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978-1-107-08986-0 - Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West

German Far Left, 1967–1989

Jeffrey Herf

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

If there were an unwritten eleventh commandment of West German history after the Holocaust, it would be that no German government or political group should kill or harm any more Jews or lend assistance to anyone else who was killing or harming Jews. Nor should a German government attack the state of Israel or aid its enemies. It was the moral minimum associated with West Germany's policy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or "coming to terms with the Nazi past," above all with the crimes of Nazi Germany's mass murder of six million Jews in Europe. It was a tradition more known for financial restitution than timely justice.¹ Yet the basic moral principle of doing no more harm to the Jews animated the decisions of successive West German chancellors, including Konrad Adenauer's determination in 1952 to offer financial restitution to survivors of the Holocaust and to the state of Israel, and Ludwig Erhard's policy of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel in 1965. The tradition persisted after German unification; in 2008, German chancellor Angela Merkel declared in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, that Israel's survival was a matter of Germany's reason of state.

From its founding in 1949 until its collapse in 1989, the government of the Communist regime in East Germany adopted a very different view, one that entailed hostility to Zionism as an idea and Israel as a reality.

¹ On *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in West Germany, see Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). The tradition led to financial restitution to survivors of the Holocaust, financial payments to the state of Israel, and a mix of judicial reckoning, delay, and integration of former members of the Nazi regime. On the latter see Norbert Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

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Especially beginning in June 1967 during and after the Six-Day War, the West German radical Left also turned against Israel and produced small groups of terrorists who collaborated with Palestinian organizations in the 1970s and 1980s. This book is a history of the anti-Israeli policies and activities of the East German *state* and the West German radical leftist *organizations*. It examines the translation of anti-Zionist, at times anti-Semitic ideology into policies of support for war and terrorism aimed at the state and the citizens of the state of Israel, that is, policies that indeed caused more harm to Jews. It focuses on the years from 1967 to 1989 and especially on the early 1980s. It was then that antagonism reached its most virulent level and when both East Germany and the West German Left supported Arab state and Palestinian organization efforts to destroy the state of Israel by force of arms. The spectrum of antagonism included hostile political warfare at the United Nations and repeated assertions that Israel bore sole responsibility for what was then called “the Middle East conflict.” Yet, as the following chapters confirm, the antagonism combined hostile words with providing military training and delivering weapons of war including thousands of Kalashnikov assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, land mines, explosives, and on occasion tanks and MiG fighter jets to the Arab states and Palestinian organizations then at war with Israel. In this indirect sense, both the East German government and West German leftist terrorist groups were also at war with Israel. Though the Communist regimes in Europe collapsed in 1989–1990 and though their Arab and Palestinian allies failed in their efforts to destroy Israel by force of arms, the ideas of this era of secular, leftist antagonism toward Israel continue to echo in world politics today.

The terrorism of the West German groups was more famous at the time than the military alliance between the Soviet bloc and the Arab states and Palestinian terror groups. Yet the East German government had far more impact on the course of events in the Middle East than did West German leftist terrorists. The great attention devoted to the latter and the relative neglect of the former reversed the order of their causal impact on events in the Middle East. By drawing attention to the importance of the Soviet bloc and East Germany, this work gives them a causal import often missing in media focus on West German leftist terrorism and connects this history to that of the global Cold War between the Soviet bloc and the Western Alliance. At the time, the United States Central Intelligence Agency estimated that East Germany’s arms deliveries to the Arab states constituted about 3 percent of those from the Soviet bloc. As we will see, 3 percent of some very large numbers dwarfed

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the far better publicized arsenals discovered in the safe houses of West German leftist terrorists. The differences in scale were due to the differences between the resources of a *state* linked to a huge military alliance and those of leftist political *movements and groups*. While the Red Army Faction, June 2nd movement, and Revolutionary Cells captured headlines, it was the East German Communists who could deploy state power – armed forces, embassies, and a diplomatic corps; an effective intelligence service; military training centers; and a controlled press and media – to affect the balance of forces and events in the Middle East. This work presents the most extensive examination to date of the implementation of those instruments of power.

This book is the first work in English to draw on available German archives to examine the history of this period of German antagonism to Israel. It focuses on its causes, but, more than in previous accounts, it also examines the consequences of these policies in the form of political warfare, hostile propaganda, and military support for states and terrorist organizations at war with Israel. It is the first work in any language on this subject that draws not only on the now-open and extensive files of the former East German dictatorship but also on the relevant files of the governments of the United States and West Germany as well as published documents of the Israeli government, especially those produced by its delegation to the United Nations in New York; the views of leaders of West Germany's Jewish community; and the considerable documentation of West German leftist, Arab state, and Palestinian organization statements available in English and German. This is a German story, which had a direct impact on Jews in West Germany as well as on the citizens of Israel. The integration of their voices is a distinguishing feature of this work.

The founders of the Communist regime in East Germany, beginning in 1949, and then the West German radical Left, especially beginning in 1967, did not, however, feel bound by these same above-mentioned moral obligations. In the years from the Six-Day War of 1967 to the Lebanon War and its aftermath in the 1980s, the government of the German Democratic Republic – that is, East Germany – and, with fewer resources but more media attention, the West German leftist terrorist organizations did indeed continue to do more harm to the Jews, especially those living in Israel, and they helped others to harm them as well.

This work is, in part, a sequel to my previous study of the German Communist and radical leftist ideological interpretation of Zionism and the establishment of the state of Israel. The ideological foundations of this antagonism were articulated in the “anti-cosmopolitan purges” of

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the early 1950s in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It was then that Soviet-bloc support for Zionism and Israel – support that was so important for the establishment of the state and led to assistance for the Jews in the war of 1948 – ended, and that “Zionism” became a term of abuse within Communist discourse. Soviet-bloc Zionism was a product of the exceptional circumstances of World War II and the Holocaust. Soviet-bloc anti-Zionism and hostility to Israel were part of a larger reversion to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy that accompanied the beginnings of the Cold War. At the most general level, the idea of a Jewish state contradicted both the Communists’ claims to universalism and, notwithstanding the secularism of the founding Zionist generation, the Communists’ view that religion was the opiate of the people. For orthodox Communists, the Soviet Union, not European Jewry, was the primary victim of Hitler’s Germany. During the postwar purges, anti-Zionism, often with anti-Semitic themes about vast Jewish power and its connections to capitalism and imperialism, became standard discourse in the Soviet bloc.

While a minority of German Communists made the case that East Germany² should have close and warm relations with the new Jewish state, the orthodox majority rejected the idea that as German Communists they had any particular moral obligation toward the state of Israel. On the contrary, the East German Communists of the 1950s already denounced Israel as an ally of Western and American imperialism and refused to pay any financial restitution to the Jewish state. East Germany was the only member of the Warsaw Pact that never had any diplomatic relations with the state of Israel. As the West German Left in 1967 adopted core elements of leftist anti-imperialism, it too placed Israel on the wrong side of what it regarded as the core global divide between an evil and exploitative imperialism and a virtuous exploited third world. The corollary of this view was support for the Arab states and, in both East Germany and the West German radical Left, especially passionate engagement with the Palestinian groups at war with Israel.

² The official name of the East German government was the “German Democratic Republic,” abbreviated in English as “GDR.” In fact, the regime was a dictatorship and was neither democratic nor a republic. Hence I generally refer to it as “East Germany.” The scholarship on East Germany is now extensive. Most recently see Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat: Geschichte und Strukturen der DDR 1949–1990* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2013). Other general histories include Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Hermann Weber, *Die DDR 1945–1990*, 2nd rev. ed. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1993).

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The Soviet Union was the driving force and key actor shaping the policy of the Warsaw Pact's hostility to Israel. Contrary to Maoist propaganda and the romanticism of the Western New Left and its successors, the Soviet Union's policy toward third-world revolution was noteworthy for its radicalism and, very importantly, for its material substance. The Soviet Union, not Mao's blustering China, was the primary source of weapons and military training for leftist guerrilla movements around the world. Its military assistance to the Arab states and Palestinian terrorist organizations was part of its global offensive against "U.S. imperialism" as well as of its efforts to gain influence in the strategically important Middle East. Yet small as its contributions were in comparison to the efforts of the Soviet superpower, East Germany was not a reluctant follower. On the contrary, for reasons of mutually reinforcing ideological passions and conventional arguments about national interest, its leaders enthusiastically participated in campaigns against Israel. In the Middle East, the Soviet bloc, including East Germany, supported the forces of radicalism, not moderation and, as we will see, did so both in words and in deeds.

The infamous West German leftist terrorist groups of these years as well as the numerically more significant legal organizations of the radical Left voluntarily decided to support the Arab states as well as the various organizations that made up the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, including Al Fatah as well as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, two organizations whose leaders dispensed with any pretenses of moderation or the public ambiguity about support for terrorism associated with Arafat's mixture of force and political warfare. One of the issues this work explores is the intensity, voluntarism, and passion with which these Germans turned against Israel and aligned with its enemies. Their antagonism to Israel and willingness to attack not just Israel's policies but its legitimacy and right to exist were hardly unique; both had become common themes of the global Left since the early 1950s. Yet nowhere else did the anti-Israeli passion entail such a striking flight from the burdens of a national past as in Germany. This flight from the past earned East Germany and the West German leftist terrorist organizations many friends around the world.

In one of the bitterest ironies of this era, the Communists and the leftist movements transformed the language of anti-fascism that the world associated with the war against Nazi Germany into a rhetorical arsenal to use against the Jewish state. There were Communists, Jews, and non-Jews

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who thought that the anti-fascism of World War II should have led to postwar support for Zionism. However, the brief era of Soviet-bloc support for Israel ended in the anti-cosmopolitan purges of the early 1950s. From 1949 to the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, more than three million persons, about 20 percent of the population, left East Germany for West Germany, among them presumably those most willing to oppose the regime's policies. Hence, by 1967, when East Germany's antagonism to Israel burst most fully into public view, another striking feature of the East German story emerges, namely, the absence of any public protest against its policies. By means of both repression and the safety valve of emigration up to 1961, the GDR had become a polity and society without opposition or at least without an opposition able to express itself publicly. In Poland, rumbles of dissent led to a massive purge of Polish political and intellectual life followed by an exodus of those dissenters able to leave the country. In East Germany there was no such massive purge because by 1967 either the opposition had been repressed or its leaders had fled before the wall was built.³

At the time and since, some observers thought that the lingering impact of Nazism in German society was responsible for antagonism to Israel and enthusiasm that may have resonated at the popular level with the anti-Arab states and Palestinian terrorist organizations.⁴ Continuities were provided by journalists who had worked in Nazi Germany and who then found employment in East Germany's government propaganda organs. Yet the ideological core of the anti-Israeli turn lay in Marxism-Leninism and the associated leftist third-world anti-imperialism of the 1960s.⁵ In East Germany, the passionate embrace of third-world leftist revolution

³ On Poland during and after the Six-Day War see Dariusz Stola, "Anti-Zionism as a Multipurpose Policy Instrument: The Anti-Zionist Campaign in Poland, 1967–1968," in Jeffrey Herf, ed., *Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism in Historical Perspective: Convergence and Divergence* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 157–185.

⁴ I have examined those slogans, themes, and images in *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); and in *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁵ On these developments see, among much else, Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (New York: Random House, 2010); and his *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews and Israel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012); and Herf, *Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism*. On journalists in Nazi Germany and East Germany see Simon Wiesenthal, *The Same Language: First for Hitler, Now for Ulbricht: Simon Wiesenthal's Press Conference on September 6th, 1968* (Vienna: Deutschland-berichte, 1968).

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found some of its most important partners in the Arab states and in the Palestinian organizations already in a state of war with Israel. The latter developed special relationships with the West German radical Left, both the aboveground Marxist-Leninist and Maoist sects of the 1970s, as well as the ideologically more diffuse residues of New Left thinking and illegal leftist terrorist underground organizations such as the Red Army Faction, the Revolutionary Cells and the June 2nd movement.

In 1980, an authors' collective of researchers and professors working at East Germany's Institute for International Relations of the Academy for Law and Political Science in Berlin published a dictionary of terms for foreign policy and international law. It defined Zionism as "a chauvinistic ideology of the Jewish bourgeoisie featuring a widespread organizational system and expansionist political practice which forms a part of international monopoly capital."⁶ Its nineteenth-century roots lay in a "petty-bourgeois reaction to antisemitism" that evolved into a "reactionary conception of the Jewish community, which, in order to divert the Jewish proletariat from the class struggle, ignored the question of class and saw a solution to the so-called Jewish question in the creation of a Jewish national state on the Arab territory of Palestine. From its beginnings, with this conception, Zionism adapted itself to the political, economic, and strategic interests of world imperialism," especially that of "USA imperialism in the Middle East." From the time of its founding in 1948, East German researchers asserted that the state of Israel stood for national chauvinism and anti-communism.⁷ It was "directed against the Arab national liberation movement." Its "aggressive politics, supported by the imperialist states, especially the USA, lead to the military conflicts in the Arab region and to the development of the conflict in the Middle East. At the XXX UN General Assembly in 1975 in resolution 3379, Zionism was condemned as a form of racism and racial discrimination."⁸ In other words, Zionist ideology and the state it produced had no moral legitimacy. For these authors, the state of Israel was, *from the beginning*, inseparable from American imperialism and its intrusion into "the territory of Palestine."

One of the defining aspects of East German foreign policy was what I will call a "rhetorical fog of seeming moderation" with a vocabulary full

⁶ "Zionismus," in Institut für Internationale Beziehungen an der Akademie für Staats- und Rechtswissenschaft der DDR, *Wörterbuch der Aussenpolitik und des Völkerrechts* ([East] Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1980), 703.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

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of references to peace, justice, and “political solutions” to the Middle East conflict combined with unflinching support for intransigent Arab governments and radical Palestinian organizations. Soviet and Warsaw Pact policy in these decades of the Cold War combined the language of détente and the rational logic of nuclear deterrence with unambiguous radicalism regarding policy in the Middle East and in the third world more generally. When applied to the conflict between Israel, the Arab states and the Palestinian organizations, this stance held Israel from its beginning to be exclusively responsible for what the East German researchers in 1980 called “a conflict situation brought about by imperialist-Zionist forces ... that is reflected above all in aggressive actions against the Arab peoples and states.”⁹ East Germany denounced the Camp David Accords of 1978 between Israel and Egypt as a “separate peace” that ignored the rights of the Palestinians to national self-determination and supported a “steadfastness front” composed of Arab states that rejected the agreement along with “peace-loving forces of the whole world” that had emerged.¹⁰ In these years, the East Germans lent support not only to Arafat’s Al Fatah forces but also to Palestinian terrorist organizations, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

At the time and since, critics of Israel’s German antagonists have argued that leftist anti-Zionism was simply anti-Semitism – hatred of the Jews – in another language. In the long history of anti-Semitism, the antagonism to Israel of these years marks a unique chapter. Never before had those who attacked the Jews done so while insisting that their animosity had nothing to do with the fact that its targets were Jews. Yet the questions persisted. In a world of states in which democracies were a minority, why did the leftist anti-Zionists focus on the one functioning democracy in the Middle East? Why were eyes blind to and headlines absent about terrorist attacks on Israelis while Israel’s acts of self-defense met with global righteous indignation? Why did Israel’s critics assume that its government never told the truth while giving the benefit of the doubt to dictators and terrorist organizations? In the willingness to accuse Israel of horrific crimes, was there not a remnant of the longest hatred’s inclination to accuse the Jews of murder of innocents? An important feature of Communist and leftist anti-Zionism and antagonism to Israel

⁹ “Nahostkonflikt,” Institut für Internationale Beziehungen an der Akademie für Staats- und Rechtswissenschaft der DDR, *Wörterbuch der Aussenpolitik und des Völkerrechts*, 425.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 426–427.

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was an angry and indignant insistence that even to suggest similarity to the anti-Semitism of the past was an outrageous if clever Zionist trick whose purpose was to deflect criticism by changing the subject. In the court of world public opinion in the United Nations General Assembly, Israel suffered a double defeat in this era. First, only a minority of states agreed with it that the political and military offensive launched against it was a form of anti-Semitism and racism. Second, Israel suffered the ignominy of having its legitimating ideology, Zionism, declared to be a form of racism and even, according to the PLO representatives in the United Nations, itself a form of anti-Semitism directed against the Arab “Semites” of Palestine. Most painful of all was the association of the state of Israel with Nazism. In their important history of Arab responses to the Holocaust, Meir Litvak and Esther Webman concluded that “the equation of Zionism with Nazism ... began shortly after the end of World War II as part of Arab public debate.”¹¹ In this work I do not resolve the issue of whether the Israel-as-Nazi-Germany association began in the Arab countries or in the Soviet propaganda machine after World War II. What is clear is that when the Soviet Union and its allies, including East Germany, accused the Jewish state of replicating the Third Reich, they made an enormous contribution to making this falsehood a ubiquitous slogan of world, not only Arab, political culture.

These issues raise the question of whether the East German Communist regime was the second anti-Semitic dictatorship in Germany’s twentieth century, whether parts of the West German radical Left constituted an anti-Semitic movement, and whether both found adherents because hatred of Israel struck familiar chords in Germany. The global and German anti-Israel Left dismissed such questions as Zionist and imperialist propaganda, yet the issues were less easily dismissed in the German context. Here the Israeli-as-Nazi trope played an important role in overcoming what one West German leftist called Germany’s “Jewish complex,” that is, a supposed reluctance to criticize or oppose Israel due to the memory of German responsibility for the Holocaust. Once the Communists in the East and the radical Left in West Germany identified Israel with Nazi Germany, they managed to define the struggle against Israel as the anti-fascism of the period from the 1960s to 1980s. Israel had become the embodiment of the evils of the Nazi regime that they claimed to despise.

¹¹ Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, *From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust* (London: Hurst, 2009), 215.

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Understandably, German historians and historians of anti-Semitism have asked whether anti-Zionism and antagonism to Israel were merely a cover for an atavistic strain of anti-Semitism. Forgotten in some of these discussions was the fact that whether their enemies were motivated by anti-Semitism or “merely” by anti-Zionism made no difference to Israeli soldiers killed and wounded in battles with the armed forces of the Arab states equipped with Soviet-bloc and East German arms, or to Israeli civilians gunned down and blown up on buses and in market squares by the PLO and its various Executive Committee affiliates. For the Israelis, the discussion about whether their enemies were motivated by anti-Semitism or “merely” by a presumably less objectionable anti-Zionism devoted too much attention to the intentions of the killers and too little to the fate of their victims. In the following pages, I give the Arab, Arab Palestinian, East German governmental, and West German leftist voices ample space to present their indictment. However, moreso than in previous accounts, I also draw on what Israelis in their home state and at the United Nations and leaders of the Jewish community in West Germany had to say about events. They pointed out that the people being killed and wounded in the name of the “Palestinian revolution” were not an abstraction called “Zionists.” They were flesh-and-blood Jews who were the intended targets of terrorists.

The toll of Jews killed and wounded in the wars and terrorist attacks in the years from 1967 to 1989 was grim, both in absolute numbers and relative to the population that then numbered between two and three million people. According to the Israeli Defense Forces Historical Division, 6,104 Israeli soldiers were killed in the wars of these years.¹² The Israeli government estimates that number of soldiers wounded was between 21,000 and 24,000.¹³ During these same years, the Palestinian organizations represented on the PLO’s Executive Committee waged terrorist campaigns primarily against the *civilian population* of Israel, occasionally also targeting Israeli soldiers. According to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 639 Israelis, mostly civilians, were killed in terrorist attacks from 1967 to

¹² Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Arab Israeli Wars,” <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/aboutisrael/history/pages/the%20arab-israeli%20wars.aspx> The specific figures are as follows: Six-Day War, 776; War of Attrition, 1,424; Yom Kippur War, 2,688; First Lebanon War (Peace for Galilee), 1,216.

¹³ Based on figures from the Israel Foreign Ministry. On the war of 1948, see Benny Morris, *1948: The First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–2001* (New York: Vintage 1999); and Anita Shapira, *Israel: A History* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 155–178.