Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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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. 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. 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), 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.
rades, had a “too friendly attitude to people.” 7 High positions, but less political ones, like the directorship of the JHI, were thus still open to them.

When the Central Committee was dissolved in 1950 and Jewish institutions were either disbanded or nationalized, Mark found a way to keep the institution going. He moved it under the auspices of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute, an academic society founded by him only for that purpose. It was not directly subordinated to the state but under the supervision of the Polish Academy of Science. This put the JHI in a relatively independent position vis-à-vis the government. Thus, it was on Mark’s merit that the JHI survived Polish Stalinism widely unscathed and persisted as one of the very few Holocaust research centers at the time. 8

Until today, the JHI’s archive houses many valuable collections on the Holocaust, among others some ten thousand witness accounts of Holocaust survivors, many of them children, as well as diaries and memoirs. The best-known collection is the secret archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, created by the Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum and hidden in tin boxes and milk cans under the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto. 9

Shortly after its establishment in 1948, the JHI began to publish the Yiddish journal Bleter far geshikhte (Pages for history). A second, Polish language journal followed in 1950, the Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego.

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7 Anna Sommer Schneider, Sz’erit hapleta: Ocaleni z Zagłady; DzialalnośĆ American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee w Polsce w latach 1945–1989 [Sh’erit ha-Pletah: Survivors of the Holocaust; Activities of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Poland 1945–1989] (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2014), 244.

8 On the JHI in the early 1950s, see Stephan Stach, “‘The Spirit of the Time Left its Stamp on These Works’: Writing the History of the Shoah at the Jewish Historical Institute in Stalinist Poland,” Remembrance and Solidarity: Studies in 20th Century 5 (2016): 185–211.

(Bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute). Until 1957, the institute also published several books and pamphlets in Polish and Yiddish. Though the Polish publications addressed mainly a domestic audience, the Yiddish publications’ outreach exceeded Polish Jews and reached the East European Jewish diaspora in Israel and the West, the so-called Yiddishland. These publications, and the JHI itself, received harsh criticism in the Western Yiddish press at times, and was accused of politically biased falsification of Holocaust history. Nevertheless, the JHI became an important part of the early transnational Jewish discourse on the Holocaust. Especially successful was the publication of Emanuel Ringelblum’s diary from the Warsaw Ghetto. In order to receive printing permission from the communist authorities, this and other documents published in Stalinist Poland had to be purged of politically inappropriate statements, like critical comments on the behavior of non-Jewish Poles and the Soviet Union. However, these politically biased intrusions were only noticed by people who had seen the originals and did not affect the positive reception of the diary in the Western Yiddish press.

In the mid-1950s, the political thaw in Poland and other socialist countries influenced the publication policy of the JHI in different ways. As the boundaries of what could be published vastly widened, the JHI wanted to use the occasion to rework its earlier publications. Many of them were subsequently republished without, or with far less, politically motivated alterations to the texts. In addition, the JHI’s leadership wanted to publish in languages other than Polish and Yiddish to expand its outreach and keep up with the international debate on the Holocaust. However, the JHI’s appeals to the Central Office for Press,

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Publications, and Performances (Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk) for permission to publish English translations of some key publications had no success, despite the JHI’s argument that this would be the only way to reach, and thus influence, Jews in capitalist countries.\(^\text{14}\)

Around the same time, the Institute began to cooperate with several East German publishers, which resulted in a series of publications that appeared between 1957 and 1966.\(^\text{15}\) Their importance for the East German academic and public debate on the Holocaust is best illustrated with a quote from Kurt Pätzold, one of the few GDR-historians who began to research the Holocaust in the 1970s. To rebuke the common view that literature on the Holocaust was lacking in the GDR during the 1950s and 1960s, he wrote:

In 1955, Lord Russel of Liverpool’s *The Scourge of the Swastika* had been released. In 1957, Bernard Mark’s report *Der Aufstand im Warschauer Ghetto* was made available. In 1958, *Im Feuer vergangen*, an anthology of eye-witness accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto appeared, also translated from Polish. The document collection on the mass murder of Polish Jews and their resistance originated from the same Jewish source in Warsaw, accessible in German from 1960.\(^\text{16}\)

Three out of four publications Pätzold listed had originally been published by the JHI. GDR historians, however, failed to publish their own works or document collections on the Holocaust in the 1950s, a fact Joachim Käppner explained with the struggle of East German historians to create a “socialist view of history” clearly distinct from bourgeois West German historiography. In *Erstarrte Geschichte* (Ossified history) in 1999 Käppner argued that historians

\(^{14}\) Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego, hereafter AŻIH), 310/223 Konspekt publikacji Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego w języku obcym, undated and without pagination.


who published about the Holocaust only used it to “prove the crimes of ‘German Imperialism.’” In his view, memorializing the Nazi persecution of Jews was seen as competing with antifascism. Consequently, works on the Holocaust were suppressed. The only exceptions to this rule, according to Käppner, were “a few memory volumes and translated Polish and Czech works.”17 While the Holocaust was indeed not in the focus of East German research on the Nazi era, Käppner’s statement does not explain why the above ideological considerations were not applied to translations. A closer look at the genesis of the three books published in cooperation with the JHI demonstrates that neither were ideological guidelines applied for translation, nor was the Holocaust seen as a competitor of antifascism in the GDR of the 1950s and 1960s. On the contrary, these translated publications presented Holocaust memory as an integral part of antifascism.

The Three Books

The first book by the JHI which was published in the GDR was Ber Mark’s Der Aufstand im Warschauer Ghetto: Entstehung und Verlauf, which appeared in January 1957. It was a shortened and reworked version of the Polish Powstanie w getcie warszawskim that Mark had published for the 10th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1953. The 1953 Polish edition presented the Ghetto Uprising in a thoroughly Stalinist style as an antifascist revolt of the Jews in the Ghetto under the leadership of the communists, and as a part of the all-Polish resistance movement. It had been hastily revised under the impression of antisemitic events like the Slánský trial in Prague and the Doctors’ Plot in Moscow.18 Despite these deformations, the uprising is evidently told as a story of Jewish suffering and heroism.19 The centrality of the Holocaust in this book did not prevent the Karl Dietz Verlag, the central publishing house of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) to

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19 Already on the first page of the foreword, Mark states that Nazism “terrorized and oppressed Jews” worst among all European nations. See Mark, Powstanie, 3.