Cosmopolitanisms and the Jews

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Published by University of Michigan Press

Gilman, Sander and Cathy Gelbin.
Cosmopolitanisms and the Jews.

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CHAPTER 6

Rootless Cosmopolitans: German Jewish Writers and the Stalinist Purges

The Left in World War II and Thereafter

Between the 1920s and the 1940s, Jews were drawn in disproportionate number to the idea as well as to the practice of communism. Yet the paradox from the 1920s that inquired why there were so many Bolshevik Jews in the young USSR and yet why so very few Jews there became Bolsheviks held true for the numbers of Jews on the far left in Weimar Germany and beyond. Although a number of Jews from the young convert to Christianity Karl Marx onward became highly visible within the Communist Party leadership, the communist movement was but one arena of Jewish political engagement in the twentieth century. While Jerry Muller has claimed that “new, more modern forms of anti-Jewish animus, rooted less in religious difference than in the resentment of Jewish economic success . . . led in turn a small but salient minority of Jews to embrace Communism, the most radical form of anticapitalism,” Michael Berkowitz has shown that equivalent numbers of Jews before 1933 were attracted to Zionism, some for the same economic rationale. Indeed, legendary German Jewish scholar Gershom Sholem and his siblings exemplify the scale of Jewish political engagement during the early twentieth century. Whereas Gershom (born Gerhard) became a noted German Zionist and later world-renowned expert on Jewish mysticism who made aliyah to Palestine in 1923, his brother, Werner, was a Communist Party deputy to the Reichstag from 1924 until 1928. In 1926 he had been ousted from the Communist Party of Germany for opposing the purge of the Trotskyites in the USSR. Another brother, Erich, represented the views of the mainstream organization of German Jews, the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith). Finally, the oldest brother, Reinhold, was a German nationalist who, according to
Gershom, would have joined the right-wing *Deutschnationalen* (German nationalists) had they welcomed Jewish members.²

Nonetheless, some Jews saw communism as an ideal theory through which to liberate the world from social injustice as well as antisemitism, particularly during the political rise of National Socialism in the 1920s and the establishment of state antisemitism of the Third Reich. Various strands of Marxist ideology tied antisemitism to variant forms of capitalism, including the corporatism of National Socialism. Conversely, the National Socialists (and many of the nationalists across Eastern Europe) saw the interchangeability of Jews and communists as a given. Party propagandist Engelbert Huber argued in 1933 that the National Socialists’ political success resulted from “the time of the Jewish-Bolshevik Soviet rule in Bavaria, the time of tyranny at the hands of those Jewish ‘Lenin’s Boys’ in Hungary, the time when Jewish criminals in Russia slaughtered all of the bourgeois intellectuals—nearly two million people.”³ “Jewish Bolshevism” was a given for the National Socialists, and the presence of racially defined Jews in all of these revolts from the left was seen as proof of their interconnectedness.

At the same time, Jewishness remained a contested question in Marxist theory and practice beginning with Marx’s 1844 response to Bruno Bauer, “On the Jewish Question.”⁴ In the mid-twentieth century, then, the labels of internationalism, cosmopolitanism, and Jewishness assumed deadly meanings within the Soviet Union and its later Eastern Bloc satellite countries. Finding themselves as outsiders and ultimately presumed enemies within the communist project, a number of Jewish communists and sympathizers became the earliest outspoken critics of the Stalinist crimes, which they began to address in their writings as early as the late 1930s. Their works enable us to trace the Jewish leftist predicament that sustained the socialist-communist project on the one hand and ultimately called for its critical interrogation on the other. Nowhere has the examination of the Stalinist crimes occurred in a more passionate and soul-searching manner than in writings by German-speaking Jewish authors caught in the crossfire of the National Socialist and Stalinist regimes and their aftermath between the 1930s and the 1970s.

**Communism, National Socialism, and the Jews**

Between the world wars, the affinities between cosmopolitanism and communism seemed obvious, for the proponents of both ideas strove to transcend the rabid nationalism that had thrown Europe into the World War I disaster and
fueled the rising antisemitism and the National Socialists’ ascent to power. For many Jews, both cosmopolitanist and leftist ideas thus held considerable attraction, and communist internationalism in particular seemed to resonate with the cosmopolitanist sensibility. Both cosmopolitanist thought and the communist fight for social justice offered left-leaning Jewish intellectuals a route to transcend the presumed stigma of Jewish particularity through affiliation with a universalist project. This was, of course, so because communist internationalism was itself putatively heir to the cosmopolitanist strand of philosophy in the German-speaking Enlightenment. Under Stalin’s rule, however, Soviet Party communism took an increasingly hostile stance toward cosmopolitanism and the Jews, and communist internationalism was sidelined in favor of a new Soviet nationalism.

Until the second half of the 1920s, however, Jewish cosmopolitanist affinities with the communist project were not merely imagined. Following the early revolutionary condemnation of antisemitism, Soviet propaganda of the 1920s officially forbade antisemitism as a “reactionary relic of Tsarism.” At the same time, Jewish particularism was seen as standing in opposition to the revolutionary idea of nationalism, according to which ethnic particularities were to be completely assimilated and integrated into the Soviet national project. In 1919, the Communist International (the Comintern or the Third International) was founded in Moscow to safeguard proletarian internationalism—the idea of international workers’ solidarity—and to promote the global communist revolution. Together with its predecessor, the Second International, the Comintern—with participating organizations from across Europe and several Asian countries—formed one of the few global political structures promoting what Philip Spencer has termed “a radical cosmopolitan politics” to organize workers across the boundaries of the nation state. But from the late 1920s onward, communist internationalism was explicitly pressed into the service of unfailing support for the Soviet Union, and any aberration from this line was deemed treason to the cause of communism. As Stalin declared in a 1927 speech, “The International Situation and the Defense of the USSR,” “An internationalist is one who, unreservedly, without hesitation, without conditions, is ready to defend the Soviet Union because it is the basis of the revolutionary movement.” This assertion was reiterated in the Comintern’s final statutes in 1928.

Communist internationalism was placed in explicit opposition to bourgeois nationalism, which was aligned with cosmopolitanism as the credo of the liberal bourgeois intellectual. Cosmopolitanism thus became seen as a product of precisely that class and its individualist strivings, which the communist movement sought to overcome. During the 1930s, this campaign assumed in-
creasingly antisemitic undertones as Leon Trotsky emerged as the figurehead of anti-Stalinist opposition. While even Stalin could not risk being openly antisemitic during this period of consolidation, his Great Purges all but destroyed the country’s budding independent Jewish culture. Furthermore, Jews died in disproportionate numbers at the height of Stalin’s terror between 1937 and 1938, when he purged the Bolshevist first guard, with its inordinately high numbers of Jews. But although antisemitism no doubt played an implicit role in conceiving and justifying these events, Jews were but one group among the millions of Stalin’s Soviet victims between 1931 and 1939. An estimated six to nine million people died of starvation, mostly in the countryside, during the forced collectivization of agriculture, and approximately three quarters of a million Soviet peasants, workers, and members of ethnic minorities also were killed. In addition, numerous communists of other nations, particularly German exiles from National Socialism, were murdered by hard-line Party comrades in the antifascist resistance struggle and behind the lines of the Spanish Civil War.

As Stalin shifted to using the idea of antifascism to rally support for his leadership in the fight against Hitler and detract from the mass killings in the Soviet Union, internationalism became an increasingly obsolete and suspect concept. During the first years of National Socialist rule, the Comintern had kept German exiles in check and betrayed to the Party those deemed to be straying from the Communist line. During the Great Purges, however, the Comintern’s early leaders were killed, as were 133 of its 492 staff members, and Stalin finally disbanded the organization in 1943. The same year, Stalin began his concerted attacks on cosmopolitanism to stress Soviet patriotism over any indebtedness to foreign ideas. Stalin borrowed the term rootless cosmopolitanism (byezrodnui cosmopolit) from Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky, who had coined it during the early nineteenth-century struggle against the Westernization of Russian letters to describe those whose aesthetic production was indebted to German models. Rootless cosmopolitanism soon became a code word for Jew and was easily merged with Soviet antifascism, just as the National Socialists had merged Bolshevism with the Jews.

Andrei Zhdanov’s 1946 appointment as director of Soviet cultural policy led to an increased stress on a pure Soviet culture freed of the degeneration represented by the West. The following year, Soviet writer Vladimir Yermilov denounced rootless cosmopolitanism as nizkopoklonstvo (servility to foreign things), a form of culture inimical to the Soviet aesthetic ideal. In 1948, R. Miller-Budnitskaya claimed that these tendencies were found among German Jewish writers and represented an ancient Jewish trait that dated as far back as
the writings of first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus and that had culminated in Lion Feuchtwanger’s “reactionary cosmopolitan idea of a world state [that] meant the Hitlerite ‘new order in Europe.’” These bizarre allegations no doubt rested on a deliberate misinterpretation of Feuchtwanger’s Josephus trilogy.

In 1949, then, a new series of openly antisemitic purges and executions began across the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. Jews were explicitly charged with harboring an international Zionist-cosmopolitanist conspiracy. As early as the 1930s, however, a number of Jewish writers had felt a growing unease at Soviet politics and propaganda, which they believed to have antisemitic undercurrents. These concerns clashed with their continuing sympathies with the communist project to liberate the world from social injustice, of which they saw antisemitism as one part. In his 1927 essay, The Wandering Jews, for example, Austrian Jewish writer Joseph Roth, who stressed his cosmopolitanist affinities throughout his interwar writings, claimed that the Soviet Russia of his day was “the only country in Europe where anti-Semitism is scorned, though it might not have ceased.” While Russian antisemitism might persist on a popular level, the Russian Revolution had swept away the idea of national (here in the sense of ethnic) politics as well as the idea of the Jews’ ethnic particularity. This, Roth contended, would make both Zionism and antisemitism—and perhaps even Judaism itself—obsolete, but the greatest achievement of the revolution would be its release of Jews and non-Jews alike as “one people is freed from the stain of suffering and another from the stain of cruelty” (WJ, 114). In the new afterword to the volume, which appeared in 1937 in the midst of Stalin’s Great Purges, Roth conceded

that the position of the Jews in the Soviet Union, as I tried to describe it in the last section of my book, has in all likelihood changed since that time. . . . I remain convinced, however, that nothing in the underlying attitude of Soviet Russia towards the Jews has altered. (WJ 117)

Roth’s assertion illustrates the pains that many liberal-minded Jews felt at acknowledging the Communist Party’s increasingly problematic politics regarding the Jews in its ranks. Within the German Communist Party, which largely failed to express its solidarity with Hitler’s Jewish victims and even deemed Jews a liability and thus excluded them from its resistance cells, the rifts were evidently clear. For many, however, a systematic ostracism and persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union, the home of the proletarian revolution, remained unthinkable. Nevertheless, in exile from National Socialist Germany,
the situation of Jewish intellectuals became increasingly untenable, given that they felt themselves caught in the crossfire of the National Socialists’ persecutions and the Stalinist purges, both of which had deadly consequences. Hitler’s references to a “poison injected by the international and cosmopolitan Jew[s],” who had formed a conspiracy to destroy the Aryan race, were too similar to Stalin’s 1950s charges that the Jews were “rootless cosmopolitans” and had created an international Zionist conspiracy to destroy the Soviet Union and undermine its sphere of political influence in the postwar Eastern Bloc.17 “It now became startlingly clear,” German Jewish political scientist Hannah Arendt wrote in her seminal *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1950), “how deep an impression this mainstay of Nazi ideology must have made on Stalin.”18 Arendt finds the first public indications of Stalin’s antisemitism, which drew its “propaganda value” from popular antisemitism in Russia and its satellite countries, in the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact (OT, xxxix).

From the late 1930s on, exiled leftist Jewish writers led the way in the critical examination of the Stalinist atrocities. Alice Rühle-Gerstel and Arthur Koestler opened the debate, followed by others including Manès Sperber, Peter Weiss, and Stefan Heym. Given the close historical proximity of Stalin’s crimes to Hitler’s, it seemed almost inevitable that these writers would draw analogies between these atrocities, if perhaps mainly to draw attention to the ongoing Stalinist persecutions. Indeed, these intellectuals’ experience of political and racial persecution by the National Socialists significantly brought into focus their budding critique of Stalin’s regime, particularly because Hitler’s rise to power, their flight into exile, and the beginning of Stalin’s Great Purges not only closely coincided but were also intricately linked. As Sperber wrote in the 1974 foreword to the new edition of his sociopsychological essay, “Zur Analyse der Tyrannis” (On the Analysis of Tyranny, 1937),

> We felt the “Il Duce a sempre ragione” and the well-organized hysteria of “Heil Hitler” to be the essence of fascism, whereas the systematically organized glorification of Stalin, then, necessarily and directly contradicted historical materialism and the principles of the Marxist proletarian movement.

But tyranny, Sperber argued, was not merely an external imposition of power; on the contrary, it was “the tyrant as well as those who make him.”19 In their quest for personal responsibility and agency, these authors’ soul-searching writings differ considerably from the postwar debates regarding totalitarianism and the comparability of the National Socialist crimes, which have usually bolstered Western Cold War ideologies and their aftermath.
Writing from her exile in the United States, Arendt was the first to theorize in depth the possible points of comparison between Hitlerism and Stalinism. Arendt established her enduring scholarly fame through *Origins of Totalitarianism*, even though she did not coin the concept of totalitarianism itself, which had been in use since the 1930s to compare the Hitler and Stalin regimes. Arendt’s work arose from the post-1945 attempts to bring the National Socialist perpetrators to justice for what were newly dubbed “crimes against humanity” and thus to instate what Seyla Benhabib has more recently termed a “cosmopolitan norms of justice” inspired by Kant’s call for a universal law in his *Perpetual Peace*. As Arendt wrote in the preface to the first edition of *Origins*,

> Antisemitism (not merely the hatred of Jews), imperialism (not merely conquest), totalitarianism (not merely dictatorship)—one after the other, one more brutally than the other, have demonstrated that human dignity needs a new guarantee, which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity at this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities. (OT, ix)

*Origins* gave the concept of totalitarianism broad currency. In Cold War political rhetoric, the term now served to discredit the Eastern Bloc regimes against the supposedly cleansed democracies of the West, including West Germany. Totalitarianism thus soon became a contested concept. For obvious reasons, Eastern Bloc ideologues rejected any analogies between state socialism and National Socialism, and behind the Iron Curtain, any discussion of the Stalinist crimes and their legacy remained taboo even after Nikita Khrushchev’s secret revelations to the 1956 Soviet Party Congress. Criticism also came from Western intellectuals who were concerned about the legacy of the National Socialist past in Western Europe, particularly West Germany, where the term totalitarianism threatened to obliterate the barely acknowledged legacy of the National Socialist past.

In *At the Mind’s Limits*, Austrian Jewish writer and Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry thus argued that despite the heinous atrocities committed by Stalin and after 1945 in countries such as Chile, Brazil, and Cambodia, the National Socialist “Evil really is singular and irreducible in its total inner logic and its accursed rationality.” Améry debunked any analogies between communism and National Socialism in particular as essentially different. Whereas it was possible to imagine a communism with a humane face, given the process of de-Stalinization in Eastern Europe after 1956, Hitler’s policies of extermina-
tion and enslavement formed the core of National Socialism. Citing a statement by German writer Thomas Mann in exile, Améry concluded that “no matter how terrible Communism may at times appear, it still symbolizes the idea of man, whereas Hitler-Fascism was not an idea at all, but depravity.” Améry’s assertion that the communist idea as well as the socialist system could not be collapsed with the atrocities committed under Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot has recently been reiterated by German Holocaust historian Detlev Claussen, who points out in his foreword to the new German edition of Léon Poliakov’s *From Antizionism to Antisemitism* that such discussions now falsely focus on charging Marx with the supposed plans for these killings.

Although historians in the West have gradually abandoned the concept of totalitarianism, the past three decades have seen a growing body of comparative historiography on National Socialism and Stalinism. Yet a nuanced discussion of the possible relationship between the two systems and their politics of terror is yet to emerge. To date, such discussions display their roots in the Cold War rhetoric that sought to minimize the National Socialist atrocities through such analogies and thus absolve the Western allies of their varying histories of collaboration in the annihilation of European Jewry. In the 1980s, when such analogies emerged in the field of academic study, they were still met with wide outrage and considered an expression of fringe right-wing attitudes. Such was the response to two now infamous essays by Ernst Nolte, a professor of history at West Berlin’s Free University.

In the first of these two pieces, “Die negative Lebendigkeit des Dritten Reiches” (The Negative Vitality of the Third Reich) (1980), Nolte criticized the assumption that the “violent crimes of the Third Reich are singular.” Instead, he drew a line of class-based terror from the French Revolution (and its right-wing responses) to Stalinist terror (and the National Socialist genocide as its response). These events, Nolte contended, had found their preliminary climax in the recently discovered atrocities of Cambodia’s Pol Pot regime between 1975 and 1978. Nolte drew his proof from an indicatively phrased announcement in the East German communist daily *Neues Deutschland* on 6 December 1978, on the eve of the Vietnamese invasion of Phnom Penh, which effectively ended the Cambodian genocide. According to this announcement, “The reactionary clique of Pol Pot/Ieng Sary . . . exterminated the villages and landscapes, in which our people had lived since millennia” and “incarcerated our fellow citizens in hidden concentration camps.” “The events in Indo-China,” Nolte concluded, “should now have made apparent what precisely constitutes original and copy with regard to annihilation based on class, ethnicity, and group affiliation.”
Nolte reiterated this claim in terming the National Socialist genocide against the Jews an “Asiatic crime” in his 1986 follow-up article, “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will” (The Past That Refuses to Pass), which would spark the landmark German historians’ debate. Nolte’s and others’ subsequent attempts to academically legitimize comparisons between National Socialism and Stalinism became discredited. However, the opening of Soviet archives after 1989 brought new documentation to light, and such comparisons have since resurfaced under partially revised—yet familiar—parameters. In his foreword to German historian Joachim Hoffmann’s evocatively titled Stalins Vernichtungskrieg (Stalin’s War of Annihilation), Manfred Kehrig conceded that World War II was “a life-and-death battle between two totalitarian systems that used the same means and methods to achieve their political aims.” When the volume first appeared in 1995, Kehrig was working for the German Military Research Office, and his foreword gave Hoffmann’s book such official weight that it was debated in the German parliament.

Hoffmann’s borrowings from Nolte are evident in his attempts to compare the “mass murders” committed by the Stalinist regime “based on motives of class struggle” to those of Hitler’s regime based on motives of “race struggle” (SV, 325). That Hoffmann really sought to redress the balance between the historical constellations of German Holocaust perpetrators and their Jewish victims becomes apparent in his chapter on the Wehrmacht, which is subtitled “The Anti-German War and Racial Propaganda of Hatred” and focuses extensively on the writings of Soviet Jewish writer Ilya Ehrenburg. On the other side of the debate stands what Hoffmann, in his foreword to the second edition, considers “the inflammatory traveling exhibit The Wehrmacht War of Annihilation” (SV, 15), which sought to reveal the Wehrmacht’s participation in war crimes against civilians behind the Eastern Front.

Yale historian Timothy Snyder’s recent probing into the relationship between Stalinism and National Socialism in his Bloodlands (2010) inadvertently raises the question of the comparability of Hitler’s genocide against European Jewry with Stalin’s atrocities against his own population. In particular, Snyder favors the generic term mass killing over genocide precisely to propose, albeit in a far more complex manner than Nolte, that Stalin’s policies ultimately facilitated Hitler’s. While Snyder’s observations on the problematic political and discursive history of genocide are undoubtedly insightful, the blanket term mass killings risks losing the discursive and political specificities of the National Socialist crimes, which found their justification in modern racial and broader genetic biology and thus draw their historical basis from German and European antisemitic and colonialist mass violence. Indeed, Snyder’s vision of the Holo-
caust is severely limited by the regional focus of his study on that part of Eastern Europe where the spheres of Hitler’s and Stalin’s military aggression overlapped. When Snyder rejects the association of “the Holocaust with rapid industrial killing” as “too simple and clean” (BL, xiv), given that as many of its victims were shot as were gassed, his vision of the ideological, political, and practical specificities of Hitler’s and Stalin’s killings becomes further limited.

This is so because the widespread perception of the National Socialist camps as “Death Mills” (the title of Billy Wilder’s famous 1945 documentary) referred as much to the technical ingredients of the German camp atrocities, for which the death camps stood synonymous—the gas vans and gas chambers, the mass-capacity furnaces and constantly smoking chimneys—as it did to the nonstop killing process, which followed the paradigm of industrial shift work. Jean-Claude Pressac’s *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers* (1989) conveys the extent of technological engineering that was required for the mass production and destruction of corpses in the death camps. This inversion of the twentieth-century narrative of cultural advance through technological progress sparked the postwar discourse about the Holocaust as an unprecedented rupture in civilization.

This is, of course, not to say that the comparative study of atrocities is in and of itself illegitimate but rather to point out the authors’ inherently political agenda. By proposing the Holocaust as a function of modernity, the work of Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, for example, has often been misunderstood to suggest an arbitrariness of the Holocaust in relation to other mass atrocities despite Bauman’s explicit rejection of classing the Holocaust “as another item (however prominent) in a wide class of that embraces many ‘similar’ cases of conflict, or prejudice, or aggression.” Instead, Bauman sought to undo the focus on “the Germanness of the crime” as “an exercise in exonerating everyone else, and particularly everything else.”

More recent studies such as Michael Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memories* have further demonstrated the necessity of a nuanced and contextual study of memories of the Shoah and crimes committed in the European colonial territories. Here, however, a nuanced examination of Stalin’s crimes tends to fall by the wayside, such as when Rothberg critiques Arendt’s linkage of “disparate phenomena such as imperialism, Nazism, and Stalinism” in *Origins.* Such blanket rejections of any comparability of these phenomena disregards, for example, Russia’s imperial policies in and orientalist conceptions of Central Asia, which the Soviet Union inherited and pursued under different parameters. Furthermore, the overlapping experiences and memories of National
Socialism and Stalinism form part of Europe’s multidirectional memories, which have been coming to the fore in German debates since unification.

Indeed, the close connections between the ways in which Stalinism and National Socialism implemented their systems of terror are evident in their overlapping temporality, their drive for total control by the state and organization of its citizenry into politically streamlined mass organizations, and their mass atrocities and competing expansionist power struggles. The sidelining of Stalinism in these comparative studies of the Holocaust is thus itself born of the old Cold War divides, in which such comparisons constituted a Holocaust apologia. But nothing was further from the heart of those German-speaking Jewish writers who sympathized with the communist cause and were caught in the crossfire between the two regimes. Their writings offer a route of investigation into both systems that does not shirk the questions of political responsibility and personal agency on either side of the political divide.

**Writing the Stalinist Purges: Alice Rühle-Gerstel, Arthur Koestler, and Manès Sperber**

Although Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, first published in German in 1940, provided the famed template for this body of critical writing, it was preceded by Alice Rühle-Gerstel’s novel, *Der Umbruch; oder, Hanna und die Freiheit* (The Break; or, Hanna and Freedom). Today Rühle-Gerstel, who was born into a middle-class German-speaking Jewish family in Prague in 1894, is largely forgotten, even though her work has recently seen something of a revival on the German literary scene. After completing a doctorate in philosophy in 1917, when it was unusual for women to earn even undergraduate degrees, she moved to Munich and later Dresden. Rühle-Gerstel developed a public profile as a women’s rights activist and proponent of Alfred Adler’s individual psychology while strongly sympathizing with the Austrian Social Democratic Party as well as Austro-Marxist educational programs. During her years in Germany, Rühle-Gerstel published several psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist, and sexological works, including a book on sexual analysis co-authored with her husband, Otto Rühle.

From 1932 to 1935, the couple lived in Prague, where Rühle-Gerstel’s friendship and rumored lesbian relationship with Czech writer Milena Jesenská—Franz Kafka’s onetime lover and recipient of his *Letters to Milena*—brought Rühle-Gerstel into contact with Czech oppositional communists and
Trotskyists. Despite her personal sympathies for Trotsky, especially after his exclusion from the Soviet Communist Party, she remained skeptical of his political theories. In 1936, Rühle-Gerstel followed her husband into Mexican exile, where she wrote *The Break* at the height of the Stalinist purges. The novel, which critically examines the political cleansings among the German exile community in Czechoslovakia, was not published until 1984, more than forty years after her death. In Mexico, Rühle-Gerstel, who firmly saw herself as an internationalist and anti-Stalinist, struck up friendships with Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Leon Trotsky, who was murdered there at Stalin’s command in 1940. At the same time, both she and her husband avoided the local German emigrants’ organization, Nationalkomitee “Freies Deutschland” (National Committee for a Free Germany), in which writers such as Bodo Uhse, Anna Seghers, and Rühle-Gerstel’s childhood friend, Egon Erwin Kisch, were active. According to the Rühles, the committee was run by faithful Stalinists who had caused the couple’s removal from their jobs in the Mexican Ministry of Education. This is not implausible, given that the Stalinist-dominated Mexican trade unions of the time would have taken issue with the Rühles’ work for the Dewey Commission, whose 1938 report had cleared all the defendants in the Moscow trials, including Trotsky, of the charges against them. As a result, the Rühles lived in bitter poverty, largely cut off from the public sphere. Deeply disillusioned personally and politically by her dual experience of National Socialism and Stalinism, Rühle-Gerstel committed suicide in 1943 by jumping from the window of her flat in Mexico City, just hours after her husband’s death.

*The Break* weaves together the multiple political and personal dimensions that Rühle-Gerstel had addressed in her earlier essays. These dimensions are also reflected in the novel’s title, which in German indicates both rupture and the process of newspaper page makeup. Hanna Aschbach, the protagonist, who works for a Prague newspaper, realizes that “Make-up occurs every day” (B, 260), indicating the huge political and personal ruptures of the time, which here variously signify the National Socialists’ rise to power, Hanna’s emigration from Berlin to Prague, her gradual alienation from the communist-led exile movement, and her liberation from both bourgeois and the Communist Party’s conceptions of female subjectivity and sexuality. Rühle-Gerstel’s dissent from hard-line Party politics thus lies precisely in her holistic conception of the Marxist personality type, which retains the important features of individuality—marked as “bourgeois” in official Party propaganda—even under the conditions of class struggle and the fight against fascism. Similar constructions reappear in the works of Rühle-Gerstel’s friend, Manès Sperber, and
later in those of Peter Weiss. In all of these novels, the protagonists representing such holistic views of personality remain outsiders to the Communist Party and become its suspects.

In Rühle-Gerstel’s work, as in the later writings of Koestler and Weiss, Jewishness remains an implicit or subdued feature, reflecting the high degree of assimilation common among Jewish authors who later joined the communist movement. The revolutionary relegation of Jewishness to a “secondary problem” that would be resolved through class struggle did not pose an inherent problem for these authors’ already secularized self-conceptions. But this did not necessarily mean that they rejected their Jewishness. Like Stefan Zweig, Joseph Roth, and Lion Feuchtwanger, who had embraced the cosmopolitanist label as an expression of their Jewish sensitivity during the interwar period, many Jewish communists saw their political engagement as the necessary consequence of the lethal history of European antisemitism since the Middle Ages. Their fight for overall social justice stemmed from the awareness that Jews as an integral part of modern European culture had also been the historical victims par excellence of European ostracism and violence. Given the extraordinary contribution of German-speaking Jews, including Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle, and Rosa Luxemburg, to the communist and socialist movements, Jewish communists could see themselves as part of a specifically Jewish legacy within the political fight for social justice, which, some argued, went back to the Jewish religion’s early attempts to establish forms of welfare for the socially disenfranchised, including the stranger and the slave. This secular Jewish awareness rendered these writers sensitive to the early signs of antisemitism in Stalinist politics though it lay dormant in the 1930s propaganda against bourgeois intellectuals and internationalists.

Jewish themes and associations in writings by these authors thus serve as a site of disturbance of and resistance against the grip of Stalinism. While *The Break*, for example, makes only passing reference to Jews alongside other émigrés and among the politicized, Hanna Aschbach, the daughter of a Czech mother and a German father, bears implicit Jewish connotations through her name as well as through her brother’s occupation as a banker. Having grown up bilingual and between national affiliations, Hanna faces the predicament of nonbelonging, which echoes the deterritorialized state of Jewish identity in the diaspora. Hanna’s sense that because “her father was German [and] her mother was Czech, she belonged neither here nor there” (B, 34) reflects Gregor Samsa’s fantastical wanderings across all the planes of his room in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, wanderings that have been read to symbolize the shifting ethnic, national, and cultural locations of acculturated Jews in early twentieth-century Prague. Hanna’s predica-
ment of nonbelonging fuels her work for the Party, since “we are internationalists, words such as strange lands, home country, abroad mean nothing to us, for there are comrades everywhere” (B, 66).

Hanna’s internationalism, however, renders her a singular figure in the text, and her constant perception by other protagonists as an outsider reflects the Jew as perpetual outsider, an ostracized status that Arendt would describe so memorably in *The Jew as Pariah* (1944) just a few years later. The text includes numerous moments of alienation, such as when the staff at the German refugee hostel treat Hanna with suspicion as a result of her “face, which seemed so foreign to the workers” (B, 63), as well as of her educated middle-class origins: “The men looked at her quizzically, she spoke differently than them, but one of the women reached out to shake her hand” (B, 54). Hanna is then interrogated by one of the leaders, who accuses her of having stolen money from her resistance group back in Berlin. This is only the beginning of Hanna’s decline, which ends when the Party itself betrays her to the police for having engaged in political work, thus invalidating her refugee status and leading to her extradition from Czechoslovakia.

The novel focalizes this process of disillusionment through Hanna. When she arrives in Prague, Hanna still idolizes the Soviet Union from her 1931 visit, with its spirit of awakening that resulted from its new agricultural program and five-year plan and the Russians’ fervent love for their country. Back then, she had still “understood, condoned, optimistically justified . . . the masses’ heroic starvation during the first five-year plan,” which she had witnessed. Now, however, “the second five-year plan had come around, the masses continued to starve heroically” (B, 120), while the most efficient workers were beginning to enjoy a better lifestyle. Hanna sees the situation as akin to the “worst type of capitalist slave-driving for the piece rate” (B, 120). By suggesting that the mass starvation of millions of Soviets during the early 1930s was not simply a necessary stage in the construction of the new Soviet society but the product of willful negligence at best and cynical calculation at worst, Rühle-Gerstel injects severe doubt into the official communist narrative of Soviet moral and social superiority.

As the novel progresses, comparisons with the National Socialist persecutions become ever more explicit. Hanna thus feels that the Czech Party’s attempts to bring its members into line with new Soviet directives are “awfully similar to Hitler’s persecutions into the third and fourth generations” (B, 168), and she believes that the Communist daily writes “almost as nationally as a fascist paper” (B, 348). An inkling of the violent nature of the purges shines through the ellipses in the unfinished sentence when Hanna peruses the newspaper’s reports “of vast party purges and its threats of an iron broom.
that . . . set in such small print so as to be hard to read” (B, 348). The Party ultimately stands for the political Right, as the novel has the Trotskyist Luise respond to Hanna’s final plans to join the Spanish Interbrigades: things might “get wrecked there too; of course the party will ensure that the lovely Popular Front turns right wing” (B, 402).

Hanna’s alienation from Stalinist Party communism runs parallel to her move toward two alternative male figures, Leon Trotsky and Anatol Svoboda, both of whom the novel ultimately treats with hesitation, albeit in different ways. Although Trotsky does not appear in the novel himself, the text sees several of Hanna’s friends turn to Trotskyism as a rallying point against hard-line Stalinist Party communism. But Rühle-Gerstel does not let Hanna replace Stalin with Trotsky as a new political father figure. Instead, Hanna makes her way to Spain, where the Popular Front is as yet a leftist movement in flux and thus offers itself more readily to Rühle-Gerstel’s vision of a fluid Marxist internationalist, gender, and sexual politics beyond Party structures. But the novel ends with Hanna alone in the geographic no-man’s-land between Bohemia and Austria, suggesting that this is utopian vision cannot be realized under existing political conditions.

Svoboda, the editor of the Czech newspaper where the Prague Party chapter has placed Hanna, offers her a more tangible alternative. The paper bears his last name, which means “freedom,” and both the character and the publication represent the positively configured bourgeois attributes of education, political liberalism, and cosmopolitanism. In its first editorial, the newspaper had thus praised in measured words libertarianism, patriotism, and cosmopolitanism as its leitmotifs, while cleverly inserting a few classical quotes and a number of bawdy popular sayings. (B, 72)

Of course, the Party quickly denounced the paper as a “capitalist harlot, camouflaged with liberal phrases” (B, 73), but the novel conveys the considerable allure of its values through Hanna’s infatuation with the much younger Anatol. The two initially seem quite similar: like Hanna, Anatol is of mixed ethnic origins, and his cosmopolitanism is thus linked to the theme of ethnic hybridity, as was Hanna’s internationalist outlook. The son of a Hungarian mother and a Czech father, Anatol, like Hanna, implicitly displays the physical and intellectual attributes of the Jew. At their first encounter, Hanna perceives Anatol with his “glowing . . . dark eyes,” “olive-yellow” complexion, and “strange, non-European” appearance as “nervous, nervous, a nervous aesthete” (B, 98, 136). After all, the claims of the Jews’ hybrid racial origins, together
with their alleged special proclivity for neurasthenia and lack of cultural essence, lay central to the mythology of modern racial antisemitism.\textsuperscript{43}

With her husband, Karl, a communist resister and sex educator, interned in a National Socialist jail in Germany, Hanna feels herself single and thus free to embark on a relationship with Svoboda, in which she finds herself fully orgasmic for the first time in her life. The conditions of exile and political illegality thus allow Hanna to temporarily suspend the constraints of both bourgeois and communist conceptions of heterosexual relationships, and her liaison with Svoboda ultimately catalyzes her growing disagreement with the Communist Party. This portrayal seems to reiterate and apply to Stalinism German Jewish Marxist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich’s construction of the sexually repressed personality as the essential predicament of the authoritarian regimes that fascism epitomized. As Reich wrote in his seminal \textit{The Mass Psychology of Fascism} (1933),

\begin{quote}
Sexual repression strengthens political reaction and makes the individual in the masses passive and nonpolitical; it creates a secondary force in man’s structure—an artificial interest, which actively supports the authoritarian order. When sexuality is prevented from attaining natural gratification, owing to the process of sexual repression, what happens is that it . . . is distorted into brutal sadism, which constitutes an essential part of the mass-psychological basis of those imperialistic wars.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

Conversely, then, Reich claimed, “the objective loosening of the reactionary shackles placed on sexuality” would effectively disable political reaction, which “would have no answer and no counter-ideology.”\textsuperscript{45} This process also seems at work in \textit{The Break}, where the liberation of Hanna’s libido develops alongside her dissident status in the Party. Tellingly, the consolidation of Stalinist Party politics materializes toward the novel’s end in the announcement of a new and more restrictive sexual politics. This, Hanna ponders, seeks to reinforce precisely those “bourgeois clichés—family life, marital fidelity, the comfortable home” (B, 166) that the Party had previously denounced. At the same time, the novel lets the Party’s older, more liberal sexual politics emerge as only seemingly conducive to a sexually awakened and thus truly liberated personality. The Party’s previous approach had been governed by pragmatism, whereby sexuality was only a secondary issue given the primacy of political struggle: “Marital fidelity? That’s amongst yourselves, says the party, we have transcended bourgeois monogamy as well bourgeois liberti-
nage, says the party, the choice of arrangement is up to you, but you must be
decent, reliable comrades” (B, 129).

In the past, both Hanna and Karl had defended this view in their work and private lives. But in her encounter with Anatol, Hanna realizes that the Party’s view of sex as a “hygienic measure” (B, 165) to safeguard the primacy of political struggle has left her sexually unfulfilled even in her relationship with her beloved Karl. But the novel’s ending restates the importance of political struggle over the sexual and the wider personal, albeit under reconfigured parameters, as Hanna leaves behind both Karl and Anatol for an uncertain journey to join the Spanish Interbrigades. In doing so, Hanna symbolically rejects both the Party communism of her adult life (represented by Karl) and the bourgeois cosmopolitanism of her upbringing (represented by Anatol) and instead embraces a truly internationalist stance.

This ending recalls that of Henrik Ibsen’s 1879 play, A Doll’s House, whose protagonist, Nora, became one of the key prototypes of early feminist discourse. Hanna’s departure from the male-defined coordinates of her previous life suggests the nomadic rootlessness of the modern woman, which oddly recalls Weininger’s notion of women and Jews as signifiers of rootless modernity. Unlike Weininger, however, Rühle-Gerstel does not present this rootlessness as an essentialized paradigm of the woman and the Jew. Instead, she suggests Hanna’s nomadism as the only viable stance for disrupting the ideologies of modernity—National Socialism, Party communism, and bourgeois liberalism and its cosmopolitan configuration—that have led society into a literal dead end.

When Arthur Koestler wrote his seminal novel Darkness at Noon (1940), he obviously did so with far more extensive knowledge of the Great Purges than Rühle-Gerstel had available in 1937–38. The son of a Hungarian Jewish father and an Austrian Jewish mother, Koestler was born in Budapest in 1905. In 1919, his family moved to Vienna, where Koestler joined the Zionist student movement. Between 1926 and 1929, he worked in Palestine as a correspondent for the Ullstein press. He subsequently moved to Paris and later Berlin, where he joined the Communist Party in 1931. In 1933, just after visiting the Soviet Union, Koestler went into exile in Paris. He joined the French antifascist movement and went to Spain in 1936 to report on the Spanish Civil War for the British News Chronicle. He returned to Paris in 1938, left the Communist Party, and spent four months interned at the notorious Le Vernet camp. In 1940, he found refuge in Britain, where he began to write in English. He died in London in 1983.
Darkness at Noon provided the first concerted literary attempt to address the Great Purges. The novel conveys the profound disillusionment and shock that Koestler felt during his 1933 visit to the Soviet Union, during which he encountered the regime’s betrayal of its own subjects, a betrayal that became the novel’s central theme. Koestler located this betrayal in the foundations of Stalinist ideology and politics. While in Baku, Koestler had fallen in love with a Russian woman, who he learned was a suspected counterrevolutionary spy. Koestler reported on her, lost touch with her, and ultimately left her to an uncertain fate, but his betrayal long haunted him. So profound was Koestler’s disillusionment with Soviet communism that Manès Sperber found Koestler completely changed in appearance after his return to Paris. No longer a carefree man but a worried and trembling individual, Koestler’s “total impression was quite different.”

Set in a Soviet jail, the novel explores the Stalinist purges of first-guard revolutionaries between 1936 and 1938 through the eyes of the accused former Comintern representative Nicolas Salmanovitch Rubashov. Through Rubashov, Koestler not only places the Jew at the center of the Stalinist narrative and its critical examination but also preempts the post-1945 Stalinist persecution of Jews among the communist guard. As with Rühle-Gerstel’s Hanna, Rubashov’s Jewishness remains only implicit, a narrative strategy reflecting the subordinate role of Jewishness within both assimilationist and communist identity politics. Rubashov’s Jewish origins are suggested through his middle name, Salmanovitch, which indicates that his father bore the Hebrew first name Salman. In this context, Rubashov’s intellectual pretenses, his internationalist convictions, and his extensive travels abroad link him to the image of the Jew as a nomad and thereby add further meaning. While installed as a functionary, Rubashov had delivered “long [and] difficult to understand” (DN, 15) speeches praising the Comintern and the world revolution, suggesting his abstract intellectualism—a mode of thinking that antisemitic discourse ascribed to the Jews. Now, the Party deems him a “querulous intellectual” (DN, 29). This, together with his frequent international missions for the Comintern, renders him a suspect.

As in many other cases, Rubashov’s faithful service, first to the revolution and then to the communist state, predestines him for rather then protects him from the purges. Once a dedicated communist, Rubashov has delivered others presumed to be political deviants to the deadly purges. But the purges leave him increasingly disillusioned and his turn ultimately comes. The same is true for another convict in the jail, the former chair of the Comintern. This character is a thinly veiled representation of Grigory Zinoviev, the Jewish former Comintern leader who was executed in the 1936 purges. Zinoviev’s case illustrates the
complex relationship between communist perpetrators and their victims, for he had provided the ideological justification for Stalinist mass murder when he declared at a 1918 meeting of Bolsheviks that “we must carry along with us 90 out of the 100 million of Soviet Russia’s inhabitants. As for the rest, we have nothing to say to them. They must be annihilated.” But by 1936, as Stalin was establishing his new Soviet nationalism, close involvement with the Comintern meant a death sentence, no matter how faithful a functionary had been to the early revolutionary cause. As Rubashov’s interrogator, Gletkin, states,

The policy of the International had to be subordinated to our national policy. Whoever did not understand this necessity had to be destroyed. Whole sets of our best functionaries in Europe had to be physically liquidated. We did not recoil from crushing our own organizations abroad when the interests of the Bastion required it. (DN, 226)

As Koestler shows, the particular horror of the Stalinist persecutions lay in the victims’ extensive collaboration and identification with their persecutors because the victims had previously been the hangmen. In his earlier role as a Comintern functionary, Rubashov had traveled abroad to purge communist resisters in National Socialist Germany who had customized the Party’s leaflets to speak more effectively to the masses. This was deemed a deviation from the Party line, even if it occurred in the service of its cause. Most important, however, Stalinism also achieved its lethal effect by compelling its victims to behave according to their own belief systems. Rubashov thus conceives his relationship with his interrogator, Ivanov, as that of twins “nourished by the umbilical cord of a common conviction. . . . They had the same moral standard, the same philosophy, they thought in the same terms. Their positions might just as well have been the other way round” (DN, 110). Out of sheer Party discipline, the victims performed the part of the traitor because that was what their leaders required. As Rubashov wonders in his cell, “What if, after all No. 1 were in the right? If here, in blood and dirt and lies, after all and in spite of everything, the grandiose foundations of the future were being laid?” (DN, 126).

Unlike Rühle-Gerstel’s *The Break*, which outlines through Hanna an internal position of dissent from Stalinism within the communist idea, Koestler’s novel erodes any internal resistance. Stalinism has consumed the communist idea in its entirety, and having previously been the hangmen, the victims have lost any position of moral authority over their tormentors. This is, of course, yet another moment where the psychological mechanisms at work in Stalin’s and Hitler’s atrocities seem to overlap. In his final book, *The Drowned and the Saved*
(1986), Primo Levi, too, observed an “identification or imitation, or exchange of roles between oppressor and victim” in his study of the Jewish special squads at Auschwitz, who were forced to aid the SS in processing the dead bodies produced in the gas chambers. As Levi wrote in his chapter, “The Gray Zone,”

It is naive, absurd and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims; on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them resemble itself, and this all the more when they are available, blank, and lacking a political armature.  

Therein, however, also lie the essential differences in the ideological conception of the Soviet and the German atrocities. In the National Socialist camps, the seeming convergence between masters and slaves never suspended the hierarchy of power that marked the biologized difference between the masters and their slaves: all Jews were designated to die, whether or not they had been accessories to murder. Such essentialized differences did not exist between Stalin’s henchmen and their victims, and Stalin could thus ideologically contaminate his victims in a way that National Socialism, which viewed its Jewish victims as subhuman outsiders and therefore did not require them to identify with its cause, did not demand.

This is, of course, not to say that Stalin’s crimes equaled or outweighed Hitler’s but rather to pinpoint the finer nuances by which both ideologies enveloped and utilized their victims in very different ways. Yet in Darkness at Noon, National Socialism and Stalinism still look deceptively similar on the surface. This emerges most clearly in the novel’s final scene, when Rubashov, having made a false confession, is convicted and led to his execution. As he is hit by a blow to his head, he dreams of his arrest, wondering which country he is in and whether the portrait of Stalin or Hitler is looking down on him. Was it

he with the ironic smile or he with the glassy gaze? A shapeless figure bent over him, he smelt the fresh leather of the revolver belt; but what insignia did the figure wear on the sleeves and shoulder straps of its uniform—and in whose name did it raise the dark pistol barrel? (DN, 254)

Such analogies, however, do not absolve individual responsibility by pointing a finger at a similar evil. If anything, such comparisons serve as a last call to awaken the human and leftist conscience in particular to disrupt everyday complacency toward such atrocities. As Koestler wrote in his 1944 essay “On Disbelieving Atrocities” in the New York Times Magazine,
A dog run over by a car upsets our emotional balance and digestion; three million Jews killed in Poland cause but a moderate uneasiness. Statistics don’t bleed. . . . Thus we all live in a state of split consciousness. . . . We live in a society of the Jekyll and Hyde pattern magnified into gigantic proportions.53

At the same time, Koestler’s earlier analogies between National Socialism and Stalinism obviously result from the fact that Darkness at Noon was written several years before the National Socialists’ Final Solution unfolded. Before the erection of the death camps, it was possible to read Stalin and Hitler as evil twins who utilized seemingly similar mechanisms to manipulate the masses and ensnare their political victims. The knowledge of the mechanized nature of the National Socialist death camps changed that equation. When the bare outlines of that news emerged, despite inaccuracies of detail resulting from the sparse information available, Koestler saw that crime as unmistakably unique:

At present we have the mania of trying to tell you about the killing, by hot steam, mass-electrocution and live burial, of the total Jewish population of Europe. So far three million have died. It is the greatest mass-killing in recorded history; and it goes on daily, hourly, as regularly as the ticking of your watch.54

In making the Holocaust the universal paradigm of the human loss resulting from modern mass violence, Manès Sperber’s Like a Tear in the Ocean similarly suggests the uniqueness of the National Socialist genocide while simultaneously probing its intersections with Stalinism.55 Sperber’s trilogy on the communist struggle in times of war, written in German but first published in French between 1948 and 1952, delivers extensive descriptions of Stalinist atrocities as well as the National Socialists’ annihilation of European Jewry, though it does not represent the gas chamber killings themselves. The German original was not published until 1961.

Sperber was born into an Orthodox Jewish family in eastern Galicia in 1905, where he received a traditional Jewish upbringing. In 1916, Sperber’s family moved to Vienna, where he joined the socialist-Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair. Like Rühle-Gerstel, with whom he later became friends, Sperber was a follower of Alfred Adler’s individual psychology before breaking with him in 1932. In 1927, Sperber moved to Berlin, joining the Communist Party one year later. After the National Socialists’ rise to power, he fled via Vienna and Zagreb to Paris, where he worked for the Comintern Institute for the
Study of Fascism. In 1937, Sperber left the Communist Party and joined Koes- tler as a contributor to Willi Münzenberg’s journal, Die Zukunft (The Future). Sperber survived the Holocaust in France and from 1942 in Swiss exile. During this time, he was already writing the first book of his trilogy, which he began in 1942 and completed in 1948. Having returned to Paris, he wrote the second and third volumes between 1948 and 1951 against the backdrop of a new wave of Stalinist purges directed explicitly against Jews as “rootless cosmopolitans.”

The case of Willi Münzenberg and his associates echoes through the first two volumes of Sperber’s trilogy. In 1918, Münzenberg, a non-Jew from a working-class family, had been a founding member of the German Communist Party. Münzenberg was a leading Comintern member, and he remained a loyal Stalinist until the beginning of the Great Purges in 1936. When Münzenberg refused to purge the Communist Party of Germany, his own life became endangered. Walter Ulbricht, the later East German president who was also in Paris exile at the time, working for the Comintern, traveled to Prague to run the German Communist Party’s secret operations there. By Stalin’s order, Ulbricht attempted to lure Münzenberg to Moscow, where he most certainly would have faced execution, but these plans failed. After purging “disloyal” communists behind the battle lines of the Spanish Civil War, Ulbricht turned his attentions back to Paris, where he betrayed communists associated with the Comintern and Münzenberg, and within two years, the vast majority had been expelled or killed by the Soviet secret police. In 1940, Münzenberg, who had escaped from a French internment camp, was found strangled in a forest in southeastern France, from where he had been trying reach Switzerland. His killers are widely believed to have been Stalin’s agents.

Münzenberg is echoed in Sperber’s protagonist Herbert Soennecke, once a popular leader of the working class and a friend of Rosa Luxemburg, who is brought to trial in Moscow, accused of being a Trotskyite, and shot. His interrogator, Bärtchen, the German communist who in 1934 first reported Soennecke to the political division of the Soviet secret police, evokes the real-life Ulbricht. Like Ulbricht, Bärtchen superficially resembles Lenin through the small beard and glasses that he began to sport while in exile. By the end of the novel, most of Soennecke’s associates, just like Münzenberg’s, have been killed by the political secret police or delivered by the Party into the National Socialists’ hands. “Nowhere else in the world have so many Communists been killed as in Russia” (LTO, 1:332), says Albert Gräfe, another protagonist in the novel. The Party delivers Gräfe to the Gestapo, but he survives National Socialist torture, jail, and camp internment, believing that he had been betrayed by Soennecke. The Party leads his common-law wife, Erna, to believe that she is
responsible for the betrayal and she therefore commits suicide. Later, in Swiss exile, Gräfe survives a violent attack by Party agents, who then betray him to the Swiss police as double agent of the Gestapo and secret police. In the end, he is murdered by fascist Croatians while fleeing through Yugoslavia.

Betrayal of his most faithful comrades lay at the heart of Stalin’s power politics. Sperber reveals the anatomy of this system’s total moral evisceration of its subjects in the section dealing with the farcical investigation and murder of Soennecke and two of his comrades in Moscow. Following Bärtchen, another and by all appearances more intellectual investigator arrives: “He was clever and obviously experienced in political matters” (LTO, 1:349). He explains to Soennecke that the true reason for his conviction is that “You’re an old revolutionary, and therefore, ipso facto, an opponent of the present regime” (LTO, 1:349). But unless Soennecke falsely confesses to having planned Stalin’s assassination, all Parties and their organs, as well as intellectual sympathizers globally, will be instructed to denounce him as a National Socialist agent and counterrevolutionary. This process is necessary, the interrogator states, because the Party has committed many grave mistakes, such as starvation and shortages in agricultural production.

Cleansing the Party’s reputation and preserving its existence demands the sacrifice of its individual followers, the interrogator states: “Afterwards the water’s dirty, but the Party’s clean. Under what epithet a man dies for is utterly unimportant” (LTO, 1:351). As Sperber’s account of the interrogation suggests, the merged identities of hangmen and victims safeguards the smooth running of this system. Until this point, despite his nagging doubts, Soennecke has delivered his comrades to their incarceration and death. Therefore, the interrogator argues, Soennecke’s refusal to die, bears no scrutiny. Conversely, the hangman’s compliance was ensured by giving him a previous taste of the Gulag, “and there’s no place in the world where dying’s easier” (LTO, 1:350), the interrogator states. But Soennecke dies steadfast, despite threats to target his children. Alternating physical deprivation and comforts such as better food, alcohol, showers, and fresh clothes are also used to extract a false confession from Soennecke’s fellow inmate, Vasso. In exchange for a confession, Vasso is promised a stay in a sanatorium in the Crimea or the Caucasus, after which he will be ordered abroad to “reorganize” the Party and “take the whole business firmly in hand” (LTO, 1:367). But like Soennecke, Vasso refuses to comply and is killed.

As Sperber suggests, Stalinist ideology depended on a supreme degree of its internalization by the individual, to the extreme of total self-sacrifice and self-effacement for the clean reputation of the Party. As Arendt argued in Ori-
gins, the demand for “total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member” (OT, 323) formed the hallmark of totalitarian movements. This is the “atomized individual” (OT, 338) of modern society, whose lack of social ties forms the essential precondition for its total surrender to the Party or movement. As a consequence of the great upheavals of the Bolshevik Revolution, Arendt argued, the early Soviet Union thus became a laboratory for the workings of totalitarian power. Soviet propaganda specialized in coercing the “isolated mass man” (OT, 353) into fabricated self-confessions of guilt, which were essentially predicated on this individual’s great dependency on the Party or movement for his sense of personal truth and belonging. “In a situation where the dividing line between fiction and reality is blurred by the monstrosity and the inner consistency of the accusation,” Arendt wrote, it is all the more difficult for this individual “to resist the temptation to yield to the mere abstract possibility of guilt” (OT, 353). It seems plausible, then, that the act of self-confession—even of entirely fabricated convictions leading to the knowing victim’s execution—supplied the individual with at least the solace of having remained loyal to the Party and its abstract belief system, even if doing so was to its own detriment.

Similarly, Soennecke’s friend, Josmar, succumbs to his interrogators before reportedly killing himself between the battle lines in Spain. Josmar’s final letter to his comrades conveys his personal sense of guilt while reiterating the integrity of his faith to the Party: “I’ve remained true to the Party and to no one and nothing else” (LTO, 1:388). The influence of Arendt’s Origins on Sperber is particularly apparent in the second and third volumes of Like a Tear, which repeatedly invoke the concept of the totalitarian by drawing analogies between National Socialism and Stalinism. Protagonist Doino Faber, who, like Sperber, hailed from the provinces of tsarist Russia and abandoned his traditional Jewish upbringing for communism, represents Arendt’s atomized modern individual. As a child, Faber had been taught to wait for the Messiah, who would do away with the tsar’s executions of innocent people. Having grown older, he rejected such a passive stance and instead chose, in the words of his friend, Stetten, a different kind of “Messiah, only now he calls him ‘world revolution’ or perhaps a ‘classless society’” (LTO, 1:146). Faber subsequently became one of those men of a generation for whom all ceremonial and all symbolic gestures had long lost their value. Such men scarcely knew the meaning even of shame anymore. Yet though they would speak of their desires and disappointments in straightforward, matter-of-fact terms, it
embarrassed them when they had to express their sufferings. And that, precisely because they had discarded traditional forms as a man might throw away a worn-out fancy dress. (LTO, 2:181)

This reduced state becomes even further pronounced under the intersecting conditions of political illegality, exile, and the Stalinist persecutions. The text’s unpredictable shifts into a multitude of characters and perspectives whose identities often emerge only after several pages of narration, reflect the isolated condition of Sperber’s protagonists, who are struggling for moral integrity and ultimately sheer physical survival. In this situation, leaving the Party or being marked as a traitor by it is tantamount to death because, as Sperber writes elsewhere, both Party members and sympathizers would thrust the apostate into “soundproof isolation.” In *Like a Tear*, the Serb poet, Djoura, is thus ostracized by three other Party members, who like him are awaiting their execution by the Croatian police. The recognition that the Party itself has betrayed the cause is devastating beyond words. Faber tries but fails to describe his state of bereavement and loss beyond repair:

Perhaps it is the anguish of solitude and of being deprived of all future. What is usually called sadness contains within itself the consolations of self-pity. But this particular anguish destroys that pity, it petrifies your heart and immobilizes time itself. (LTO, 2:70)

The story of Petrovitch, a Serb who escaped from a northern Siberian camp, stands out among the repeated expressions of such personal desolation. Petrovitch’s report to Faber and Gräfe of the conditions in the gulag suggests the eerie parallels between Stalin’s camps and Hitler’s, down to invoking the image of the *Muselmann*, the term for inmates in the National Socialist annihilation camps who had lost all desire to live:

The wave of arrests, the overcrowded communal cells, the solitaries, the convictions without trial or opportunity for defense, the overcrowded railroad cars that transported the prisoners eastward, the hopeless struggle against the real criminals who were with them, thirst, hunger, the endless marching, the chicanery that went on, the first camp, the second camp; he described how men can be humiliated and debased until they are capable of only one feeling, hunger, of only one sensation, exhaustion, permanent exhaustion. (LTO, 2:151)
But although Faber and Gräfe believe Petrovitch’s apocalyptic account of the camps, they refuse to follow his pleas to make this truth public. As they reason, Stalin is their only reliable ally—although, as Petrovitch points out, Stalin in fact has killed all of his allies—in the fight against the main enemy, Hitler. Their response reflects Sperber’s reaction to the Great Purges, which he described in “On the Analysis of Tyranny”: “To remain faithful to [the Party and comrades whom Hitler had incarcerated and murdered], it was imperative to never lose sight of the true enemy and, so long as he existed, to disregard any other evil in the world.” Faced with this silence, Petrovitch commits suicide.

The novel lets Faber’s Jewishness emerge as a humanizing feature that enables him to take on the role of witness and break through his emotional ossification. Before their execution, both Soennecke and Vasso had outlined the survivor’s role in identifying individual responsibility for the Stalinist atrocities and preserving the memory of the crimes. That person’s role is to find out “exactly when this development began and what part each of us played in it. He’ll have to assess the guilt of each individual one of us exactly” (LTO, 1:354). As Vasso demanded, Faber was to study the events of his death without either rejecting communism on the one hand or succumbing to the logic of his murderers on the other. But Doino’s flight across Europe, which sees him joining the Yugoslav partisans in their armed struggle against the occupation, has rendered him hardened personally and politically. Unable to devote himself to a lover, Faber has left or lost all the women he loved, and his vow to become “hard, violent” and “observe the murderers with murderers’ eyes” (LTO, 3:96) has resulted both in the loss of his comrades’ lives for the sake of symbolic resistance, and in the Germans’ eradication of the village that has sheltered them.

The trilogy’s prologue, which relates a modern version of the biblical story of the burning bush, reflects the centrality of Jewish paradigms for Sperber’s vision of the dashed hopes of communism. The fires of the burning bush, from which the hidden Hebrew god speaks to Moses in the Torah, has led humans to live in its light, until one day the branches and even the roots of the bush are consumed to ash. But the new masters kill everyone who expresses their sense of betrayal that the miracle has failed. They are enemies, these masters claim to their new slaves, to whom the light of the bush remains obscured. Yet, secret voices persist, and despite their persecution and annihilation, they claim that one must find or plant another bush. But the stranger telling this story is speaking into a void, for his listeners are tired of starting anew.

This void is reflected at the end of the novel, when only the “principle of hope” remains, to use the memorable title of the German Jewish philosopher Ernst Bloch’s wartime magnum opus. By tracing this principle back to the
biblical story of Job, *Like a Tear* identifies the idea as a Jewish inheritance. As Stetten surmises, “Wherever there were rebels, there, too, were the Jews, driven by their belief that they could bring about a happy ending on earth” (LTO, 1:225). This hope, the novel suggests, lies in the steadfast rejection of power and the embrace of the victims’ stance—the only resistance that does not repeat injustice. At the end of the novel, Faber thus accepts his earlier realization “that power corrupts, and that, therefore, the man who has it inevitably misuses it” (LTO, 1:145) by rejecting political action. Faber’s rejection of action runs parallel to his renewed interest in Jewish tradition, if only as an intellectual blueprint. Faber’s recovered memory of the Jewish legend of the Lamed Vov, the thirty-six just men who are said to exist in every generation and whose merits ensure the continued existence of the world, thus maintains the imperative of justice, albeit in a reconfigured way.

Faber’s course is echoed in the story of the Jews of Wolyna, from which the novel takes its title. Faber’s counterpart Edi, a secular Viennese Jew and social democrat, arrives in Wolyna on the eve of its destruction by the Germans. Faced with their imminent annihilation, first the rabbi and then his son refuse to follow Edi’s call for armed resistance because doing so would compromise their faith in God. Furthermore, as he contends, the Jews have never been defeated because they alone have refused to resemble their enemies. In contrast, actionism and its reflection in battle are meaningless:

“Try, just once, to describe a battle,” the rabbi’s son tells Edi, “and you will find that all those actions taken together are smaller and more shapeless than a tear in the sea” (LTO, 3:190). The centrality of this statement for the novel—it is even part of the title—is apparent. These teachings, then, chime with the convictions of Faber’s Viennese friend and professor of history, Stetten, who represents “the corpse of Austria” (LTO, 1:228), with its destroyed liberal legacy. Driven out of Vienna, Stetten dies in exile, but his papers record that “intellectual man must leave action to others and only intervene when it is a question of presenting certain actions or of protesting, and also when a moral or intellectual need threatens to become a general danger” (LTO, 3:252).

**The Left and the Stalinist Purges after 1945: Rudolf Leonhard, Peter Weiss, and Stefan Heym**

Sperber wrote the last two volumes of his trilogy against the backdrop of renewed Stalinist purges, in which the persecution of internationalists assumed a clearly antisemitic tone. The 1930s purges had occurred on the back of the
Stalin-Trotsky split. When in 1948 Yugoslavia embarked on a more liberal version of communism under Josip Broz Tito, a new series of purges began across the Soviet satellite countries. Albania came first. Next was Romania, where Ana Pauker, born into an orthodox Jewish family and now the de facto leader of the Communist Party, was purged with two comrades. Pauker survived, but one fellow defendant was executed. The show trials heightened in intensity and antisemitic tone as the Noel Field Affair unfolded beginning in 1949, recapitulating in new ways the 1930s battle between internationalists and those who had remained in the Soviet Union. The hard-line Stalinists, many of whom had been trained in the Soviet Union during the war, now targeted those with Western ties, which were seen as synonymous with Jews and Israel.

The British-born Noel Field and his wife, Herta, both non-Jews, were avowed antifascists with Soviet sympathies. Raised in the United States and educated at Harvard, Noel Field served as a U.S. State Department employee from the late 1920s until his appointment with the League of Nations in Geneva. By this time, he had already been recruited by the Soviet secret police. In 1938, he was posted as a League of Nations representative in Spain, where he and his wife aided Franco victims and Republican fighters. In 1941, Field moved to a new post in Marseille, where he and Herta became involved in rescue operations for persecuted Jews, often putting their own lives on the line. Field also established connections for the American wartime intelligence service, the Office of Strategic Services, with Communist resistance fighters. In 1949, the Fields moved from Switzerland to Prague. Just a few days after their arrival, Field, his wife, his brother, and his daughter were arrested in various Eastern Bloc countries and accused of having headed a spy network. Field was taken to Hungary to serve as an accessory in the László Rajk trial, which opened a new round of show trials in September 1949. Noel Field survived torture and five years of solitary confinement; his wife was imprisoned in the infamous Soviet Lyublyanka prison, where her initial death sentence was commuted to forced labor in Siberia. In 1954, all members of the Field family were released. Yet like so many other Soviet sympathizers, Noel and Herta Field identified with their torturers rather than condemning them. As Field wrote during his imprisonment,

My accusers essentially have the same convictions that I do, they hate the same things and the same people I hate—the conscious enemies of socialism, the fascists, the renegades, the traitors. Given their belief in my guilt, I cannot blame them. I cannot but approve their detestation. That is the real horror of it all.62
The antisemitic tone of the new purges culminated in an infamous November 1952 Prague show trial in which Rudolf Slánský, secretary-general of the Czech Communist Party, and thirteen other high-ranking members of the Czech Communist establishment were charged with high treason, espionage, and participation in a Zionist conspiracy for Field’s alleged spy network. Eleven of the fourteen defendants were Jews, including Slánský himself. Slánský and ten others were hanged, while the remaining three received life sentences.

At the same time, show trials took in East Germany when Paul Merker, a longtime communist and anti-National Socialist resistance fighter, was arrested on charges of having led the East German operation of yet another supposed spy network uncovered during the Prague trials. In particular, Merker was accused of having been recruited for the French secret service by three of the Jewish defendants executed in the Slánský trials. A non-Jew, Merker was charged with having Zionist sympathies and contacts with “Zionist circles” during his time in Mexico. These charges rested on a 1942 article in which Merker demanded postwar reparations for the National Socialists’ Jewish victims. This article is a unique war-time German demonstration of empathy regarding the plight of the Jews:

If all German rivers were ink, and all German forests quills, they would not suffice to describe the innumerable crimes which Hitler fascism has committed against the Jewish population. . . . Only those antifascists can acquit themselves from responsibility for the monstrous consequences of antisemitism who have, since Hitler’s rise to power, tirelessly risked their freedom and lives to fight against the mighty gulf of darkness and the reactionary forces that reached their bloodied climax in Hitler fascism. . . . It is them who, fuelled by the ideals of their struggle for the progress of humanity, voluntarily accept responsibility for reparation—if that is even possible—for the crimes perpetrated on their Jewish fellow citizens.63

After more than two years of detention, Merker was brought to trial in 1955 and sentenced to eight years in jail. After serving one year, he was released and secretly cleared of all charges. However, these accusations of Jewish sympathies and coding as a Zionist resonate with the East German Communist Party’s position on postwar reparations for the Jews. This position was clear from 1946 onward, when the Eastern Zone’s reparations committee declared that communists were the only genuine National Socialist victims and treated Jews and all other categories of victims as secondary, awarding them little or no
material support because unlike the communists, they had supposedly failed to resist the National Socialists.64

In the polarized postwar climate, few writers addressed the continuing legacy of the Stalinist crimes. Among the notable exceptions on the Western side of the Iron Curtain are Wolfgang Leonhard’s autobiographical Child of the Revolution (1955) and Peter Weiss’s literary epic, The Aesthetics of Resistance, and Stefan Heym’s works in the East. Weiss’s Aesthetics of Resistance, published in three volumes between 1975 and 1981, reiterates the central themes of Sperber’s Like a Tear but adopts an experimental aesthetic form that reflects the early call for the unconditional openness of revolutionary art, which had become abandoned under Stalin.65 Born to a Hungarian Jewish father and a Christian mother in what is now Potsdam-Babelsberg in 1916, Weiss emigrated to the United Kingdom in 1934 and from there via Prague to Sweden four years later. He died in Sweden in 1982. The Investigation (1965), a dramatic treatment of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials that drew inspiration from Kafka’s The Trial, became Weiss’s most famous work other than the Aesthetics. In both writings, Weiss takes implicit issue with Theodor Adorno’s apprehensions against art on atrocity, which Adorno had expressed in response to the Shoah. Opening with a poetic account of the ancient Greek atrocities at Pergamon, the Aesthetics thus staunchly insists on the ability of language and art to account for atrocity. The Aesthetics must be considered the most profound exploration to date of the relationships among the individual, political resistance, and art.

As a result of the novel’s monumental extent and stream-of-consciousness style, Walter Jens considers the Aesthetics “the equal of Ulysses.”66 And indeed, Weiss’s magnum opus utilizes both formally and thematically the patterns laid by that classic of early twentieth-century world literature, a concept that historically has been closely tied up with the cosmopolitanism ideal. Like James Joyce’s epos, the Aesthetics sets out from Greek myth. However, Weiss uses the figure of Heracles, who is said to have been both a protector and benefactor of humanity on the one hand and to have visited terrible violence on those who betrayed him on the other. Weiss’s Heracles becomes the perfect symbol for the dichotomous twentieth-century history of communism, which fought fascism in the name of humanity while enacting monstrous violence during its purges. Weiss’s autobiographically inspired novel chronicles this history from his first-person protagonist’s participation in the antifascist struggle in Germany and the Spanish Interbrigades through his emigration and post-war life in Sweden.

Weiss suggests that proletarian art remains necessarily limited by the conditions of violence dictated first by the proletarian revolution and then by the
antifascist struggle. Under the current condition of national revolutions rather than the world revolution for which Marx had originally called, artistic abstraction and internationalist—indeed, cosmopolitan sentiment—thus remained the stuff of bourgeois art:

Modernism, Abstraction had to remain the privilege of people who dealt with artistic problems, no proletarian art could arise from there even if the artists believed they were speaking the true language of a revolutionary nation. . . . These ponderings included the opposition between the national and the international guidelines. Had the Revolution spread, then art would likewise have maintained a revolutionary versatility. (AR, 57)

Weiss’s novel seeks to recover that lost multiplicity by presenting its discussion of history, politics, and art through a dialogue of interwoven narrative voices. In doing so, the humanist cosmopolitan narrative, with its emphasis on the individual, remains in constant tension with the first-person narrator’s exploration of proletarian art and communist internationalism. The narrator thus rejects the “view that a writer must belong to a country, a precisely outlined sphere of existence, a national culture for his writings to sound convincing” (AR, 117). Instead, he seeks his audiences beyond national borders, and defines internationalism as the sign of his affiliation. These political views and the global network of people leading the same struggle define his sense of belonging.

The Spanish Civil War, then, which drew left-sympathizing volunteers from all vocations and corners of the Western world into the Interbrigades, forms a preliminary highlight in international solidarity as well as leftist coalition politics. Thirty-five thousand volunteers, workers, intellectuals, and artists joined in the “pan-European war against fascism” (AR, 282) between the autumn of 1936 and the spring of 1939. Lying in the trenches of the Spanish Interbrigades, Weiss’s narrator invokes Nikolai Bukharin’s speech to the first Soviet All-Union Congress of Writers in 1934, which passionately attacked “the freedom of revolutionary art, on the unconditional openness of form . . . , a call for the development of individuality” (AR, 254). By turning time and again to physician and sex educator Max Hodann, a close ally of Magnus Hirschfeld and like him a Communist Party sympathizer, the text reflects on personal development as part of the envisioned new society. Even in the Spanish trenches, faced with his own annihilation by the fascist troops and the communists’ deadly purges of political deviants behind the lines, Hodann combines his communist views with the demand for personal happiness and sexual liberation.
By this time, internationalists are becoming increasingly suspect within the communist ranks. In the Soviet Union, they represent those who spent the prerevolution years in exile and whose views now clash with those who had remained in Russia. With Stalin’s turn toward nationalism, the 1930s saw a steady decline in Comintern politics, even though it was formally disbanded only in 1943.

A former exile, first-rank revolutionary, and later member of the Soviet politburo, Bukharin, too, epitomized the interchangeable roles of hangman and victim under Stalin. Bukharin played an instrumental role in ousting Zinoviev as Comintern secretary before becoming the organization’s head. Political disagreements with Stalin, however, led to Bukharin’s purge as a supposed leader of the counterrevolution. Weiss’s text reverberates with the shock of Bukharin’s rapid confession, conviction, and execution in the early hours of 15 March 1938. In Weiss’s account, Bukharin’s self-denunciation provides the pivotal moment in his demise: “What had induced him, Lenin’s closest confidant, to describe himself to the world as the organizer of an anti-Soviet bloc and to deny everything he had fought for all his life” (AR, 254).

This malaise has spread through the communist movement, and the narrator and his comrades watch unquestioningly and unresistingly as their ranks are decimated by the liquidation: “We accepted everything, we knew how to rationalize everything” (AR, 269). However, Ruth Marcauer, a young Jewish woman and Communist Party member since her youth, offers a point of resistance in this narrative of complacency. She refuses to take on the complicity that Stalin demanded of his victims. She not only loudly refutes suspicions that she may have been a Trotskyite but even discusses in front of comrades Stalin’s liquidation of long-term revolutionaries. Weiss’s description of her friends’ response is chilling:

We tried to keep Marcauer quiet, to shield her from her own words. But whenever we talk about our own war, she said, in the presence of the political commissar, we also have to talk about the other war, which is being waged simultaneously in our ranks against holders of dissident opinions, a war whose weapons I can never approve of. . . . No one could help Marcauer when her arrest was ordered. We wanted to reduce the significance of the interrogations that she could expect. . . . Yet we already knew that we would repress any thought of this woman who came from an upper-middle-class family in Hamburg. And soon the hour was blurred, the early morning when she was taken away by the military police. (AR, 275)
The communist atrocities, the novel asserts through Hodann, affected that generation more deeply than the destruction wrought by the National Socialists, because communists staunchly identified with and defended the Soviet Union. Fascism, in contrast, represented a known enemy and therefore constituted a monster they could fight. “Politics and art are of equal importance,” Hodann states near the end of the novel, and art, which “stood synonymous for humanity,” therefore needed “to compensate for the failures of politics.”  

Art “would, one day, be able to describe” (ÄW, 1025) the inhumane treatment of the National Socialists’ Jewish victims, which the narrator’s mother had witnessed while incarcerated and which had rendered her silent. The text offers a detailed description of the gas chamber murders before turning to Stalin’s betrayal of revolutionary idealism: “The land of the Revolution, too, had lost its dignity even before entering into the great struggle, in which it might win back its greatness and prepare a change of thought in us, at the cost of millions of dead” (ÄW, 1025). Therein, Hodann asserts, lay the schism that would need to be overcome so that the leftist exiles could once again lend meaning to their lives. Weiss attributes a key role to the exiles and their art production in this process when he asserts through Hodann “that they who wanted to take on the classical heritage of German culture would also need to inherit the cultural wreckage upon returning to that deformed country” (ÄW, 1165).

Stefan Heym’s novel, Collin (1979), concerned itself with precisely that ideological and moral wreckage. Born in 1913 into a Jewish textile manufacturer’s family in Chemnitz, the “German Manchester,” Heym had been a leftist sympathizer since his youth. Immediately after the National Socialists’ rise to power in 1933, he fled to Prague and emigrated from there to the United States in 1935. During World War II, he served as a sergeant in the U.S. Army’s Ritchie Boys, a special unit in charge of psychological warfare. In the course of the U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy’s infamous persecutions of communists, Heym and his American wife, Gertrude, left the United States in 1952 and settled in East Berlin. After the publication of his novel, The King David Report (1972), which offered a thinly veiled treatment of the Stalinist crimes through the biblical story of King David, Heym became East Germany’s top dissident and persona non grata. 68 From that point until 1986, his works were published only abroad, a practice that left Heym on the constant brink of legal prosecution.

Collin remains singular in its treatment of the Paul Merker Affair and the complicity of East German intellectuals who had previously fought against National Socialism in the postwar Stalinist persecution of alleged Zionists and
dissenters in the East German Party ranks. Merker served as the model for Heym’s protagonist, Julius Faber, a faithful Party member who spent the years of exile from National Socialism in France and Mexico before joining the East German Party elite after the war. But in 1952, Faber is accused at the Party conference of being an agent of the class enemy—indeed, a member of Noel Field’s “imperialist-Zionist world conspiracy.” Faber’s emigration to the West turns out to be the crucial moment in his indictment, when his accusers claim that he had enabled the SS to murder his Party comrades, “the survivors of the heroic International Brigades” (C, 126–27), by impeding their attempts to escape while he, “well-nourished and well-preserved, was able to betake himself to Mexico” (C, 127). As Heym’s protagonist, writer Hans Collin observes, these accusations closely follow the pattern of Stalinist show trials elsewhere:

How familiar, these charges. The names are interchangeable, the details may vary, but always you hear this talk of treason and conspiracy, in Moscow and Budapest, in Sofia, Bucharest, Prague, not to mention Belgrade where a small clique of contemporary renegades is still holding sway. (C, 127)

Even now, in novel’s present-tense setting of the 1970s, plainclothes members of East Germany’s secret service, the Stasi, hound Faber during an outing to a café, where he is heckled as “Judas” (C, 128), a “traitor to the working class” and “Zionist agent” (C, 129) for the Americans. Heym exposes the perfidiousness of these accusations through Wilhelm Urack, a reflection of Stasi director Erich Mielke, whose journey in exile had closely resembled Faber’s. Each man’s destiny in Party politics was, therefore, not simply determined by his Western rather than Soviet exile but by his ability to play the power game. According to Urack, Faber’s true crime lay in his innocence and the fact “that he was there, and that he was the person he was. He was just a natural for the lot that fell to him” (C, 215). Even worse than Trotsky, whose destiny made him “a big-mouthed failure whose skull is bound to be cracked by some assassin’s pickaxe,” Faber was “a lamb. And therefore was sacrificed like a lamb” (C, 216). Contends Urack,

What predestined one man to lead the plow and the other, to be plowed under, lay deep inside his heart and was something almost irrational. It lay precisely in the difference between Comrade Faber and Comrade Urack. They were, so-to-speak, of different races . . . ; you took one sniff and your instinct told you: this guy is different and therefore dangerous,
whether he plans something against you or not, he is one you can’t work with, he doesn’t fit into the group, he is not of my kind. (C, 171)

But whereas the brute Urack’s views on the victims of the Stalinist persecutions may be predictable, the position of the intellectual in the novel emerges as more troubling. For all of the intellectuals in the novel with the notable exception of Jewish critic Theodor Pollock, who can be seen as Heym’s alter ego from his King David Report onward, have in their own ways betrayed the accused victims of Communist state persecution. Collin echoes the complacent Heym in his early East German years, remaining silent against the absurd accusations against Faber, who later becomes an accessory in the farcical trial against state official Georg Havelka. At Havelka’s trial, too, Collin remains silent.

Heym’s portrayal of the Havelka case follows the contours of the real-life prosecution of Walter Janka, a former political inmate in the National Socialist concentration camp at Sachsenhausen who then went on to fight in the Spanish Interbrigades. Janka became a star in the East German publishing industry and by 1956 he was serving as head of Aufbau Verlag, the leading East German publisher. During the Hungarian anticommunist uprising that year, Janka became involved in the attempted rescue of Jewish literary critic Georg Lukács, a communist official and dissenter, from enemies on both sides of the uprising.70 Lukács’s escape was plotted by high-ranking representatives of East Germany’s cultural scene, including poet and minister of culture Johannes R. Becher; Anna Seghers, head of the East German writers’ association; and Helene Weigel an actress who served as artistic director of the renowned Berliner Ensemble Theatre after the death of her husband, Bertolt Brecht. Seghers and Becher, who had supported the heinous earlier accusations against Merker, now played a key role in persuading Janka to fetch Lukács from Budapest. Then, however, East German president Walter Ulbricht, whom Becher had informed of the plan, called it off. Nine months later, Janka was arrested and sentenced to five years in jail. Seghers, Becher, and Weigel were present at his trial but remained silent. Merker, who had just been unofficially rehabilitated and was facing threats, played his allocated part as witness for the prosecution. And thus the moral demise of the East German intellectual was complete, long before the scandal involving leading East German writer Christa Wolf’s Stasi links surfaced in 1993.

These events are reflected in Heym’s protagonists Curd and Pamela Piddlekoe, the former a poet and minister like Becher, the latter a theater director like Weigel, who also sit silently through Havelka’s trial while the pathetic Faber makes his confession. Heym suggests that the leftist cause in the East Ger-
man republic will not survive their moral failure. Collin’s secret recording of these events in his memoirs in the present-day of the novel is bracketed by two heart attacks. The first one sees him hospitalized and inspires him to write; the second one, however, takes place at the end of the novel and is fatal. Urack, who is being treated at the same hospital, lives on, signifying the Stalinists’ victory long after Stalin himself has passed. Yet Urack’s triumph is only momentary, for Collin’s unfinished memoirs are preserved, and Pollock has secretly taken possession of them. As in Feuchtwanger’s *Josephus*, Heym’s great model for the writing of Jewish historical fiction, the ancient Jewish writer thus acts as a repository of a counterhistory to the history of twentieth-century state violence.

Collin uncovered the skeletons in the East German cupboard just as the news of communism’s most atavistic crime, the 1975–79 Cambodian genocide, became public. In the last volume of *Aesthetics of Resistance*, published in 1981, Weiss made implicit reference to what would turn out to be the final act in the communist system’s moral demise. Weiss recounted the 1930s journey of a hard-line communist, Stahlmann, who also appears in Heym’s *Collin*, to the ancient Cambodian cities of Angkor Wat and Angkor Tom. These are sites of death: Angkor Wat is “the image of the monstrous symmetry of a system of domination which, albeit sunken, continued to control the hidden site with its remains” (ÄW, 979). On this “night of all nights” (ÄW, 980), Stahlmann accesses Angkor Tom via the solemn figures of stone warriors who guard a “gate of death,” behind which the Buddha’s myriad faces beckon at the Bayon Temple, “dominating the world, emerging from the timeless ether, rising above the decay” (ÄW, 981). Stalin and his emulators, concluding with Pol Pot, are now part of a mythology of atrocity that Weiss traces from the Pergamon altar to these hidden cities in the jungle.

Weiss appropriately closes his mythology of atrocity here. Annihilating first-guard revolutionaries alongside ethnic minorities and intellectuals—that is, the educated middle class, people in command of foreign languages, and people wearing glasses—the Khmer Rouge had attempted to construct a total agrarian society from which all signs of cosmopolitanism would be erased. Unbeknownst to Weiss, Pol Pot’s crimes, which destroyed up to two million lives—20 percent of the Cambodian population—in less than four years, represented the sunset of communism.