots of our time if not golems?”<sup>56</sup> Although the comparison of the golem with an automated, unthinking weapon may be a more intuitive one, Singer’s golem-computer analogy points to a historical shift: in the course of the twentieth century, the golem ceased to be a mute and unintelligent machine, incapable of development. On the contrary, the fictional and cinematic golems we will encounter in this book exhibit varying degrees of self-knowledge, with Piercy’s cyborg marking one extreme as a golem capable even of wisdom and selfless love. World War I popularized the golem as an invincible fighter-machine, a vulnerable (if uncontrollable) living-dead clay monster, and a potential redeemer, albeit a violent one. The theme of the golem’s own suffering and desire for human connection was cemented already a century ago in German literature and film, calling into question the ethics of artificial creation in the service of modern warfare. The possibilities of the golem, and its value as a revealer of our cultural preoccupations, have only grown since then. Part automatized soldier, part nuclear weapon, and part interfacing cyborg, the golem continues to haunt the transnational imagination in our own day as we still contend with the bloodshed of the twentieth century and the repercussions of ongoing global wars.