New Perspectives on Kristallnacht

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The memory of the terror events on November 9, 1938 can serve as a litmus test of the East German regime's view on the Holocaust. When the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was founded in 1949, its ruling elite was facing a fundamental dilemma: establishing a Socialist country was seen as the result of the previous anti-fascist struggle against Nazi Germany, and, based on a Marxist view of history, as the only possible consequence in a history of class struggles. While the GDR had that fact in common with other Socialist regimes taking over all over Eastern Europe, there was one crucial difference: the GDR was one of two successor states of the German Reich, and, thus, the land of the perpetrators. Both German governments tried to solve this problem in a similar way, although with a different tone to it. Both were very eager to grant amnesties to all those willing to help build a new state. Questions of guilt and responsibility were soon discarded, and a small set of villains and perpetrators was presented to the people: in the West, these included mostly Hitler and his henchmen, in the East it was Hitler, and, more importantly, capitalists and West German industrialists.1

After the collapse of the GDR, some historians have argued that the Holocaust was mostly a taboo topic in East German memory culture.2 If it was
addressed, it supposedly only served as a means of propaganda. Previous research on the memory of November 9, 1938, in the GDR mostly reflected this, arguing that the date was appropriated by the regime for its purposes while other actors, such as the Jewish communities, if they are mentioned at all, are portrayed as amenable accomplices to state propaganda. New research on Holocaust memory in the GDR, however, paints a more differentiated picture. Thus, the memory of November 9 may provide an opportunity to shed new light on this topic. This article will show how the commemoration in the GDR of the 1938 events tells us something about the regime’s stance on the memory of Jewish victims of Nazi crimes, and, more importantly, how other groups, especially East Germany’s Jewish minority, used the date to implement their own agenda.

**CONFRONTING THE PUBLIC**

November 9 has been a day for commemoration in Germany ever since 1918. However, in 1945 it was unclear what exactly was to be remembered that day. Two events had been addressed during the Third Reich: the failed putsch by Hitler in 1923 which was glorified by the Nazis as the first attempt to overthrow the state, and the official announcement of the Kaiser’s abdication and the proclamation of the republic in 1918 following the German revolution, which was, in contrast, demonised. After 1945, in East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED), was eager to point out the revolution of 1918, highlighting the Communist’s role in the toppling of monarchy and criticising the missed opportunity of erecting a Socialist state. The events of 1938 had to be integrated into that sample.

During the early postwar years, it was almost exclusively survivors who took action and initiated commemorative events. Already in November 1945, a Berlin based radio station hosted a public event featuring a speech by the mayor, and an interview on the pogrom and its causes by Fritz Katten, a Jewish survivor and later the Chief of Police in Berlin up until his arrest in 1948. Similar events were held on every anniversary in subsequent years. These events all over Germany were usually hosted by a small group of Jewish survivors, and mostly attended by Jews only.

Non-Jewish Germans reacted to these events in diverse ways, ranging from approval and praise to strong rejection and hatred. When a newspaper
in Halle printed an article on the fate of the city’s Jewish population in 1938, it received various letters from readers scornfully asking whether it would be right to only report about Jewish victims, especially since National Socialism had shown that they were “parasites to the people” as one reader put it. Staging commemorative events for Jewish victims in postwar Germany always meant confronting the still virulent anti-Semitism within the population.

Furthermore, these events automatically confronted the public with its own role during National Socialism. The term “collective guilt” became a buzzword all over Germany, and soon people began discussing its implications. The defensive reactions of so many ordinary Germans were an expression of a common feeling of guilt, or at least shame and acknowledgment of some responsibility for the crimes and the stability of the regime. The persecution of the Jewish population especially was a trigger of such reactions as the overall acceptance or appraisal of National Socialism by the majority could most impressively be addressed via this issue, especially in commemorative events on November 9 both by Jewish and non-Jewish speakers. The reactions of the population to the terror events of November 1938 had ranged from appraisal to—probably more common—rejection, not necessarily due to compassion for the attacked, however, but out of moral outrage over such “dishonourable” behaviour of a “civilised people.” Yet, from a victim’s perspective this was irrelevant. Accordingly, the indifference of most Germans to the entire persecution of the Jewish population became a key element of the commemoration of November 9. In an internal report to the party about an event in the small city of Plauen in Saxony in 1950, the reactions of the audience is especially revealing: “Some concertgoers staged a concert of coughing so loud that comrade Friedrich remarked: ‘You should have coughed in 1938, but you remained silent then. Today, you will have to listen to what I have to say to you.’” Similar remarks could be found in newspaper articles concerning November 9 as well. This occasion especially revealed how deeply rooted anti-Semitic mindsets still were within the people, and how unwilling most non-Jewish Germans were to confront the past.

While the annual Day of the Victims of Fascism, established already in 1945, was conceived as a tribute to all Nazi victims and perceived accordingly, albeit with a distinct focus on Communists, November 9 soon became a metaphor for the entire Holocaust. Still, there were limitations. The global dimension of the Nazi genocide was rarely realised by the public or addressed by the officials, and the persecution mostly remained closely linked to German, and not necessarily European Jewry.
ALLIES

Jewish survivors all over Germany were not entirely alone in their attempts to raise awareness of Jewish persecution under Nazi rule, yet their allies were scarce. The nature of the postwar discourse on the Nazi past was paradoxical: it was entirely dominated by former Nazi victims and survivors, yet it had to incorporate the vastly different experience of the majority as well. Already in 1948, the formerly persecuted came into conflict with the SED. Since the regime did not justify its own existence via elections, but derived their claim to power from history, their governmental position was fairly weak. In order to ensure the population's consent, the party's elite soon opted for conciliatory gestures, just as the West German government did. Reminding the population of its own role in National Socialism was not among these strategies. Rather, the SED granted permission to the founding of the National Democratic Party as a gathering place for former Nazis, and welcomed former Nazi party members—who amounted to up to ten percent of all SED members in the early 1950s—into their own ranks. Those insisting that Germans should be confronted with Nazi crimes and their own role in it became less visible.

Accordingly, the Association of Nazi Persecutees (Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes, VVN), which existed in all parts of Germany, soon became a thorn in the SED inner circle's flesh. It was the VVN that assisted Jewish survivors in their struggle for recognition. Between its founding in 1947 and its forced dissolution in 1953, one-third to half of the association's members were Jewish or had been defined as such and persecuted accordingly by the Nazis. The leadership was distinctly Communist, but Jews, some of them Communists themselves, always played a role.

Two years after the war, the severity of German anti-Semitism became evident as dozens of Jewish cemeteries in all occupation zones were desecrated and destroyed. The VVN initiated various events all over Germany on November 9, 1947 where Jewish and non-Jewish survivors could address their concerns. Julius Meyer, chairmen of the East German Association of Jewish Communities and high ranking member of the VVN, announced that “Jewish cemeteries have been desecrated not just during the Nazi time, but again today. We now know that the fight must continue.” Meyer's plea was shared by politicians in all zones who promised a fierce fight against anti-Semitism. Yet, most of the public—and high-ranking politicians as well—seemed fairly unimpressed with the new violent outbursts. Apart from ceremonies on November 9, the mantra that anti-Semitism had been overcome could be heard in all parts of Germany. Already in February 1947, Kurt Schumacher, head of the Social
Democratic party in the Western zones, declared that a “Jewish question does not exist anymore” for most Germans as a result of the “evocative education ["Anschauungsunterricht"] sparked by the persecution of the Jews, especially since November 1938. In fact, today Germany is probably the country with the weakest anti-Semitic stirring of all.” He could not have been more wrong. Schumacher’s assessment was shared and uttered even more vigorously by East German Communists; yet, this was more an expression of an envisaged future than a realistic representation of the present situation. Anti-Semitism was still an integral feature of the German population, and politicians knew that.

During an event in Dresden on November 9, 1947, Leon Löwenkopf, head of the local Jewish community and member of the VVN’s inner circle, painted a grim picture: “Nine years have passed and we, the few surviving Jews, stand here forlorn and alone, surrounded by millions of corpses of our murdered children, fathers, and mothers.” Disregarding the claim of collective guilt, he still stressed that “Germans, numbering millions, were actively or passively involved in the murder of millions of Jews.” Despite that bleak outlook, Löwenkopf still saw a possibility for Jewish life in postwar Germany, but was unsure whether the Germans were willing to let that happen. Löwenkopf pointed to a pressing issue for most Jewish survivors and returnees for whom the question of remaining in Germany had not been answered in the mid-1940s. Reminding the German population of its responsibility and hoping for a change in their attitude was certainly a way for many survivors to ensure themselves that returning to Germany was right. Yet, the overall lack of outrage over postwar anti-Semitic attacks and defaced cemeteries seemed proof enough that Germans had not changed at all.

Moreover, these commemorative events never attracted as many people as the annual Day of the Victims of Fascism. Although the VVN and the churches assisted the Jewish communities in their events around November 9, attendance was scarce, and the outreach negligible. Commemorating Jewish victims together with non-Jews was a welcomed token for the VVN as it publicly indicated the alleged cohesion of all Nazi victims. However, since its leadership consisted mainly of non-Jewish SED members who mostly agreed with the newly established East German government’s course of integrating former Nazis into the society and refraining from addressing German guilt, Jewish survivors felt increasingly estranged from the association. Some VVN members even opposed highlighting the Jewish victim’s perspective. In 1949, the VVN regional board in Dresden deemed it “inadvisable” to stage a rally on November 9 in memory of Kristallnacht since the effect would eventually
“peter out. […] We would probably address the same group of people, and with this the effort and effect would be amiss.”\textsuperscript{19} For some Nazi victims, addressing the public and commemorating Nazi crimes did not necessarily include a distinct Jewish perspective. However, they correctly ascertained a reluctance within the public to attend events commemorating Jewish victims, so urging the population to do so anyway might affect the VVN’s reputation.

There are, however, also examples of non-Jewish members eager to call public attention to Jewish suffering under Nazi rule. In 1951, Kurt Schatter, a non-Jewish politician and resistance fighter from Berlin, tried to initiate a research project on the November 1938 events, and suggested browsing municipal archives for relevant documents. He wanted the historians’ findings published in a “black book” that would be made available at every “public or school library,” and featured in history education. Schatter was deeply concerned that these “horrible deeds” would be forgotten, and he regarded such a book “as a cultural document and warning” and an effort to redeem “our guilt” from “the Jews”—something the world would surely recognise.\textsuperscript{20} Although the project was never realized, Schatter’s impulse hints at the need some non-Jewish Germans felt to redeem themselves from feelings of guilt. An annual reminder of the population’s consent to violence was, after all, a constant reminder of one’s own bad conscience, and accordingly fairly unpopular within both German societies.

November 9 soon emerged as a fixed date in the calendar of commemoration, but it never reached an importance befitting its cause. For the most part, members of the Jewish communities observed and organized the event amongst themselves. Occasionally, local, mostly Protestant churches invited Jews to stage a common event in memory of Kristallnacht. Church groups, Jewish communities, and the VVN, thus, formed an alliance of Nazi victims or opponents eager to acknowledge the suffering of Jews under Nazi rule.\textsuperscript{21} These events featured a mixture of music, recitals of poetry, and (mostly Christian) prayers. In Bautzen in Saxony, for example, Lewandowski’s Kol Nidre was played next to Beethoven’s Fidelio, a poem by a “Jewish mother who perished in Auschwitz” was recited after the “Ring Parable” from the play Nathan the Wise by German-Jewish Enlightenment era dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.\textsuperscript{22} Lessing’s play, a plea for religious tolerance between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, was one of the first to be staged at German theatres after the war, and a common choice at commemorative events.\textsuperscript{23} Choosing this play hints at the importance of mediating religious, and thus ethnical, tolerance ascribed by cultural officials in postwar Germany. The audience’s reactions to the play
seemed to prove them right as the writer Willi Bredel described it: “Previously the narrative of the ring was the core and free-spirited high point of the play. How that had changed! Today it was the story of the massacre of Jews at Gath that shook audiences most.” Still, despite the overall solidarity by non-Jewish Nazi victims and logistical help by the local administration, Jewish communities had to rely on themselves to mount most commemorations.

1953—a turning point?
Following anti-Semitic campaigns and show trials in Eastern Europe in 1953, mostly in Czechoslovakia and the GDR, a vast number of Jews left East Germany. Almost every leading figure of the Jewish communities fled, leaving the remaining members in dire need to reorganise themselves quickly. Yet, even in this hostile situation, commemoration continued. Only half a year after the hasty flight of its board members, East Berlin's Jewish community unveiled a new memorial stone at its biggest cemetery in Weißensee. Others in the GDR as well as in the Federal Republic acted similarly, and availed themselves of November 9 as an opportunity to unveil new memorial stones, mostly at the sites of destroyed synagogues. In 1960, this happened at Große Hamburger Straße in East Berlin, in Leipzig in 1951 and again in 1966, or in Halle on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary in 1968.

Contrary to what some historians have claimed, Jewish communities organized events around November 9 every year during the GDR's existence. Yet, after the dissolution of the VVN in 1953, public awareness of these events plummeted. Still, Jewish communities were eager to stage dignified events, and often asked acclaimed artists for their assistance. The writer Peter Edel, for instance, a Jewish-Communist survivor of Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen, frequently assisted the Jewish community in East Berlin by giving speeches on November 9 or on the Day of the Victims of Fascism in September at which the Jewish community usually held their events at the cemetery in Weißensee separate from the main, SED dominated event.

The most frequently requested artist was the Dutch-Jewish singer and actress Lin Jaldati. A performer of mostly Yiddish songs, Jaldati had joined the Dutch-Communist resistance together with her husband, Eberhard Rebling, a German Communist. Eventually, they were betrayed, and while Rebling escaped, Jaldati was deported with her family and others (among them Anne.
Frank and her family) from Westerbork to Auschwitz, and later to Bergen-Belsen. There, Jaldati and her sister were among the few who took care of Anne and Margot Frank, and eventually buried both of them in a mass grave. After the liberation, Jaldati returned to Amsterdam and started working as a singer again, but the family struggled, and when Jaldati’s husband was offered a job as chief editor of a music journal in East Berlin in 1952 he gladly accepted. Only seven years after the war, Jaldati moved to the country of the perpetrators. Unlike her husband, Jaldati’s career was uncertain. The demand for Yiddish songs in postwar Germany was very low, but Jaldati, accompanied by her husband on the piano, nevertheless found an audience. Although she never became a member of the local Jewish community, Jaldati often performed at their cultural events. In 1952, they participated in a theatrical show commemorating Kristallnacht, the first of many to come.

In 1953, Jaldati took part in the inauguration of a memorial plaque at a train station in West Berlin’s Grunewald from where Jews had been deported in the 1940s. The police tried to prevent this, mostly due to the involvement of the Communist dominated VVN, which, already dissolved in the GDR, was a prohibited organisation at the time in West Berlin. GDR newspapers praised Jaldati’s actions as part of an anti-fascist resistance fight against a supposedly neo-fascist West German government. Yet, Jaldati was not merely a passive pawn in the party’s game, but an individual genuinely interested in the commemoration of Jewish victims. When the police tried to dissolve the rally at which all speeches were restricted, she started singing Hirsch Glik’s hymn to the Jewish partisans, *Zog nit keyn mol*. Although Jaldati soon incorporated German folk songs into her programme to attract a larger audience and to contribute to the anti-fascist narrative, she always stuck to the core of her repertoire of Yiddish songs, many of them with reference to the Holocaust such as Mordechai Gebirtig’s *S'brent* which soon became her theme song. Her growing reputation helped raise awareness of commemorative events in which she participated, but it never really altered the small, intimate character of them except for major anniversaries.

**ALL PROPAGANDA?**

It took years for the East German regime to realise that these events could be exploited in a propagandistic fashion. In 1958, on the twentieth anniversary
of Kristallnacht, an employee of the State Secretary for Church Affairs complained that unlike their counterparts in West Germany, no high-ranking politicians participated in the commemorative event. This would change in 1963. That year, the State Secretary organised a grand ceremony staged shortly before the opening of the Auschwitz trial in West German Frankfurt—the largest trial against Nazi perpetrators being held in the Federal Republic against former personnel from the Auschwitz concentration camp—and following a campaign against Hans Globke who had authored the legal commentary on the Nuremberg Race Laws in 1935, and in the 1960s served as the most influential state secretary of the West German Chancellery under Adenauer. In this setting, the SED took the opportunity of presenting the GDR as a place where Nazis were vigorously persecuted and Jews could live happily and safely. The Federal Republic, on the other hand, was demonised by speakers.

The official event was held on November 11, 1963 at the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden. A few days prior, the Association of Jewish Communities in the GDR had published an “Appeal to the Jews of the World and all Men of Good Will,” condemning neo-Fascist activities in West Germany and praising the GDR where “fascism, anti-Semitism, and racism have been uprooted.” The speeches delivered at the event were similar. As the GDR’s chief rabbi, Martin Riesenburger, put it: “We Jews always have a home where we find a home in the people’s hearts. Our home is here in the GDR where the brown past has flat out been dealt with.” These remarks seem to prove the often uttered accusation that the Jewish communities, and Riesenburger in particular, succumbed to the regime’s pressure, and assisted a dictatorship by lending themselves to propaganda. This puts a misleading moral perspective on the Jewish minorities’ behaviour, and suggests that they should have acted differently. Yet, Jewish GDR citizens often behaved just as the non-Jewish majority: at times they adopted the regime’s views and policies, sometimes they compromised and went along, and sometimes they ignored them or resisted.

Furthermore, Riesenburger’s statement cannot only be seen as propaganda. After 1945, socialism and anti-Fascism constituted the only condition under which Jewish life in Germany seemed possible at all to many survivors. The anti-Jewish actions of 1953 did not necessarily change that, for only a few months later, during the violent riots against the East German regime in June 1953, most Jews remaining in the GDR supported the regime suppressing the uprising. Too many remembered how an intractable mass of people could also pose a threat to the Jewish minority. Some were reminded of the events of 1938, and the few, but frightening instances of rioters chanting anti-Semitic slogans
in 1953 seemed to prove their point. While some certainly had their issues with the regime, there were few alternatives, if any. In 1950, Victor Klemperer noticed a “great divergence from the SED on all intellectual matters. But I cannot just move over to the West—it is even more repugnant to me.” While some were cross with the state, living in West Germany did not seem to be a viable alternative. Although reality often interfered, the desire for an anti-fascist Germany was strongly felt by many Jews, and one of the reasons they stayed.

Although the Jewish communities often assisted the SED by providing them with public statements of solidarity and support, they also retained some independence from the regime. They never publicly condemned Israel, for instance, something that the party often asked them to do, especially during various wars in the Middle East. Jewish groups also used whatever opportunity they had to highlight Jewish suffering under National Socialism. Since the Eichmann trial in 1961, the GDR government had appropriated the memory of the Holocaust for political campaigns against West Germany. Leading figures of the Jewish communities assisted them, but utilized these campaigns to implement their own agenda of fostering Holocaust memory. In 1963, the Association of Jewish Communities proposed a special stamp in memory of Kristallnacht which the GDR’s post then issued. Although the effect of this was benign, it was still a success for the association in their strife for recognition.

Accusing the Jewish communities’ chairmen of complicity in retrospect ignores the complex historical reality which often required compromise. Chairmen behaved the way they were supposed to at times, but received greater government focus on Jewish victims under National Socialism in return.

On some occasions, though, GDR Jewish communities were publicly forced to endorse state positions, such as in the period following the Six Day War in 1967. The State Secretary of Church Affairs, often manoeuvring between the party leadership’s intentions and the Jewish communities’ needs, suggested a public commemoration at the Ravensbrück memorial site. The commemoration, however, was not for Kristallnacht, but for the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution. At this ceremony, the Jewish communities were expected to proclaim their solidarity with the GDR. Helmut Aris, chairman of the Association of Jewish Communities, cunningly prevented this public humiliation. The date in October proposed by the State Secretary would collide with the Jewish holidays, he argued, so that only November 9, 1967, would be possible. Instead of Ravensbrück, Aris also suggested staging the event at the memorial site in Tröbitz in south Brandenburg. In 1945, one of the “Lost Transports”—three trains carrying Jewish inmates from the cleared
out Exchange Camp at Bergen-Belsen—ended in Tröbitz. Of the almost 2,500 people in the train, at least 133 died on the way, and some 320 more after the liberation in Tröbitz who were then buried in mass graves. A proper memorial site was inaugurated only in 1966, which soon became one of the most important sites in the GDR; the Association began holding events there, often around November 9.\textsuperscript{45}

The Kristallnacht commemoration in Tröbitz in 1967 encapsulates the ambiguity of Holocaust remembrance in the GDR, and the intricate relationship between the state and its Jewish communities. In his statement, Helmut Aris pledged “a clear allegiance to the GDR,” the “homeland where fascism and racism have been banned for ever.”\textsuperscript{46} In previous negotiations, however, both the Association and the State Secretary had agreed to leave out any remarks concerning the “Middle East problem” due to “different opinions.” When Herbert Ringer, vice chairman of the Association, asked whether a statement on the Jewish communities’ “stance on West Germany” was really necessary, the State Secretary insisted on it.\textsuperscript{47} Both groups benefited from that compromise: while the government received a public appraisal by the communities—not so much as an act of heartfelt allegiance, but as a necessary measure to ensure the regime’s toleration—the communities managed to stage a dignified event commemorating Kristallnacht in return.

NOVEMBER 9 AND THE GDR SOCIETY
For decades November 9 remained a date most relevant to the Jewish communities. Starting in the 1960s, though, other East German groups society began to realise its potential. The thirtieth anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1968 was celebrated not just by the Association, but also with a grand event hosted at East Berlin’s Academy of Arts where the publisher Verlag der Nation presented an anthology of poetry on the Holocaust, some of which were recited by famous writers such as Stephan Hermlin or Christa Wolf.\textsuperscript{48} Non-Jewish artists, writers, and intellectuals increasingly took an interest in the memory of the anti-Semitic persecution, contributing to a multi-faceted culture of remembrance about the Holocaust within the GDR.\textsuperscript{49}

GDR churches were another protagonist that would later prove of vital importance in toppling the SED. From the 1960s onwards, church groups staged their own events around November 9, mostly in towns where no Jewish com-
munity could survive; church–owned papers often published sermons on or recollections of the event. The Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, founded in 1958 in both Germanys, provided field trips to Holocaust memorials in Poland and Czechoslovakia to several thousand adolescents. The cooperation of Jewish communities and church groups intensified from the 1970s onwards, especially in promoting the “Christian-Jewish Dialogue.” In Leipzig, the fortieth anniversary of Kristallnacht was celebrated as a joint event by the local Jewish and the Versöhnungskirche community with its minister, Siegfried Theodor Arndt, one of the leading figures of Christian-Jewish relations in the GDR.

November 9 evolved into an occasion for protests. The authorities were sceptical of this new-found interest in Jewish matters by the churches who sometimes led demonstrations of dissent. On November 9, 1983, a small group of adolescents gathered in Leipzig at the memorial stone for a destroyed synagogue. Following a prayer in the nearby Nikolai church, they placed candles next to the stone. Shortly afterwards, the police arrived, removed the candles, and arrested everyone. The next evening, the adolescents returned to the same spot, provoking another response from authorities. Criticism of the regime’s policies and of an anti-fascist folklore that often tended to neglect Jewish and non-Communist victims was mixed with expressions of discontent with life in the GDR. This episode highlights how people with no particular connection to Jewish remembrance appropriated the event and used it for their own purpose, thereby expanding its meaning. Commemorating a historical event is, after all, never only about the past, but also about the present.

NEW DIMENSIONS: 1978–1988

High ranking party officials were rarely involved in commemorative events on November 9. Yet, in both German states, the fortieth anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1978 proved a critical turning point. For the first time the memory of November 1938 was acknowledged as something truly meaningful by both governments. In the Federal Republic, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and President Walter Scheel joined a festive ceremony in the main synagogue in Cologne while manifold other events were held. Similar events, albeit with less prominent personnel, were staged throughout the GDR, and the completion of the refurbishment of the synagogue at East Berlin’s Rykestrasse was used to open a special exhibition on the event, designed by the Museum for
German History. There are several reasons for this change: First, both governments reacted to a newly found interest in Jewish history and culture, an international trend at the time. Second, West Germany had been experiencing a new wave of interest for Hitler often with undisguised fascination, and a surge in right-wing extremism which was also felt, but not publicly acknowledged, in the GDR. Third, and probably most importantly, a new generation started to raise questions about the German past. The pressure of non-Jewish groups “from below” urged the political elite to react while often the groups took initiative themselves. Almost half of the forty-five plus events staged in memory of Kristallnacht in the GDR that year were organised by Protestant churches. Also, the party’s preference of highlighting 1938 instead of 1918 coincided with a general growing disinterest in the 1918 revolution. The Jewish communities gladly accepted this new form of attention, but kept a distance due to their experience with the state. Five years later, the forty-fifth anniversary was not celebrated, as it coincided with the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther. Helmut Aris refused to stage an event, referring to an “anti-Semitic atmosphere” in the GDR due to an “undifferentiated depiction of the situation in the Middle East”—the media coverage of the 1982 Lebanon War—which coincided with a noncritical appraisal of Luther and his anti-Semitic writings.

The greatest efforts by the SED were put into the organisation of the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1988. The regime recognised its chance to start what Harald Schmid called a “charm offensive.” However, the many events, publications, and speeches honouring the day did not have the intended effect. On the contrary, this “epidemic of remembrance,” as the Jewish journalist Salomea Genin noted, was the last grand effort of the regime to regain some international recognition and trust of the population, but failed eventually. Nevertheless, the memory of Kristallnacht and of the Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities were prominently addressed in 1988. The founding of the Centrum Judaicum, a Jewish cultural institution, at Berlin’s former synagogue at Oranienburger Straße was the clearest sign of a new appreciation of Jewish history. The connivance of ordinary Germans in the persecution of the Jews could now be expressed more clearly than before. A memorial plaque unveiled at a church in Dresden read: “We kept silent when their synagogues were burned, when Jews were deprived of their rights, expelled, and murdered. We did not recognise them as our brothers and sisters. We ask for forgiveness and shalom.” Such a clear acknowledgement of guilt had been mostly absent in the public since the 1940s, but speeches by Jewish dignitaries prior to 1988 included remarks to that effect. Furthermore, GDR historiography had finally
begun to address Kristallnacht in more detail. Kurt Pätzold, the GDR’s leading historian on the Holocaust, published several articles on the subject in which he depicted the German population as beneficiaries of forcefully sold or confiscated Jewish property. He also published an edition of unknown documents on Kristallnacht together with Jewish sociologist Irene Runge, whose introductory essay candidly reviewed the overall missing protest by non-Jewish observers in 1938.

CONCLUSION

November 9 was an occasion for the commemoration of Kristallnacht and the Shoah throughout the GDR’s existence, yet it rarely reached an importance similar to other anniversaries such as the founding of the GDR or even the Day of the Victims of Fascism. While the government soon opted for a highlighting of Communist resistance during the war and the blaming of a few high-ranking capitalists for the crimes, in order to deviate attention away from pressuring questions about German guilt and individual involvement in Nazi crimes, Jewish survivors chose a different approach. Torn between their own experiences of persecution, leading to a highly critical assessment of the postwar German society eager to forget its recent past, and their desire to believe in the possibility of a truly better, anti-fascist Germany, survivors and returned émigrés had to negotiate with the non-Jewish elite about their agenda. Contrary to what 1990s research on the Jewish communities suggested, the chairmen did not merely succumb to the regime’s pressure, but managed to form compromises leaving all parties involved mostly satisfied with the outcome. Thus, the communities were able to shape the events in their will, eking out “a peripheral yet largely unmolested existence” in the GDR, as Jay Geller put it. The memory of Kristallnacht in the GDR is a prime example of how negotiations between the state, Jewish communities, and other groups such as Protestant churches, unfolded, and how different parties strove to find the best possible solution for themselves and their members.

Furthermore, it shows that clear cut paradigms like the state and the Jews are insufficient in explaining the intricate historical situation. Using November 9 as an occasion to criticize West Germany’s policies and neo-fascist activities, for instance, served the interests of both the Jewish communities and the government as it highlighted Jewish suffering during National Socialism, mostly
unimpaired careers of perpetrators after 1945, and emphasized the GDR’s anti-fascist aura. The commemorative events were the most explicit way of highlighting the experience of Jewish victims, though the public perception of this tragedy only became pronounced after the late 1970s, very similar to developments in the Federal Republic. Beforehand, Jewish survivors had to rely on themselves in organising commemorative events while public perception remained negligible.

On November 9, 1989, a large crowd of tens of thousands of people gathered in Leipzig to hold a silent protest at the memorial stone for the former synagogue. Speakers demanded a change in politics, and an improved relationship with Israel. A press conference held that same day in Berlin led to a very different kind of commemoration—and celebration: the fall of the Berlin wall, which initiated the end of the GDR. November 9 had once again become a relevant date in German history.
Notes


10. Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Chemnitz (SächsStA-C), 32672 VVN, Nr. 47.


19. SED Kreisvorstand to SED Landesvorstand, October 26, 1949, Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Dresden (SächsSta-D), 11856 SED-Landesleitung Sachsen, IV/A/1800.

20. Letter from Kurt Schatter, the addressee is unclear, November 23, 1951, Centrum Judaicum Archive (CJA), Berlin, 5 B 1, Nr. 6.


22. It is unclear which poem was meant here. Yet, one year later, a poem under that title was published in the VVN paper *Die Tat* on November 5, 1949, 6. See the correspondence, announcements, and programme in SächsStA-C, 32672 VVN, Nr. 47; SächsSta-D, 11410, Kreisrat Bautzen, Nr. 868.

23. See the programmes in Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), C Rep. 118-01, Nr. 38958; BArch, DY 54/V 277/1/45. Cf. Peter Monteath, "A Day to Remember: East Germany's Day


27. See Y. Michal Bodemann, *Gedächtnistheater. Die jüdische Gemeinschaft und ihre deutsche Erfindung* (Hamburg: Rotbuch-Verlag, 1996), 108. Newspaper articles prove that such events took place every year, at least in Berlin, but surely also in other communities.


29. See the letters and invitations in Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (AdK), Peter-Edel-Archiv, Nr. 744; CJA, 2 A 2, Nr. 431; CJA, 5 A 1, Nr. 491; LAB, C Rep. 104, Nr. 2093.


37. “’Unsere Heimat ist hier in der DDR.’ Gedenkkundgebung zum 25. Jahrestag der


44. CJA, 5 B 1, Nr. 235, p. 22.


47. CJA, 5 B 1, Nr. 235, Bl. 22.


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