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

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3197457
ment ended with a gesture towards East German propaganda goals, describing it as R&L’s “small contribution to the struggle against neo-fascism in West Germany.”48 The external reviewer underscored the importance of the book because it “allows to quite accurately follow the stages of the extermination of the Jewish population of Poland” and “to see the extermination of Jews in Central, West, and South-Eastern Europe by the fascists in broad outlines.”49 The review praised the manuscript for its vivid portrayal of Germany’s exploitation of the Jewish workforce, showing the Jews as skilled workers on the one hand, and for emphasizing organized Jewish resistance and armed struggle on the other. All this, the reviewer concluded, was also “a strike against antisemitism, by far not yet overcome in Germany, existing in a number of residual imaginations even in our GDR.”50 To be sure, the external reviewers of both books argued from a thoroughly antifascist, communist perspective. Still, in their view, acknowledging the Holocaust as a central feature of Nazi crimes did not contradict this perspective, but confirmed it.

The Intended Role of the Books in the East German Press Debate and their Effect

So far, I have discussed how GDR publishers and state and Party administrators evaluated these books against the background of antifascist ideology. All this, however, happened before these books were printed. But how did the state-controlled media present them to East German readers? To answer this question, I analyze press reviews and reporting on these books.51 Hardly surprising, press coverage situated the books in an antifascist narrative and in the already mentioned campaign portraying West Germany—not totally unreasonably52—as a safe haven for Nazi criminals.

48 BArch DK 1, HVB, DR 1/5390a, Druckgenehmigungsvorgang “Faschismus—Getto—Massenmord”: Bemerkungen des Verlags, 151.
49 BArch DK 1, HVB, DR 1/5390a, Druckgenehmigungsvorgang “Faschismus—Getto—Massenmord”: Gutachten Andre Grevenrath des Verlags, 395.
50 BArch DK 1, HVB, DR 1/5390a, Druckgenehmigungsvorgang “Faschismus—Getto—Massenmord”: Gutachten Andre Grevenrath des Verlags, 398.
51 My analysis is based on three newspapers: Neues Deutschland (New Germany), the SED national organ; Neue Zeit (New Time), the national organ of the East German Christian Democratic Party (loyal to the SED); and Berliner Zeitung, the SED organ for Berlin.
52 On the personal continuities of Nazi perpetrators in West Germany, see Eckart Conze, Norbert Frei, Peter Hayes, and Moshe Zimmermann, Das Amt und die Vergangenheit: Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik (Munich: Blessing, 2010); Frank Bösch and Andreas Wirsching, eds., Hüter der Ordnung: Die Innenministerien in Bonn und Ost-Berlin nach dem Nationalsozialismus (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015).
Grete Wittkowski introduced the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in her review of Mark’s book in the SED organ Neues Deutschland (ND) as “one of the most impressive chapters in the history of antifascist struggle.”

Interlacing the book in the antifascist narrative, she argued that Der Aufstand im Warschauer Ghetto “reveals the misanthropic nature of imperialism in all its heinousness,” recording the “bestial cruelty and brutality of the SS hangmen.” Then she turned to contemporary events:

Today’s reader won’t study this documentary report without being deeply moved and shaken. Because the war criminals and Jew-murderers, those responsible for the inhumanity back then, are rehabilitated today. Blood-stained SS Bandits move into the Headquarter of the NATO-Army. Others guilty of the mass destruction of Jews, like [Otto] Bräutigam and [Hans] Globke are gloating over their high-ranking positions in the state. Adenauer’s Ministers, government press, and Expellee Associations are again advocating for a march towards the east.

Press reviews on Im Feuer vergangen and Faschismus—Getto—Massenmord usually also included comments on Nazi criminals living in West Germany, which were apparently demanded by press control if articles addressed Nazi crimes. This is especially obvious in cases when these comments do not match the general narrative of the review. Im Feuer vergangen received additional attention in GDR press in the fall of 1959, when East German propagandists discovered its usefulness for the ongoing campaign against Theodor Oberländer, West Germany’s Minister of Expellee Affairs since 1953. Oberländer, who had been a Nazi official

---

54 Otto Bräutigam (1895–1992) had been a high-ranking officer in the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete) during the war and directly involved in the Holocaust. From 1954 to 1956, he directed the Eastern Department of West Germany’s Foreign Ministry.
55 Hans Globke (1898–1973) had been a high-ranking officer in the Office of Jewish Affairs of Nazi Germany’s Ministry of Interior and was, among others, involved in the implementation of the Nuremberg Laws. From 1953 to 1963 he was Undersecretary and Chief of Staff in West Germany’s Chancellery under Konrad Adenauer.
56 Wittkowski, “Der Aufstand im Warschauer Getto.”
and an influential expert on Eastern Europe before and during the war, was particularly targeted by East German propaganda since mid-1959 because of his supposed involvement in massacres in Lviv in the summer of 1941. At that time, during the German attack on the Soviet Union, he had served as an Obersturmbannführer in the SS-Battalion Nachtigall, which arrived in the city some days after the German invasion. East German propaganda claimed that Oberländer had been involved in the murder of several hundred Jews during the Lviv pogrom and the shooting of about 3,000 Jews some days later. In October 1959, Neues Deutschland noticed that these crimes against the Jews of Lviv were among those described in two of the five memoirs of Im Feuer vergangen. Janina Hescheles described the pogrom, in which her father was murdered, in her “Diary of a 12-year-old girl.” Leon Weliczker also described the pogrom and other massacres in the “Death Brigade.” Neues Deutschland published excerpts of Weliczker’s memoirs under the title “A Survivor of the Bloodbath: Oberländer is a Murderer!” A month later, a longer article placed Im Feuer vergangen in the context of the Oberländer campaign, extensively quoting from Weliczker’s and Hescheles’ accounts. The article closed with an appeal to the publisher to hasten the next edition of the now sold-out book. R&L published three more editions in 1960 alone. When in April 1960 a show trial against Oberländer was staged in East Berlin, R&L director Else Man-

59 The SS rank Obersturmbannführer is equivalent to Lieutenant-Colonel.
60 While members of the Nachtigall battalion had indeed participated in the pogrom, the shooting was in fact committed by another German unit, Einsatzgruppe C. On the anti-Jewish crimes after the occupation of Lviv, see Kai Struve, Deutsche Herrschaft, ukrainischer Nationalismus, antijüdische Gewalt: Der Sommer 1941 in der Westukraine (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 304–79.
ske-Kraus proudly wrote to Ber Mark: “[T]he Jewish diaries ‘Im Feuer vergangen’ undergo one edition after the other and played, as you have surely read, an important role in the accusation against Oberländer.”62

The publication of Faschismus—Getto—Massenmord in late 1960 took place in the aftermath of Adolf Eichmann’s capture and transfer to Israel (see figure 12.4). For its second edition, the publisher placed ads in Neues Deutschland and Berliner Zeitung titled: “For the Eichmann trial: Faschismus—Getto—Massenmord, Documentation on the Mass Extermination and Resistance of Jews in Poland.”63

All three books were embedded in the broader East German political campaign against West Germany and former Nazis in its government. This use of the books aimed at turning them into propagandistic weapons on the ideological battlefields of the Cold War. However, the success of this undertaking is doubtful. The “polemical moment” against West Germany only had a marginal effect on these books, mostly restricted to their forewords or introductions and the press coverage on them.

More importantly, despite the political context in which they were published, the books were significant in documenting the mass murder of Polish Jews from personal, documentary, and scholarly perspectives. The reporting about these books in the context of the campaign against West Germany surely increased their publicity among East German readers, but nonetheless the books still conveyed essential information on the Holocaust. Kata Bohus demonstrates a similar effect in the case of Hungarian press coverage of the Eichmann trial which, according to government guidelines, depicted West Germany as a refuge for Nazi criminals. The Hungarian press reports on the Eichmann trial, like the press coverage of the books published in the GDR discussed here, might have aimed at reinforcing anti-Western resentment among their readers, but at the same time, they also confronted them with the history of the Holocaust.64

As I will show in the following sections, there is good reason to believe that the positive impact of the books on the GDR’s public in its confrontation with the history of Nazi crimes was greater than the propagandistic purposes the books might have had in Cold War politics, though these two aspects do not necessarily contradict each other.