Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

Stach, Stephan, Hallama, Peter, Bohus, Kata

Published by Central European University Press

Stach, Stephan, et al.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/94691.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/94691
Helmut Eschwege, an East German-Jewish historian of the Holocaust, presents a fascinating and largely overlooked case of conflicted identities: communist, Jew, and historian. Eschwege’s work was exceptional both in that he was a historian who worked outside of institutional boundaries and in that his own life demonstrated many of the tensions and complexities in German-Jewish history, Jewish identity, and Holocaust memory in the German Democratic Republic.¹

As Konrad Kwiet has pointed out, historians of the German Democratic Republic predictably marginalized Jewish history, the history of antisemitism, and the history of the Holocaust.² Such themes, he wrote, were not considered “worthy of study for their own sake within the terms of reference of GDR historiography.”³ The official interpretative framework in the GDR remained bound by the Dimitrov formula (articulated by the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov) that fascism “is an open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist, and most imperialist elements of German fi-

---

¹ I would like in particular to thank Clemens Vollnhals for inviting me to give an earlier version of this paper at the Hannah Arendt Institut für Totalitarismusforschung at the TU Dresden. I would also like to acknowledge Benjamin Binstock, Bettina Brandt, Konrad Kwiet, Herbert Lappe, Hildegardt and Johannes Stellmacher, Peter Hallama, and Stephan Stach for their helpful comments. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Tamari, Dr. Preuß, and Eva Blattner of the Zentralarchiv zur Erforschung der Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland in Heidelberg for providing aid and assistance in a warm and supportive manner as I was conducting my research.


³ Kwiet, “Historians of the German Democratic Republic,” 173.
nance capital.” Economic interpretative frameworks were prioritized; racial genocide was rooted in the logic of monopoly capitalism. This interpretation of fascism had immediate political implications. According to the SED (Socialist Unity Party), enduring elements of fascism remained a very real problem in capitalist West Germany. By contrast, East German historians proclaimed, the German Democratic Republic, a socialist country and a state that identified itself with the antifascist resistance, had destroyed the roots of fascism. More complex and nuanced interpretations of the Holocaust and Nazism were provided by novelists such as Johannes Bobrowski and Jurek Becker, and filmmakers such as Kurt Mätzig, director of *Marriage in the Shadows* (1947), and Konrad Wolf, director of *Stars* (1959) and *Professor Mamlock* (1961). However, historical writing was far more rigid and constrained than in West Germany and mostly followed guidelines set down by the academic establishment of the GDR.

Just as there were prescribed boundaries on what could be written about the persecution of the Jews, there were also (unspoken) limitations on what could be stated about Jews and Jewish history. The German Democratic Republic rejected racial antisemitism as a matter of course. However, the SED viewed Judaism as a religion that would ultimately be transcended in a socialist society (following Marx’s arguments in “On the Jewish Question”). While many of the governing elite came from Jewish families, their Jewish background, while not explicitly denied, was downplayed. A leadership position in East Germany necessitated the renunciation of one’s Jewish identity. Viewing Zionism as a form of reactionary nationalism, they sought to dissolve their German Jewish background into a communist identity that would eventually lead to the total assimilation of the remaining German Jews. Following Marx’s position, they believed that a socialist society would bring about an end to all religions, including Judaism. Antisemitism would then, they believed, disappear as well.

---

4 Kwiet, “Historians of the German Democratic Republic,” 175.
5 Anke Pinkert writes of the films of Wolf, Mätzig, and others, “Challenging the general assumption that the Holocaust was suppressed in public and cultural discourse of the East, these films provide varying models of both addressing and containing antisemitism and the Holocaust within a teleological master narrative of antifascism, including a focus on communist resistance and conversion and a clear hierarchy of victimization.” The films of the later 1940s, in particular, dealt with the persecution of the Jews when there was silence in the West. Nevertheless, they did so within a certain prescribed ideological framework. See Anke Pinkert, *Film and Memory in East Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 41. On the somewhat different case of literary representations of the Holocaust, see Thomas C. Fox, *Stated Memory: East Germany and the Holocaust* (Rochester: Camden House, 1999), 97–144.
The writer Barbara Honigmann writes about her father, Georg Honigmann, a well-known East German journalist and a member of the communist elite, that by joining the Communist Party as a young man, he rejected what he felt was a provincial and limiting Jewish identity. To him communism represented a movement that “promised equality and fraternity . . . that claimed not to know any race but only class divisions and that wanted to simply ‘abolish the Jewish question as such.’” In a similar vein, French scholar Sonja Combe writes that communism in East Germany “allowed Jews with the impulse to assimilate, to suppress their otherness but also their Jewish suffering. Their political engagement and their communist identity erased their Jewishness. For the price of silence about Auschwitz in public life, they were successful in mastering their memories.”

A noteworthy exception to the tendency described by Combe and Honigmann was the historian of the Holocaust and of German-Jewish history, Helmut Eschwege. Eschwege had fled Germany as a young man and a member of the SPD but returned from exile in Palestine in 1946—now a committed communist—to help build a socialist society in the Soviet zone. However, along with his leftist orientation, he remained committed to his own version of Jewish identity that was reflected, above all, in his desire to engage in historical research and

---

7 Barbara Honigmann, Damals, dann und danach (Vienna: Hanser Gardner Publications, 1999), 44.
8 Sonja Combe, “DDR: Die Letzten Tage der deutsch-jüdischen Symbiose,” in Erinnerung: Zur Gegenwart des Holocaust in Deutschland-West und Deutschland-Ost, ed. Bernhard Moltmann, et al. (Frankfurt: Haag and Herchen, 1993), 147, quoted in Fox, Stated Memory, 4. There were, however, many forms of Jewish “identity” in the GDR. Ute Frevert has provided a nuanced exploration of some of the identity issues related to leading Jewish communists in the GDR. See her article “Jewish Hearts and Minds? Feelings of Belonging and Political Choices among East German Intellectuals,” Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 56 (2011): 353–84. The economic historian Jürgen Kuczynski (like Hermann Axen and Albert Norden) embraced a form of “red assimilation,” which meant not disavowing a Jewish background but denying its significance. Kuczynski, Frevert writes, considered his connection to Judaism as “purely accidental.” By contrast “identification with the Party and the communist movement came as a matter of course” (365). He never “believed in, or experienced, a common Jewish nationality or identity.” By contrast, the economist Hans Mottek, a committed communist who refused to visit his sister in Israel, nevertheless quietly acknowledged his Jewish background/identity and insisted on being buried in the Jewish cemetery in Weißensee. Another version of Jewish/communist identity in the GDR is exemplified by Lin Jaldati, an assimilated Dutch Jewish communist, and a survivor of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen who was known as a singer of Yiddish folk songs of the workers’ movement and the antifascist resistance. Since her version of Jewish culture prioritized antifascism, it was promoted by the East German government. See David Shneer, “Yiddish Music and East German Antifascism: Lin Jaldati, Post-Holocaust Jewish Culture and the Cold War,” Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 60, no. 1 (2015): 207–34. On the concept of “red assimilation,” see Karin Hartewig, “Die Loyalitätsfalle—Jüdische Kommunisten in der DDR, 1949–1960,” in Zwischen Politik und Kultur: Juden in der DDR, ed. Moshe Zuckermann (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2002), 48–62.
Benjamin Lapp

publish works on the history of the Holocaust and the history of Germany’s Jewish minority. He did this despite resistance from the academic establishment and from ruling elites.9

Eschwege’s research on Jewish history and the Holocaust dated back to the mid-1950s when there was little historical research on these topics in the GDR. He published a path-breaking collection of documents detailing the Final Solution, *Kennzeichen J: Bilder, Dokumente, Berichte zur Geschichte der Verbrechen des Hitlerfaschismus an den deutschen Juden 1933–1945* in 1966. He followed this with *Die Synagoge in der deutschen Geschichte* in 1980 after long delays, having originally completed the manuscript in 1967. According to the historian Peter Honigmann, it was a much sought after and difficult book to obtain in the German Democratic Republic.10 His influential book on German-Jewish resistance (co-written with Konrad Kwiet) was published in West Germany in 1984, although Eschwege had already published in the West on this topic as early as 1970.11 Other works such as a history of the Yiddish language and a history of Jews in the former territories of the German Democratic Republic remained unpublished, but are tributes to Eschwege’s dogged commitment to the study of German-Jewish history.12

The productivity and quality of Eschwege’s work are all the more impressive given his lack of a university education and the difficulties involved in obtaining access to archives in the GDR. He was never employed as a historian.13

---


10 Honigmann writes that he and his future wife, the writer Barbara Honigmann, were only able to obtain the book with great difficulty, using all their “connections.” Correspondence with Peter Honigmann, August 16, 2017.


12 Eschwege’s unpublished manuscripts are available at the Eschwege Nachlass (NL Eschwege) held by the Zentralarchiv zur Erforschung der Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland (Central Archive for the Research of Jewish History in Germany) at the University of Heidelberg (hereafter, Zentralarchiv). The titles are as follows: *Geschichte der jüdischen Friedhöfe auf dem Gebiet der ehemaligen DDR (B 2/11, n. 222)*; *Die Geschichte der jüdischen Gemeinde in der DDR (B 2/11, n. 592–303)*; *Geschichte der Juden in den Ländern und Staaten der ehemaligen DDR (B 2/11, n. 92–123, 189–97)*.

13 According to his own account, Eschwege worked in Berlin from 1948–52, developing a historical archive of
Beyond his prodigious scholarship, Eschwege was also a public figure in the GDR and beyond, introducing non-Jews to Jewish history and furthering dialogue between Christians and Jews particularly in the East German group Begegnung mit dem Judentum (Encounters with Judaism). He was recognized for his activism in the West, receiving in 1984, along with the Leipzig pastor Theodor Arndt, the prestigious Buber-Rosenzweig medal for Christian-Jewish cooperation. Clearly, Eschwege’s work and activity resonated in the GDR and spoke to a desire among at least some East Germans to learn more about Jewish life and the Holocaust.

Eschwege’s path to becoming a Jewish historian and activist was a response to the historical crises that shaped his fate. At the center of his development lay his own struggles with Jewish identity. Born in 1913 in Hannover, he grew up in an observant household; his family moved to Hamburg so that he could attend an orthodox Jewish day school. Eschwege never attended University; after completing his Realschule diploma, he completed a training in business (kaufmännische Ausbildung) in 1931 and his journeyman training in 1929–1933.

In the volatile atmosphere of the Weimar Republic, however, the young Eschwege became more drawn to left-wing politics than to Judaism. In 1929, he secretly joined the youth organization of the Social Democratic Party, rejecting the religiosity of his family home. “Among the reasons that led me to the SPD was the orthodox background of my family which I found deeply alienating,” he wrote in his autobiography in 1991. Beyond the adolescent revolt against parental authority, Eschwege was also provoked by the political violence of the early 1930s. He fought in street brawls with right-wing political youth, and he also came to identify with Marxism and Social Democracy.

---

16 Helmut Eschwege, Fremd unter meinesgleichen: Erinnerungen eines Dresdner Juden (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 1991), 12–16. His autobiography is the primary source for Eschwege’s story before his arrival in East Germany in 1947.
17 Eschwege, Fremd unter meinesgleichen, 18.
Despite his alienation from the Judaism of his parents, Eschwege nevertheless remembered his political activism in very Jewish terms. In a letter to the East German Jewish (but highly assimilated) writer Stephan Hermlin, Eschwege described his youth in the following terms: “In contrast to your family, I grew up in a religiously observant family, I attended a Jewish school and my friends were with few exceptions Jewish; this was also true when I joined the Social Democratic Party.” Young Jewish communists and socialists interacted primarily, he remembered, with other Jewish youth organizations, including Zionist ones.  

In June 1934, with the help of the left-wing Zionist group Hashomer Hatzair, Eschwege fled to Denmark where he joined an agricultural collective that focused on immigration to Palestine. Eschwege, however, quickly fell out with the Zionists because of his increasingly pro-Soviet orientation, soon departing Denmark with the goal of travelling to the Soviet Jewish colony of Birobidzhan. Eschwege found that the border to the Soviet Union was closed and ended up spending several years in Estonia, where he was exposed to a Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jewish world, and began learning the Yiddish language, reinforcing his view that the Jews were a “national group” as opposed to simply a religious one. While the Jews he met in Estonia were quite secular, “they were culturally and socially bound to Jewish culture and defined themselves as part of the Jewish nation.” In 1937, he left Estonia for Palestine. His siblings were already there, and he was able to arrange a visa for his mother as well. However, his time in Palestine was clearly difficult for Eschwege. In 1937, Eschwege’s allegiances lay with Moscow and not with the Zionist movement. In his memoirs, Eschwege spoke of the profound hostility that existed between the Zionists and the communists, and he was expelled from a series of Kibbutzim because of his political activities. A major reason for his commitment to communism, he writes, was his revulsion for “the hate of the Zionists towards the Palestinians.” Eschwege was, however, drawn to the largely German Jewish group Brit Shalom, which called for a binational state and reconciliation with the Palestinian

18 Helmut Eschwege to Stephan Hermlin, July 17, 1982, NL Eschwege, Zentralarchiv, B.2/11 11.4: Opfer der antisraelischen Hetze.
19 Eschwege, Fremd unter meinesgleichen, 31.
Arabs; it was through Brit Shalom that he became friends with the writer Arnold Zweig. But, Eschwege complained, the more mainstream Zionists did not understand that they were “driving the Arabs into a struggle for their own national existence.” In contrast to the Zionists, he writes, the communists “stood up for human rights.”

Encouraged by the Soviets to join the British army, Eschwege served in a non-military capacity for health reasons. After the war, Eschwege made every attempt to return to Germany, where he hoped to participate in the construction of a socialist society. Managing to get a visa to Czechoslovakia, he took the opportunity to leave Palestine with no regrets: “It was not difficult for me to leave this land. . . . The communists, like all citizens who opposed Zionist chauvinism, had a very difficult time there.” Marked by the struggle against Nazism and his own critical perspective on Zionism, Eschwege’s loyalties were to the internationalist left rather than to Jewish nationalism.

Eschwege was not a Zionist, but how did he identify himself: as a Jew, as a German, or as a German Jew? His own identity seems to have shifted according to context. After having fled Germany, Eschwege remembered that, in Estonian exile, he was seen by others as, above all, a Jew. “To present myself as German would have made me a laughing stock.” The same reinforcement of a Jewish national identity came in Palestine, not so much from the Zionists but from the Soviets. Eschwege described how in 1942 when he attempted to enlist in the Soviet army, he was told by the officer in charge that according to Soviet law, he was of Jewish nationality. A similar dynamic occurred in 1946 upon entering the Soviet Zone of Germany; the Soviet official insisted that Eschwege was a Jew.

However, it was only in the GDR, Eschwege complained, that he was forced to accept German nationality under pressure. It would not have been possible in either West or East Germany to declare oneself of “Jewish nationality.” But, at least in retrospect, Eschwege subjectively identified with a Jewish national identity even as he declared his intention to live and work in Germany, because

23 Eschwege, Fremd unter meinesgleichen, 48.
24 Eschwege, Fremd unter meinesgleichen, 48.
26 Eschwege recounts lengthy conversations with representatives of the SED in Saxony in which his claims to Jewish nationality were discussed: “The fourth discussion unnerved me to such an extent that I signed a form acknowledging my German nationality.” Eschwege, Fremd unter meinesgleichen, 66.
he was a German. For Eschwege, there was apparently no contradiction. When he was interrogated by the officials of the Stasi in 1953, they reported that Eschwege, when asked why he returned to Germany, replied that he did so because he was a German. Why, then did he enter the Jewish community despite being a non-believer? Because, Eschwege responded, he was a Jew.\(^{27}\)

Eschwege’s sense of Jewish identity was strengthened and reinforced by his awareness of Nazi genocide. According to his own account, this realization only occurred after the war’s end and his departure from Palestine. He received a visa to go to Czechoslovakia where he stayed with the writer Egon Erwin Kisch. He wrote that it was in Czechoslovakia that he realized the full extent of Nazi crimes against the Jews, and the degree to which the German population had been “Nazified.” It was in Prague, he wrote, “that I fully understood what criminals had ruled in Germany and to what an extent a large part of the population had participated willingly in the genocidal fanaticism that was directed above all against my people.”\(^{28}\) When he was given permission to return to Germany and settled in Dresden, this impression of mass complicity in German criminality was reinforced. “In Dresden,” he remembered in a 1983 interview, “I realized that the Germans, too, were all more or less influenced by the Nazis, even those who had been in concentration camps and in the punitive battalions in the military.”\(^{29}\) He made every effort to join the small Jewish community, despite the fact that the head of the community initially refused to accept him because of his secular orientation. Later, when asked in a Stasi interrogation why he chose to declare a religious affiliation, Eschwege responded that he felt “solidarity” with the few remaining Jews and that he belonged with them.\(^{30}\)

In Germany, Eschwege developed a close relationship with Paul Merker, a veteran communist and member of the Politburo of the SED. During his time in exile in Mexico (1942–45) Merker, along with other communists such as Leo Zuckermann, Rudolf Feistmann, Leo and Otto Katz, had argued in favor of German restitution to the Jews and for the Zionist movement. Historian Jeffrey Herf has demonstrated that the positions of Merker and his colleagues were intensively debated

\(^{27}\) Behörde des Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (hereafter, BStU), Personalakte Eschwege, Report of May 6, 1953, 448/58.

\(^{28}\) Eschwege, *Fremd unter meinesgleichen*, 51.


within the SED through early 1949 until the Soviet-inspired campaign against “cosmopolitanism” aimed largely at communists who had found refuge from Nazism in the West shut such discussions down. Eschwege was clearly drawn to Merker’s position that the Soviet Union and East Germany should acknowledge the Jewish catastrophe and attempt to address the needs of the survivors. When asked by Merker for his thoughts on German postwar policy, Eschwege recommended that a postwar German government issue the following statement:

The German people hope that they will regain the trust of the Jews in the future. They hope to bring this about as a result of their future leadership and its actions. The German people recognize their guilt toward the Jews, which stems from their active or passive participation by an overwhelming majority in the Hitler system. Through the most far-reaching restitution of the economic and physical damage to the few surviving Jews and Jewish communities, it seeks to remove a part of its guilt.

Eschwege went on to recommend that the German Jews who remained abroad should also receive restitution, that Nazis should be purged from all political positions, and that Jews should be recognized as a national minority, “in view of the developments since 1933.” “The German people,” Eschwege declared, “do not regard these measures as a replacement for the extermination of Jewish life but rather as an important part of justice.” Eschwege’s recommendations, writes Herf, captured the hopes of some communists “that a postwar government would unambiguously accept obligations created by Nazi anti-Jewish persecution.” They also reflect his own identification with a Jewish nation, or ethnicity, despite his distance from Zionism.

Eschwege and Merker’s hopes that such guidelines would help shape postwar communist policy were not to be realized. As the scholarship has made clear, the onset of the Cold War and the creation of the State of Israel led to a decisive rejection of Merker’s (and Eschwege’s) perspectives on Jewish issues.

---

33 Herf, Divided Memory, 86.
34 Herf, Divided Memory, 86.
35 See, for instance, Mario Keßler, Die SED und die Juden: Zwischen Repression und Toleranz; Politische Entwicklungen bis 1967 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995); Erica Burgauer, Zwischen Erinnerung und Verdrän-
nists in Czechoslovakia, eleven of whom were Jewish were charged with treason, the subsequent anti-Zionist campaign and the Moscow Doctor’s Plot preceding Stalin’s death in 1953 were all aspects of a Soviet directed antisemitic policy.

Following Moscow’s lead, the SED launched a campaign against Jewish communists—particularly those who had found refuge in the West during World War II—who were accused of “chauvinism and cosmopolitanism” and of being allied with American and Israeli imperialism. Paul Merker, while not a Jew, was subjected to interrogations and imprisoned because of his advocacy for Jewish restitution and his sympathy for Zionism and sentenced to eight years in prison for “Zionist” espionage. Many other leading Jewish communists were purged from the Party, and as a direct consequence the small Jewish communities were decimated as East German Jews, including most of the leaders of the Jewish communities, fled to the West. The population of Jews in East Germany fell from 3,800 in 1949 to 1,900 in 1956.

Unlike Merker and others, Eschwege was not imprisoned; he was however interrogated repeatedly and briefly expelled from the SED. Despite his membership in the Communist Party during his time in Palestine, Eschwege lost his status as a “resistance fighter” and became simply a “victim of fascism.” Victims of fascism—a category which included Jews—was seen as a lesser category than “resistance fighters” who were awarded more generous benefits and privileges. He also lost his job at the Museum of German History in Berlin at the prompting of its director Dr. Alfred Meusel. Eschwege’s Stasi files reveal the enor-

---


38 Letter from Meusel to the Technische Hochschule Dresden, Personalakte Eschwege, Personalabteilung of April 23, 1953, BStU 000043.
mous pressure that Eschwege was under from the Party to withdraw from the Jewish community (as a condition for remaining in the Party). A Stasi report on an interrogation of Eschwege reflects that pressure: Eschwege was told, the report stated, that the Jewish community “with its overwhelmingly petit-bourgeois social makeup, was a stronghold of the class enemy” and that Eschwege must distance himself from it:

Regarding his continued membership in the Jewish Community, Eschwege declared that he would leave it, if commanded to do so by the Party. Eschwege was told that his membership was brought about by his Jewish nationalism. While the Party tolerates religious superstition in its ranks, that was not the case with Eschwege.39

It was not superstitious religious belief but only his Jewish nationalism, the report pointed out disapprovingly, that led Eschwege to remain in the Jewish community. Eschwege was encouraged to study the Marxist classics on the “Jewish question” and to abandon his mistaken notion that the Jews could be considered a national minority in Germany. As a consequence of the interrogation, Eschwege withdrew from the Jewish Community in 1953.

The personal toll was considerable. According to his own account, he suffered a nervous breakdown and his marriage fell apart when his wife, a loyal communist, left him.40 In 1956, during the post-Stalinist thaw, however, Eschwege rejoined the Jewish community and expressed shame at his previous decision to withdraw. He was, he wrote, influenced by the defamation and persecutions that he had suffered. Unlike those communists of Jewish background who rejected Jewish affiliation, however, Eschwege insisted on embracing his Jewish identity. “I know,” he wrote, “that there are many comrades who see themselves as assimilated, and there are many who are scared of the repercussions . . . if they acknowledge their Jewish identity. I am proud of my nationality and my people and . . . experience it as a disgrace to have followed the dictates of the special commission.”41

The most disturbing features of Stalinist antisemitism—accusations of treachery and “cosmopolitanism,” removal from important positions in the

40 Eschwege, *Fremd unter meinesgleichen*, 78.
Party apparatus for communists of Jewish descent, interrogations and in some cases imprisonment—ended following the death of Stalin. Jewish communists who had been purged were rehabilitated. Indeed, the East German Jews became a protected minority.\(^{42}\) The tiny Jewish communities were instrumentalized by the state as “exhibits in a socialist museum,” receiving aid to care for cemeteries and synagogues and called upon when needed to demonstrate to the world that antisemitism did not exist. Even as the persecution and murder of Jews in the Third Reich was not highlighted in the historical literature or in the concentration camp memorials, East German propaganda regularly denounced incidents of antisemitism in West Germany, and the Nazi past of West German government officials.\(^{43}\) At the same time, the dogmatic anti-Zionism of the SED and the unwillingness to acknowledge the uniqueness of the Holocaust continued well into the 1980s. The East German leadership certainly acknowledged the Jews as victims, but it was the communists who were the main victims of Nazis, since they were persecuted as resistance fighters whereas the Jews were “merely” victims, according to the official narrative.\(^{44}\)

The memory of late Stalinist antisemitism and its impact on the GDR deeply affected Eschwege. Thirty-five years later, Eschwege suggested that his traumatic experiences of persecution and marginalization during this period played a central role in determining his later choices: “It was through this experience,” he declared, “that I began to get interested in Jewish history. I said to myself: ‘Write, study Jewish history, show them what the Nazis did and they can see it’s the same thing.’”\(^{45}\) In his focus on Jewish history and in his insistence on the loud proclamation of a specifically Jewish identity, Eschwege sharply distin-

\(^{42}\) As pointed out by Constantin Goschler and Anthony Kauders, “The state controlled by the SED viewed itself as the guarantor of Jewish security, thereby drawing a clear line between it and the Federal Republic which was demonized as a haven for former Nazis and neo-Nazis.” Goschler and Kauders, “The Jews in German Society,” in *A History of Jews in Germany since 1945: Politics, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michael Brenner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 339.

\(^{43}\) Mike Dennis, “Between Torah and Sickle: Jews in East Germany, 1945–1990,” in *State and Minorities in Communist East Germany*, ed. Mike Dennis and Norman Laporte (New York: Berghahn, 2011), 37. At the Jewish cemetery in Weißensee, the monument quoted the East Berlin Rabbi Martin Riesenburger’s assertion that “in our state the torch of antisemitism has gone out forever and religion is free.” By contrast “The West German state of imperialists and militarists is the boiling point for a new war in Europe and hence the breeding ground for revanche and racial persecution.” Quoted in Fox, *Stated Memory*, 56.

\(^{44}\) “The Holocaust, a story of unmitigated disaster did not fit into the story of victory and redemption of official antifascism. . . it was the narrative of Soviet suffering and redemption that dominated Communist memory after 1945.” Herf, *Divided Memory*, 382. On the issue of East Germany’s troubled relationship with Israel, see Jeffrey Herf, *Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West German Far Left, 1967–1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

guished himself from other communists of Jewish background with their strongly assimilationist orientation. He rejected the dominant narrative that denied the specificity of the German-Jewish experience in favor of the particularism of a “stubborn Jewish otherness” even as he continued to embrace socialism and live in the German Democratic Republic.46

Eschwege’s insistence on his Jewish identity inspired his commitment to scholarship, which can be viewed in part as an attempt to ground and defend that identity on historical grounds. It was a project, however, that involved overcoming considerable obstacles. The difficulties he faced as a scholar were considerable. Firstly, he had never attended university and was an autodidact. In his autobiography he described his struggles with writing: “Upon returning from work, I sat at my desk for six or seven hours.... My lack of a formal education was a problem. It began with the formulation of sentences which gave me headaches.”47 Furthermore, Eschwege had no institutional support in the GDR; he pursued his research and writing in his free time.48 He was frequently denied access to archives in the East and so was dependent on copies and historical literature sent to him from contacts in Western countries, which were often either delayed or rejected by East German postal authorities.

Eschwege wrote a letter of complaint to the department of sciences of the Central Committee in which he described the state archives of the GDR as a “hindrance” to research. In response, Helmut Lötzke, the director of the German Central archive, the main archival institution in the GDR, simply denied Eschwege access without further explanation.49 The “Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden” held in Potsdam was off limits to researchers both from the GDR and abroad, a policy which only changed in 1989.50 Documents relating

46 The phrase is borrowed from Herf, Divided Memory, 95. Herf is suggesting that an emphasis on a positive Jewish identity did not fit into the strongly anti-religious and assimilationist orientation of the SED.
47 Eschwege, Fremd unter meinesgleichen, 188–89.
48 After his dismissal from his position in Berlin, Eschwege worked as an archivist at the Technical University in Dresden.
50 This archive was created in 1906 and contained the archival holdings of German-Jewish communities, personal papers, records of associations including such significant ones as the Reich Association of German Jews, and the Jewish community of Berlin, extensive collections of personal papers of German Jews. In 1945, the Red Army took it over. In 1950, it was given to the Jewish Communities of the GDR and held at the Jewish community center in East Berlin. In 1953, the Central State Archive in Potsdam took the archive over. See Käppner, Erstarrte Geschichte, 209–10.
Benjamin Lapp

to Jews and Jewish history as well as to Nazi persecution of Jews were difficult to gain access to even for “approved” East German scholars. Nevertheless, Eschwege was able to gain access to material with the help of libraries (and librarians) in Dresden and in West Germany, as well as from scholars in Poland and Israel.51

Thus, overcoming considerable difficulties, Eschwege was able to produce significant scholarly work through his extraordinary persistence. Eschwege’s first major project, begun in the mid-1950s but only published in 1966 (long after its completion) was *Kennzeichen J*, an anthology of documents edited by Eschwege that chronicled the Nazi persecution and extermination of the Jews.52

With a brief preface by Arnold Zweig and a historical introduction by Rudi Goguel, a concentration camp survivor and scholar based at Humboldt University in Berlin, it was the first volume in the GDR for a wider audience that dealt with the Holocaust in a substantive way.

Eschwege’s collection was indeed an extraordinary achievement, given the academic and historiographic silence in the GDR concerning the Nazi genocide up to that point.53 As Joachim Käppner points out, in the wake of the Eichmann trial in Israel, and the increased international attention devoted to Nazi genocide, the GDR felt a good deal of pressure to publish a text on this subject.54

51 In 1957, Eschwege had arranged for the return of the entire holdings of the library of the Hamburg Jewish community, which had been moved to Dresden during the war. Thus, he developed good relations with the university and academic libraries there. See Miriam Rürup, “Wessen Erbe? Deutsch-Jüdische Geschichtsschreibung nach 1945—das Hamburger Beispiel,” *Kalymnos* 19, no. 4 (2016): 4–6. He also received support from the historian of the Holocaust and director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Bernard Mark and Eschwege’s cousin, also a significant historian of the Holocaust, Shaul Esh. Eschwege, *Fremd unter meinesgleichen*, 191–96.


53 There were less significant contributions written in the late 1940s that dealt with the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Siegbert Kahn wrote a pamphlet in 1948, *Antisemitismus und Rassenhetze*, which discusses the history of antisemitism and its culmination in the Holocaust, and in the same year Stefan Heymann published *Marxismus und Rassenfrage*. Both authors presented a “differentiated view of antisemitism which they regarded as a basic component of Nazi ideology.” See Fox, *Stated Memory*, 21. Also see Käppner, *Erstarnte Geschichte*, 52–53. In 1948, the debates among East German communists concerning the “Jewish Question” had not yet been shut down. Furthermore, in contrast to historical scholarship, there were memoirs, films, and literary representations of the Holocaust. See Fox, “Berlin, Moscow and the Imagined Jerusalem: The Holocaust in East German Literature and Film,” in *Stated Memory*, 97–144. For the history of Holocaust writing in the Federal Republic, see Ulrich Herbert, “Extermination Policy: New Answers and Questions about the History of the ‘Holocaust’ in German Historiography,” in *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies*, ed. Ulrich Herbert (Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), 1–52.

54 Käppner, *Erstarnte Geschichte*, 144–45.
Still, there were limits on what could be said. While the volume was published, Eschwege’s lengthy historical analysis, which was meant to accompany the document collection, never saw the light of day despite the initial interest of a publisher. Eschwege’s text, entitled Der Leidensweg der deutschen Juden, is a thorough reading of secondary sources and published survivor accounts. While Eschwege placed his narrative in an SED approved framework, highlighting the leading role of the Communist Party in the resistance, the manuscript itself far transcended the limitations of GDR Holocaust historiography inasmuch as it emphasized the experience of Jewish victims and drew on their narratives. In that sense, Eschwege’s work foreshadowed more contemporary Holocaust scholarship.55

Eschwege had support from some of his reviewers, notably Stefan Heymann and Rudi Goguel. Nevertheless, Eschwege’s book in its presentation of Jewish history and the role of genocide in the Nazi dictatorship, violated basic tenets of GDR dogma.56 Thus, Stefan Heymann—like Goguel, a survivor of the concentration camps and a leading East German diplomat—advocated for the publication of the manuscript, while simultaneously criticizing its lack of understanding of the foundation of Nazi policies towards the Jews in monopoly capitalism. Eschwege, he wrote “comes to a false conclusion whereby the monopolies tolerated the crimes, racial hatred, and concentration camps of the Nazis. No, the monopolies did not ‘tolerate’ such things, they were, rather, an integral part of the ruling system of monopoly capitalism.”57

Furthermore, Heymann suggested, Eschwege needed to do more to emphasize the ongoing problems of antisemitism and Nazism in the Federal Republic in contrast to the German Democratic Republic, a society that represented

55 See Saul Friedländer, Nazi Germany and the Jews, vol. 1, The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939 (New York: Harper-Collins, 1997) and Nazi Germany and the Jews, vol. 2, The Years of Extermination, 1939–1945 (New York: Harper-Collins 2007). Christopher Browning’s path breaking study Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp (New York: Norton, 2010) is based largely on the oral testimony of Jewish survivors. The emphasis on Jewish experience and testimony had, however, no place in East—or West—German historiography of the 1950s. Eschwege was, however, in contact with Bernard Mark, director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw whose own work also placed the experience of Jews in the foreground of the Holocaust. The institute collected approximately 10,000 survivor accounts which allowed the Holocaust research conducted there to incorporate a Jewish perspective into the analysis. Thanks to Stephan Stach for this insight.

56 See Käppner, Erstarrte Geschichte, 143–45. Käppner bases this judgement on the evaluation of the East German readers. He did not, however, have access to the manuscript itself which is now held by the Zentralarchiv.

“freedom, democracy, and socialism, in which racial hate and antisemitism no longer existed because the basis for them [capitalism and imperialism] had forever been removed.” Nevertheless, Heymann, even while pointing out Eschwege’s deviations from East German ideological orthodoxies, acknowledged Eschwege’s achievement in addressing an enormous gap in East German historiography and supported the book’s publication. Likewise, Rudi Goguel wrote that, despite his reservations about aspects of the manuscript, “we must acknowledge the author’s achievement” because after 20 years, the absolute absence of any scholarly discussion of the Nazi policies towards the Jews could not be politically defended. “The fact,” he wrote, “that up till now there has been no scholarly representation of the destruction of the Jews by the Nazi regime in the scholarship of the GDR is shameful.”

While the more sympathetic reviewers of Eschwege’s work acknowledged the striking neglect of the theme in GDR historiography, even while simultaneously criticizing his deviations from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, more negative evaluations provided a basis for the ultimate rejection of Eschwege’s text. Henry Görschler, an East German sociologist who had written on antisemitism, argued against its publication because of Eschwege’s unorthodox approach: Eschwege was, wrote Görschler, “entirely unfamiliar” with the state and conclusions of the GDR historiography, particularly in his understanding of the Jewish question. The basic assumptions underlying Eschwege’s analysis were false: “A Jewish nation” wrote Görschler, does not exist. “The Jewish question is above all a question of class: what is a Jewish comrade,” he asked rhetorically, “either a comrade or a Jew?”

While the fate of the Jews under the Nazi regime served as proof of fascist barbarism, there was no Jewish question per se; the Jewish bourgeoisie was ultimately on the side of the class enemy, and its politics was a reflection of its class standing. Indeed, inasmuch as the Jewish bourgeoisie did not side with the KPD, it was on the wrong side of history. Eschwege’s lengthy discussion of organized Jewish reactions to persecution and the destruction of the German-Jewish heritage by the National Socialists reflected for Görschler a Zionist agenda predicated on the false (Zionist) conception of a Jewish “people.” Eschwege, Görschler complained, used exclusively bourgeois and Zionist sources (by which he meant historical works written in Israel and the West, as well as

the published accounts of Jewish survivors who were not communists). Eschwege’s sources (accounts of Jewish survivors) were dictated entirely by “feeling” and avoided a systematic Marxist-Leninist analysis. Eschwege’s discussion of German-Jewish contributions to German culture—with its implication of a cultural/ethnic German-Jewish identity that was not simply rooted in religion—reflected a “Zionist bias.” Indeed, he criticized Eschwege for not attacking the state of Israel, which according to Görschler was an imperialist state and a vassal of American capitalism. Another negative appraisal of Eschwege’s manuscript that recommended against publication came from Heinz Kamnitzer, one of the founding members of the important East German historical journal, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*. A book that placed such emphasis on the Jewish victims of Nazism and that saw European and German Jews as having characteristics that could not be reduced to religious affiliation had no place in East German historiography. Indeed, even those who unsuccessfully advocated for Eschwege were ideologically opposed to the assumptions that underlie his work, particularly in regard to the existence of a Jewish nation. It was the dogma of German communism, wrote Eschwege in his memoir, that caused these scholars to reject the very notion of a Jewish nation. For Goguel and his colleagues, Jews were to be defined as a religious group, and there was thus an irreconcilable contradiction between Jewish identity and membership in the socialist or communist parties. For Eschwege, by contrast, there was no such contradiction.

Similar difficulties underlie the East German reception of Eschwege’s work on German-Jewish resistance. Eschwege had begun gathering material on this theme since 1965. The view that the European and German Jews had simply been passive victims of fascism was, Eschwege felt, fundamentally wrong. Eschwege had himself suffered from this wholesale categorization of Jewish experience. As mentioned previously, Eschwege had lost his status as a “fighter against fascism” during the period of late-Stalinist antisemitism and was demoted to the status of a “victim of fascism,” which entailed considerably fewer benefits. Academic discussions of German-Jewish resistance were, complained

59 “No word,” wrote Görschler, “concerning the politics of the state Israel, the destructive role that Israel plays as the vassal of the USA in the fight against the progressive liberation movements in the middle east. . . . Why not?” Henry Görschler, “Gutachten zum Manuskript,” July 24, 1962, NL Eschwege, Zentralarchiv, B.2/11, nr. 13.
60 Käppner, *Erstarre Geschichte*, 156.
Eschwege, “excluded.” There was, he wrote, “resistance” against the resistance of the Jews.62 When he asked the old communist (and Jew) Bruno Baum for the names of Jewish resistance fighters in Germany, Baum refused, writing to Eschwege that the resistance fighters he was familiar with were communists and could not be considered Jewish resistance fighters. It was this “typical perspective of an SED functionary” that Eschwege set out to revise, to bring to light a history that was thoroughly marginalized.63 After examining the Nazi documentation in municipal archives that was available to him in the GDR and conducting extensive interviews with individuals who had been active in the resistance in East Germany, Eschwege completed a manuscript, Der Widerstand deutscher Juden gegen das Naziregime, 1933–1945 (The resistance of German Jews to the Nazi regime, 1933–1945).

Eschwege submitted the manuscript to two publishers in the GDR and received rejections.64 In 1969, Arnold Paucker, director of the London branch of the Leo Baeck Institute, encouraged him to publish the article in the Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook. Much to the irritation of the East German authorities, the intent of the article was to correct the notion that German Jews had been entirely passive victims.65 By no means did Eschwege glorify Jewish behavior: given the degree of Nazi repression of the Jewish community, most Jews “were incapable of offering any appreciable resistance.”66 Jews were by no means a homogeneous group, however, “wherever there was the slightest chance of doing so, Jews did offer resistance. . . . They fought on every front of the struggle against German fascism, in numbers vastly out of proportion to the relative size of the Jewish population.” Eschwege’s article emphasized the high proportion of Jews in the antifascist organizations of the left, the heightened risks that Jewish resistance members faced, and the “draconian penalties which hit the Jews far harder than their non-Jewish comrades.”67 Much of the article focused on the Baum group, a youth group led by young communists known for organizing an arson

62 Käppner, Erstarrte Geschichte, 185.
63 Eschwege, Freund unter meinesgleichen, 230.
65 Eschwege’s relationship with the Leo Baeck Institute and his work on German-Jewish resistance was one of the reasons for the launching of an investigation against Eschwege in the early 1980s. The work of the Institute, reported the Stasi, “highlights the ‘special role’ that Judaism played in German history and as such provides a justification for Zionism and the State of Israel. With that comes . . . a defamation of the Marxist-Leninist historical perspective and the politics of the Socialist states.” See BStU 222/84, Bl.761, Zionist 00206, n.d.
66 Eschwege, “Resistance of German Jews.”
attack on an anti-Soviet exhibition prepared by Joseph Goebbels at the Berlin Lustgarten. Following the attack, most of the members of the group were arrested; twenty were sentenced to death. East Germans had glorified the group’s memory without, Eschwege pointed out, “allowing for the specific situation of that isolated Jewish resistance movement and ... without attention to the distinctive tragic element which accompanied it from the beginning to its very last minutes.” That is, the official GDR narrative glossed over the fact that the Baum group was made up of Jews, some of whom were Zionists and all of whom were terribly isolated within German society because of their Jewishness.68

Eschwege’s important study, co-written with Konrad Kwiet of the University of Sydney, Selbstbehauptung und Widerstand: Deutsche Juden im Kampf um Existenz und Menschenwürde, 1933–1945 (Hamburg, 1984) represented a huge step forward in the study of German-Jewish resistance. Kwiet, who had come into contact with Eschwege through Arnold Paucker of the Leo Baeck Institute, had access to archives in the West that Eschwege was not allowed to visit. Their close cooperation allowed the study to extend beyond the parameters of Eschwege’s earlier manuscript (which focused on the workers’ movement) to include the attempts of middle-class Jewish organizations to preserve Jewish life and aid with the emigration of Jews before the war.69 Furthermore, the authors greatly expanded the notion of what could be considered resistance, moving beyond the more limited notion of resistance only as armed resistance to include other forms of Jewish agency and self-assertion. While they examined many forms of resistance such as the uprisings in the ghettos and concentration camps, they included forms of passive resistance, the organization of emigration, flight, hiding and (most controversially) suicide, all seen as various forms of protest or resistance to the Nazi genocide.70

The book, of course, challenged the monopoly communists held over the history of the antifascist resistance movement and as such could not be published in the GDR. After the book was published in West Germany in 1984, the East German historian of the communist resistance, Margot Pikarski described the

69 Kwiet and Eschwege, Selbstbehauptung und Widerstand, 141–216.
70 Just as Eschwege’s work on the Holocaust and his incorporation of the testimony of Jewish victims into his narrative foreshadowed more recent approaches to the Holocaust, so too did Kwiet and Eschwege’s work presage broader definitions of Jewish resistance associated with historians like Yehuda Bauer and Marion Kaplan. See, for instance, Yehuda Bauer, Rethinking the Holocaust (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) and Marion Kaplan, Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
book as “anticommunist,” accusing Eschwege of falsifying history. In 1988, hoping that the times had changed with Perestroika and Glasnost and the newfound openness of the GDR to Jewish themes (as well as his own collaboration with the Staatssicherheit at this time), Eschwege submitted his book to the Militärverlag of the German Democratic Republic in the hope of publishing an East German edition. It was, Eschwege reported, rejected.

In 1991, shortly before his death in 1992, Eschwege published his memoir, _Fremd unter meinesgleichen: Erinnerungen eines Dresdner Juden_. Eschwege addressed his highly combative relationship to the East German state, his persecution as a Jew during the period of late Stalinist antisemitism, and his consequent attempt to defend Jewish life in East Germany. Individual chapters focus on his struggles with the dogmatic anti-Israel politics of the GDR, his critical relations to the leadership of the Jewish community in the GDR and in Dresden, and his cooperation with East German Christians in developing various forums for Jewish-Christian understanding. The memoir’s second half, entitled “Publications and Obstacles,” describes his experiences in each of his research projects and the hindrances placed in the way of his research by the state.

The book concludes with the collapse of East Germany and his own role as a founder of the newly formed SPD in Dresden. While the book is an invaluable source for the historian as well as a testament to Eschwege’s achievements, it also must be read somewhat critically. Throughout the memoir, Eschwege presents himself primarily as an adversary and victim of the East German state. It is arguable, however, that Eschwege’s relationship to the SED and to East Germany was more complex than he allows. Thus, Eschwege’s fight to retain his membership in the SED through the 1950s and 1960s as well as his decision to remain in East Germany despite contacts in Israel and West Germany suggest an ongoing identification with the East German social and political model. To be sure, this was not unusual among Jewish leftists in the 1950s and 1960s, given the prominence of ex-Nazis in West German public life. However, even in the 1970s and 1980s, his “loyalty to the GDR and his hope for a democratic socialism kept Eschwege in the country despite all of his personal and political conflicts.”

71 For a useful discussion of the East German objections to the book, see Käppner, _Erstarrte Geschichte_, 185–88.
72 Eschwege does not tell us what the reasons for the rejection were. Eschwege, _Fremd unter meinesgleichen_, 251.
73 Hartewig, _Zurückgekehrt_, 193.
Most controversially, while Eschwege discusses his “unusual” relationship with the state security services, his memoir is not entirely forthcoming on the formal aspects of that connection. The Stasi had persecuted him in the 1950s and in the early 1980s; because of his engagement in Christian-Jewish understanding projects and because of his extensive Western contacts, he was the subject of a criminal investigation, codename “Zionist.” However, he also was an unofficial accomplice (IM) of the Stasi between May 1956 and June 1958 and again between 1985 and 1989. In each case there seems to have been a quid pro quo. In the 1950s, he used his relationship to the Stasi to enable a trip to Israel to visit his family to see his elderly and ill mother. In return, he wrote detailed reports on his visit to Israel for the secret service.74 In the 1980s, following the conclusion of the criminal investigation, the Stasi approached him to inform on activities within the Jewish community and on his contacts with the West, even as they continued to observe him closely. Eschwege made it clear to his Stasi-handlers that he wanted to ensure his access to archives and the ability to conduct his research.75 There is no evidence within the Stasi files that Eschwege divulged any information that would be potentially harmful to individuals. Indeed, he seems to have used the Stasi as a conduit for expressing his (publicly stated) critique of GDR anti-Zionism, and his (publicly stated) critiques of the leadership of the Jewish community in the GDR. In the 1980s, the most important issue for Eschwege was that his ability to conduct research in the GDR for his work on the history of the Jews in the territories of East Germany be protected. However, the files suggest also that he hoped to exert some influence on policy regarding the themes closest to his heart: the dogmatic anti-Zionist position of the GDR, the public discussion of Nazi genocide, and Jewish history in the GDR generally.76

**Conclusion**

Eschwege’s return to East Germany from Palestine in 1946 clearly was related to his belief that the communists would create a better Germany. At the same

---

76 For an overview of Eschwege’s relationship to the security services, see in particular, Hartewig, Zurückgekehrt, 186–94; Käppner, Erstarrte Geschichte, 263–72; Stefan Meining, Kommunistische Judenpolitik: Die DDR, die Juden und Israel (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002), 205–10, 234–39. To be sure, even if Eschwege did his best to avoid “naming names” the Stasi did its best to pursue leads suggested by Eschwege’s reports. See Käppner, Erstarrte Geschichte, 271.