Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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Part Four

Media and Public Debate
Distrusting the Parks: Heinz Knobloch’s Journalism and the Memory of the Shoah in the GDR

“Distrust the parks.”¹ The first sentence of Heinz Knobloch’s book on the Jewish philosopher and writer Moses Mendelssohn sounds alarming, but it does nevertheless accurately encapsulate the author’s agenda. Describing a seemingly peaceful, insignificant lawn in the center of Berlin, Knobloch soon points to its history as the site of the city’s oldest Jewish cemetery. Despite being marked with a somewhat hidden memorial plaque, the site could easily be mistaken for an actual park. “Someone might not have known this,” he tags, “it is not his fault that the Jewish cemeteries of most small and medium-sized cities have vanished, leveled as storage areas, flattened as car parks or covered over with grass—distrust the parks.”²

Pointing to an example of what was obviously the eradicated Jewish life of Berlin, Knobloch turns to a special subject of the GDR’s memory of World War II, of the Shoah. The persecution and killing of European Jewry hardly featured prominently in state rhetoric or ritual. In the rare times that history came up in official discourse, it was usually to point to the perpetrators, famous Nazi leaders and high-ranking Western German officials and industrialists, or just impersonal categories like “the SS.” The failure of the GDR to accept responsibility for the Shoah among its own was particularly contradictory given that it was both a socialist state and a land of the perpetrators. Fascism, as it was defined by the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov, had been supposedly wiped out by eliminating its root—capitalism. Accordingly, the GDR denied responsibility for crimes committed by the Germans in World War II. Moreover, this question

² Knobloch, Herr Moses in Berlin, 9.
was considered to be wholly irrelevant as all “fascists” were allegedly either dead or residing in West Germany.³

Yet, there was discussion of the Shoah in the GDR, not by the government to be sure, but by writers, artists, intellectuals, and journalists. Though this view has long been rejected by academics, recent studies paint a different picture.⁴ This chapter argues that attempts to address the Shoah in the GDR were less prominent, quieter, and subtler than any official rhetoric, yet more appealing to an interested public. Oscillating atmospheres of imposed neglect of or deliberate emphasis on the Shoah as a subject of public discussion was due to the Party’s shifting propagandistic agenda. Those interested in talking about the Shoah in a more sincere and less propagandistic fashion made deliberate use of the Party’s campaigns to have their works included in the ongoing debate. Although these individuals usually struggled to be heard, they rarely had to fear censorship. After all, addressing Nazi crimes was part of the Party’s antifascist rhetoric. Yet, these individuals managed to convey their own interpretation of antifascism that included the otherwise often neglected Jewish perspective. This chapter discusses Heinz Knobloch as one example of this phenomenon.

Knobloch wrote three books on previously little-known or mostly forgotten individuals: Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), Rosa Luxemburg’s secretary Mathilde Jacob (1873–1943), and policeman Wilhelm Krützfeld (1880–1953). The first two books were published in 1979 and 1985, and thus subject to GDR censorship, while the last one was written in 1989 and published in 1990, without the oversight of a censor. This chapter interrogates how Knobloch navigated state censorship in writing about the Shoah, as he did in parts of all three of these books, by examining the content, language, and implications of his work as it related to the GDR’s state-sanctioned antifascist narrative of history that dictated how writers could discuss World War II, and by extent the Shoah. How did Knobloch deviate from this antifascist narrative and by what means?


How did he include the Shoah in books seemingly unrelated to the topic? How did Knobloch position himself and how did he address his readership? First, this chapter will analyze his books on Mendelssohn and Jacob. Second, it will trace both reactions to the books and the publishing process, asking what role his discussion of the Shoah played for the reading of the public and for the censors. Third, it will examine Knobloch’s views on antifascism in his book on Krützfeld. Finally, it will analyze Knobloch’s work in the context of Shoah memory in the GDR.

Heinz Knobloch

Born in Dresden in 1926, Heinz Knobloch moved to Berlin with his family in 1935. He was forced to join the Reich Labor Service (Reichsarbeitsdienst) in 1943, and later drafted into the Wehrmacht, only to desert the army in France in 1944.5 He was taken as a prisoner of war by the Americans and held in various POW camps in Tennessee and Scotland. He returned to Berlin in 1948 and trained as a journalist at the Berliner Zeitung.

Following the uprising of 1953, the East German Communist Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) decided to offer a slightly more diverse set of newspapers and journals in the hope of satisfying the public’s obvious need for less ideological forms of entertainment and information. From its first issue in late 1953, the Wochenpost (Weekly Post) emerged to become one of the GDR’s most popular weekly newspapers, gathering around 1.3 million subscribers, with an estimated 3–4 million readers a week.6 Knobloch worked at the Wochenpost from its establishment in 1953, writing his weekly column from 1968 onwards, advancing to become one of the paper’s most prominent and popular voices. In 1949, he joined the SED, leaving it in early 1990, “considerably too late,” as he later noted.7 However, his membership in the SED was hardly exceptional at the Wochenpost. The paper should not be seen as an opposition journal, but rather as a more diverse and multi-faceted newspaper.8

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5 Heinz Knobloch, Mit beiden Augen: Von Dresden nach Tennessee (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999), 196–201.
7 Heinz Knobloch, Mit beiden Augen: Mein Leben zwischen den Zeilen (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999), 35.
8 In this manner, the Wochenpost published articles about otherwise taboo topics, such as flight from the GDR or alcoholism. Reifarth and Reus, Lässt sich das drucken?, 13. Still, about 75 percent of the editors were members of the party, see Polkehn, Wochenpost, 63.