Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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The Perception of the Books

The three books by the JHI introduced a new perspective into literature and into the public discourse on World War II: the Jewish perspective. Though all publications were included into the political narrative of antifascism, the perspective of the authors made them unique. In all books, Jews appeared as victims who were not persecuted and murdered for their political belief, their resistance to Nazi rules, or as random victims of German brutality. The publications made it clear that they were murdered for being Jews. This acknowledgement of a particular Jewish victimhood was especially important to Jews and communists of Jewish descent among the readers of these books.

Some of them actively participated in the promotion of these books and in the debate of their content, like Grete Wittkowski, who reviewed Mark’s book; Arnold Zweig, who wrote the foreword for *Im Feuer vergangen*; Stephan Hermlin, who mentioned the book in a speech later published in the literary monthly *Neue Deutsche Literatur* (ndl);65 and Victor Klemperer, who wrote a lengthy review for the same journal. Less prominent Jews also expressed personal affection for these publications. Rosa Kahn for instance, the copy editor of Mark’s *Der Aufstand im Warschauer Ghetto* wrote to Mark:

> Since 1928 I am an active communist, I was born as a Jew and a Pole, though I grew up in Berlin. My birthplace is Oswiecim,66 where my parents and siblings most probably perished after having been expelled from Germany. Thus, I felt pride and satisfaction when I read that the Jews of Warsaw did not allow to be willingly led to the slaughter, but heroically fought under the leadership of the old communists and the Polish Worker’s Party.67

While Rosa Kahn’s statement might seem to perfectly fit an antifascist narrative on the first glance, on second glance it remains unclear if the reason of her pride was her Jewishness, her communist beliefs, or both.

These books were important not only for dedicated communists among GDR’s Jews, but also for those with less clear ideological bonds. This is expressed

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66 The Polish name of the town Auschwitz was used in the German original.
in the opening quote of this contribution from Hermann Simon, a member of the religious Jewish community of the GDR. Born in 1949, Simon became founding director of the Berlin Foundation New Synagogue Berlin / Centrum Judaicum in 1988. As the son of two professors at Humboldt University who were members of East Berlin’s Jewish community, he remembers that the book was available “on virtually every bookshelf of our friends and acquaintances at that time” and, at least with his parents’ copy, was also regularly read.68 Simon’s account demonstrates the importance of this book for East German Jews. Probably a large part of East Berlin’s small Jewish community were among the acquaintances of Simon’s family.

For East German Jews, whether religious or not, the book signified that there was a place for their story and their experience in the GDR’s antifascist narrative on World War II. In a symbolic way it gave meaning to their own suffering and that of their families, acknowledging them as rightful citizens of the state and justifying their decision to settle in the socialist German state. Yet, the meaning of *Im Feuer vergangen* and the other books from the JHI for East Germany’s Jews can neither explain their success nor does it demonstrate a broad perception of these books.

Considering the high social position of Hermann Simon’s parents, they certainly had friends and acquaintances from outside of the Jewish community. According to Simon, many people without any connection to the Jewish community or Jewishness also possessed and read *Im Feuer vergangen*. The diary collection facilitated identification beyond the Jewish community, especially for the younger generation of East Germans who experienced the war only as children or not at all. Friedhilde Krause, for instance, was very touched by the collection, especially by Janina Hescheles’ memoirs. The daughter of a Lutheran pastor and a member of interwar Poland’s German minority, she turned to communism in the late 1940s. She explained in her memoirs:

> Reading the experiences of this girl I kept thinking that I could have had the same fate, as both of us were of almost the same age—Janina born in 1930 and me born in 1928—lived in Poland, had both experienced the occupation of our homeland by German fascists. The only difference, neither earned by me nor deserved by Janina, was that she was persecuted as a Jew, and I could be free as a German. Already back then and encouraged by my parents, I ex-

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experienced this situation as it emerged in my homeland after the fascist troops invaded Poland as something very bitter. Namely, how one group of humans was privileged and the other exterminated, though they had lived together before, relying on each other peacefully and in friendship.\textsuperscript{69}

To read the story of a peer who was condemned to death only for being born Jewish while Krause could live safely because she was born German was deeply emotional. Reading accounts like this on Nazi atrocities gave the GDR’s antifascism a precise purpose in her eyes. Krause not only published scholarly articles on the broader reception of the diary collection,\textsuperscript{70} but even got in touch with Janina Hescheles and the two eventually became friends.

The readership of \textit{Im Feuer vergangen} were not only intellectual elites. The book was also featured in a reportage on the progress of labor conditions in East Germany, published in \textit{Neues Deutschland}. Its protagonist, the young welder Gottfried Günzel, enthusiastically praises the benefits of automation that eased working conditions since it left workers more time and energy to spend on culture and self-education: “‘Only recently I read the novel \textit{Im Feuer vergangen},’ recalls Günzel. ‘It is a book on the Warsaw Ghetto. It is a must to read books like this. It is very instructive for people like me, who luckily did not get to know Nazism.’”\textsuperscript{71} Günzel’s reference to the book, mistaking it for a novel, appeared almost eight years after the publication of its first edition. Considering the context of the reportage one might assume that the book was easily accessible in the labor union libraries and read in workers’ self-education circles, thus achieving a considerable outreach (see figure 12.6).

\textit{Im Feuer vergangen} also appealed to readers who were situated neither in a Jewish nor in a socialist context. Hans Gieseke reviewed the collection for \textit{Neue Zeit}, the organ of the East German Christian Democrats, from a Christian perspective. For him, the book was important because the confrontation with German war crimes was a first step toward Christian penance. He wrote:

Who really knows what the administrator of the “German death” did to people who, like everyone else, loved their life and now had to learn to curse

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\textsuperscript{69} Friedhilde Krause, \textit{Erlebt und geprägt: Erinnerungen aus 80 Lebensjahren} (Hildesheim: Olms, 2009), 99f.
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it? One should read the book, which tells about this death. Everyone should read it, the blind, the ignorant, the credulous. We, Germans, should read what Poles write here about Germans.²²

*Im Feuer vergangen* appeared during a time when Jewish-Christian Committees and the organization *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (Action Reconciliation)²³ were emerging in East German churches, initiating a Christian path to the German “coming to terms with the past.” In these circles, such a book functioned as a point of departure for reflections on guilt, atonement, and moral consequences. Gieseke’s review is also a good example of how following the rules laid out by the press authorities did not necessarily entail embracing the propagandistic intentions of the censors. While his text called on Germans to undertake a soul-searching concerning their individual guilt, it dutifully included a paragraph on Nazi criminals in leading positions of the FRG, which noticeably deviated from the argumentative framework of the text.

*Im Feuer vergangen*, probably the most widely read of the three books, also stirred a small, though important, public literary discussion between the writer Arnold Zweig and the Romance philologist and author of *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, Victor Klemperer. In his foreword, Zweig introduced the horrors described

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²² Gieseke, “Als der Tod ins Ghetto kam.”
²³ *Aktion Sühnezeichen* was founded by the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany in 1958. The organization was committed to an open engagement with the history of German crimes during World War II and actively sought atonement, for instance through organizing German youth volunteers to support victims of the Nazis. See Gabriele Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste: Aber man kann es einfach tun* (Göttingen: Lamuv Verlag, 2008).
in the diaries and memoirs and compared them to the horrors described in Dante’s *Inferno*, the first part of the *Divine Comedy*. An inferno, however, which intrudes into our daily life and our lifetime, where:

those suffering and the perpetrators came from surroundings which form our everyday environment: Streets of towns and cities, with electrical light, water pipes and a sewage system, houses with a floor of polished wood and large windows, with telephones, warming tilled stoves or central heating. They were used to modern schools and the same kind of hospitals, universities. All victims of the barbarians who were reversed into the darkest antique slavery turn out to be human beings like us.74

Klemperer rejected Zweig’s reference to Dante. Though he admitted that he had felt inclined to such a comparison too, he pointed out that,

The thinking people of all times know that [Dante’s *Inferno*] is poetry and thus one can conclude that also repugnant cruelty can provide an esthetical pleasure if it is conveyed by a work of art. . . . The comparison of Dante’s Hell to that of the Nazis is, so to say, reversibly sinful: it sins against humanity, as it converts the victims of fascism to a mere theme of literature and it sins against esthetics as it assumes the possibility of an artwork, which is without any ethical foundation.”75

After this strong statement, Klemperer evaluated the five diaries and memoirs of *Im Feuer vergangen* based on their differing degrees of literary arrangement. As the literary scholar Thomas Taterka has shown, Klemperer’s condemnation of such a literarization of witness accounts on the Holocaust anticipated many arguments voiced in more recent discussions about ways of representing the Holocaust.76

Without a reliable set of instruments to measure precisely the readership of these three books, the above examples clearly show that they had a significant impact in different spheres of GDR society: the Jewish community, dedicated communists, Christian activists, intellectuals, and the working class. The col-

74 Arnold Zweig, “Vorwort,” in *Im Feuer vergangen*, 5.
lection *Im Feuer vergangen* seems to have especially affected readers and stirred up difficult discussions of the Holocaust on an intellectual and emotional level. These confrontations took place within the antifascist discourse of the GDR but were not solely tied to it.

**Diffusion of Knowledge into Artistic, Documentary, and Educational Projects**

The impact of these books on how the public perceived the Holocaust in the GDR was not restricted to their readers or those who followed the public debates they provoked. The books also conveyed knowledge about the Holocaust indirectly, inspiring new artworks and educational projects, and serving as material for historical research. This was especially true for the volume *Faschismus—Getto—Massenmord*. This document compilation was widely quoted by scholars in East Germany and in the West because it made documents known which were otherwise hardly accessible. Published in 1960, the book found its way into the bibliography of Raul Hilberg’s groundbreaking study on the Holocaust, *The Destruction of European Jews*, which appeared the following year. Ber Mark’s book on the Ghetto Uprising, in turn, remains an oft quoted source and has had an impact beyond scholarly circles.

As Manuela Gerlof has shown in her study on depictions of the Holocaust in East German radio plays, Mark’s book served as source for the East German production of Wolfgang Weyrauch’s *Woher kennen wir uns bloß?* (How do we know each other?) The play is a dialogue between a former Gestapo officer who helped to quell the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and a surviving insurgent who accidentally meet on the streets of a West German city. Even though the production, directed by Peter Thomas, aired only five months after Mark’s book had been published, Gerlof proves that this highly edited version of Weyrauch’s original script is based on Mark’s description of the situation in the Warsaw Ghetto and the uprising, and differs a great deal from the original.77

Mark’s *Der Aufstand im Warschauer Ghetto*, and probably the other two books as well, served as an inspiration and research material for the writer Klaus Schlesinger for his short story “David” about a small boy in the Warsaw Ghetto. The story was Schlesinger’s literary debut and appeared in the literary monthly

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