Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

Stach, Stephan, Hallama, Peter, Bohus, Kata

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Stach, Stephan, et al.

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“I clearly remember where this book, which was an integral part of my youth, was to be found in my parents’ library,” writes the historian and orientalist Hermann Simon about a collection of five accounts of Polish Jews on Nazi Occupation in 2009, which appeared under the title “Im Feuer vergangen” [Gone with the Fire]\(^1\) in the GDR in 1961 [sic] and achieved seven editions in only four years. These texts, translated from Polish, were available on virtually every bookshelf of our friends and acquaintances at that time. When I had to liquidate my parents’ library two years ago, one could clearly see the traces of regular use on the 18.5 by 12.5 centimeter small but 600 pages’ strong book.\(^2\)

Simon was the son of the philosopher and Judaist Heinrich Simon and the prominent philosopher Marie Jalowicz. The family belonged to the tiny Jewish community of East Berlin. Both parents were professors at Berlin’s Humboldt

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\(^1\) *Im Feuer vergangen: Tagebücher aus dem Ghetto*, with a foreword by Arnold Zweig (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1958).

University and part of the intellectual elite of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

The collection *Im Feuer vergangen* was an enormous success for its publisher Rütten & Loening, but also for the Jewish Historical Institute (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, JHI) in Warsaw, which had chosen the documents from its collection. Apart from Anne Frank’s diary, *Im Feuer vergangen* became the most prevalent non-fictional account on what was then called persecution or destruction of the Jews in East Germany and only later was referred to as the Holocaust.

For several reasons, this book gained enormous popularity between 1958 and 1962: The memoirs in the collection provided touching firsthand accounts on the horrors Polish Jews experienced in the ghettos and camps in German-occupied Poland. The foreword by the renowned German-Jewish writer Arnold Zweig contributed to its popularity. Its classification as antifascist literature promoted the book’s use for political education, while its descriptions of Nazi crimes made it useful for East German press campaigns highlighting the supposed ideological and personal continuities between Nazi Germany and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

In this article, I analyze how antifascist ideology and political propaganda interfered with an emerging Holocaust memory in the GDR of the late 1950s and 1960s. I place three books at the center of this analysis: Besides *Im Feuer vergangen*, Ber Mark’s *Der Aufstand im Warschauer Ghetto* (The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising) and the document compilation *Faschismus—Getto—Massenmord* (Fascism—ghetto—mass murder). Rather than the content of these books, I analyze how they were introduced to East German readers; received in the media; perceived in society; and used for educational projects, documentaries, and further artistic reflection on the Holocaust. I will show that the perception of these books, which publishers labeled as “antifascist literature” and reviews in East German Press presented as part of campaigns against Nazi criminals in West Germany, ultimately exceeded superficial propagandistic purposes. In fact, I argue, antifascism and the campaign against Nazi criminals in West Germany formed a discursive framework for East Germans to confront the Holocaust within the narrow boundaries of public debate in the GDR. The second important aspect of this case study is the transcultural movement of knowledge and memory of the Holocaust. All three books originate from the

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3 The German terms used were *Judenverfolgung* or *Judenvernichtung*.
“The Jewish Diaries . . . Undergo One Edition after the Other”

Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and first appeared in the GDR between 1957 and 1960. The article is based on archival materials from the Jewish Historical Institute, the East German Ministry of Culture, which was responsible for the authorization of book production, and the archives of the publishing houses Rütten & Loening and Karl Dietz Verlag. This article also draws on East German press reporting and journal articles.

The Jewish Historical Institute and Antifascist Literature in the GDR

The Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw was founded in 1947, during a period when Jews enjoyed a limited autonomy in postwar Poland. It was one of the first Holocaust research centers in the world at the time. Initially, it operated under the auspices of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, the self-governing body of Polish Jews.4 In the late 1940s, however, when the Polish United Workers’ Party consolidated its power in Poland, its Jewish representatives took power in the Central Committee of Jews in Poland as well, and ended Jewish autonomy. This also affected the JHI, where Ber (also Bernard) Mark, a Jewish communist activist, historian, and literary critic, had become director in September 1949 (see figure 12.1). Though Mark’s nomination was supported by his comrades, he directed the JHI following his own agenda, often testing the tolerance of the communist authorities. In fact, Mark had been at the center of a series of ideological conflicts with the Party leadership ever since he had joined the communist movement.5 Thus, his nomination suggests a lack of academically trained activists among the small group of communists knowledgeable about the particular section of Jewish society in postwar Poland, the so-called Yidisher gas (Jewish street),6 who could have been able to fill the position. This opened possibilities for less orthodox communists like Mark who, according to his com-

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6 Mark was one of the very few people active on “the Jewish street” who held a university degree. See Grzegorz Berendt, Życie żydowskie w Polsce w latach 1950–1956: Z dziejów Towarzystwa Społeczno-Kulturalnego Żydów w Polsce [Jewish life in Poland 1950–1956: From the history of the Social and Cultural Society of Jews in Poland] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2006), 157.