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**EAST GERMAN COMMUNISTS  
AND THE JEWISH QUESTION**  
The Case of Paul Merker

*Jeffrey Herf*

FOURTH  
ALOIS MERTES MEMORIAL LECTURE

1994



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The lecture is named in honor of one of the most prominent members of the *Christlich-Demokratische Union* during the reconstruction of post-war Germany. It is made possible by a grant from the *Stifterverband für die deutsche Wissenschaft*.

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## Preface

THE DEMISE OF THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (GDR) and the almost immediate access to its official documents granted to the scholarly community have led to a virtual stampede of historians and political scientists to archives and repositories housing the records of the former East German state. The initial results of this research activity have been highly interesting, if sometimes controversial, as the ideological foundations of the former workers' and peasants' state are increasingly shown to have been built on quicksand and the serious shortcomings of its economic and social structures are brought to light in ever greater detail. One of the most intriguing questions of the history of the GDR, whose ideological *raison d'être* lay in its very claim to be the standard bearer of antifascism, concerns the way in which the Communist leadership chose to deal with the entire complex of issues involving Germany's Nazi past, Israel, the Jews, and anti-Semitism.

Michael Wolffsohn explored certain international aspects of this theme in the Institute's first Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture in 1991. In the fourth lecture in this series, Jeffrey Herf illustrates the nature of this contradictory relationship by analyzing the case of Paul Merker, an East German Communist leader who paid with imprisonment and the destruction of his political career for his pro Jewish sentiments, his support of *Wiedergutmachung*, and his sympathies for the state of Israel in the 1950s. As Herf points out, the Merker case clearly shows how the self-proclaimed antifascist regime of the GDR did and did not directly face the Nazi past. In contrast to the Slansky trial, for example, the Merker case made no headlines and was nobody's cause célèbre, but it belongs to those "lost causes" and "silenced voices" whose history can only now be written.

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1981. He has taught modern political, intellectual, and international European and German history at Harvard and Emory Universities. In the *Sommersemester* of 1994, he was a Fulbright Visiting Professor at the University of Freiburg, Germany.

Dr. Herf has been the recipient of research fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the German Academic Exchange Service, the German Marshall Fund, the Harry and Lynde Bradley Foundation, the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna, the Max Planck Gesellschaft, the Forschungsschwerpunkt für Zeithistorische Studien in Potsdam, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has been a research associate at Harvard, the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Chicago. In 1991–92, he was a Volkswagen Foundation Fellow at the German Historical Institute and the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Herf's publications include *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), which has also appeared in Italian, Japanese, Spanish, and Portuguese translation, and *War by Other Means: Soviet Power, West German Resistance and the Battle of the Euromissiles* (New York: The Free Press, 1991). His many articles concerning twentieth-century German history have been published in both American and German scholarly journals. He has also written political essays for *Partisan Review*, the *FrankfurterAllgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Zeit*. The material in the fourth Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture draws on research for his study *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanies*, to be published by Harvard University Press in 1996.

We are pleased to present Dr. Herf's lecture as the eleventh in our series of Occasional Papers.

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Detlef Junker

“ICH BIN WEDER JUDE NOCH ZIONIST—ein Verbrechen wäre wohl keines von beiden.” “I am neither a Jew nor a Zionist, though certainly, it would be no crime to be either.”<sup>1</sup> So stated the German Communist and former Central Committee member Paul Merker in June 1956 in a declaration on the Jewish question written for the Central Party Control Commission (ZPKK) of the Central Committee of the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED). We are familiar with the Doctor's Plot in Moscow in 1949 and the Slansky trial in Prague in 1952.<sup>2</sup> But the Merker affair was largely unknown, certainly before 1989, outside the circles of quietly dissenting historians in the former German Democratic Republic and GDR experts in West Germany.<sup>3</sup> Documents from the recently opened archives of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Merker, "An die Zentrale Kontrollkommission des ZK der SED. Stellungnahme zur Judenfrage," June 1, 1956, Stiftung Archiv für Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, Zentrales Parteiarchiv (hereafter referred to as SAPMO-BA, ZPA), NL Paul Merker 102/27, 16.

<sup>2</sup> On the Jews, Communism, and anti-Semitism in Europe after 1945, see François Fejto, *Les juifs et l'antisemitisme dans les pays communistes* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1960); German edition, *Judentum und Kommunismus in Osteuropa* (Vienna, Frankfurt/M. and Zurich: Europa Verlag, 1967). On the Jewish question and East German Communists, see Olaf Groehler, "Integration und Ausgrenzung von NS-Opfern. Zur Anerkennung- und Entschädigungsdebatte in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands 1945 bis 1949," and Mario Kessler, "Zwischen Repression und Toleranz. Die SED-Politik und die Juden (1949 bis 1967)," in Jürgen Kocka, ed., *Historische DDR-Forschung. Aufbau und Studien* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), 105–29 and 149–68. On *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in both Germanies, see Jürgen Danyel, "Die geteilte Vergangenheit. Gesellschaftliche Ausgangslagen und politische Dispositionen für den Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Widerstand in beiden deutschen Staaten nach 1949," in *ibid.*, 129–48.

<sup>3</sup> On the Merker case, see Karl Wilhelm Fricke, *Warten auf Gerechtigkeit. Kommunistische Säuberungen und Rehabilitierungen, Bericht und Dokumentation* (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1971); *id.*, *Politik und Justiz in der DDR. Zur Geschichte der politischen Verfolgung 1945–1968, Bericht und Dokumentation* (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1979); Rudi Beckert and

the SED and the East German Ministry of State Security, the Stasi, support the view that the Merker case was the decisive turning point in the history of the Jewish question in East Germany. Merker's denunciation, arrest, imprisonment, and only partial rehabilitation between 1950 and 1956 constituted a decisive blow against hopes for a distinctively East German Communist confrontation with the Jewish catastrophe or for Communist solidarity with the Jews in the form of warm or close relations with Israel.<sup>4</sup> Before 1945 most German Communists and, after 1945, most East German Communists viewed "the Jewish question"—that is, the whole complex of anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and the place of the Jews in Germany and Europe—as peripheral to the main drama of class struggle and antifascism. However, before and after 1945, there existed a minority Communist tradition in which the Jewish question was central. Paul Merker was its leading representative.<sup>5</sup>

I am aware of the irony of speaking about the persecution of a left-wing Communist in a lecture named after one of the most articulate of West Germany's moderate conservative and emphatically anti-Communist diplomats and politicians. Yet Alois Mertes, the cold warrior and anti-Communist, insisted on connecting the issue of human rights in Eastern Europe and East Germany to that of the

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Karl Wilhelm Fricke, "Auf Weisung des Politbüros. Aus den Geheimprozeßakten des Obersten DDR-Gerichts, Teil III: Der Fall Paul Merker," (Hamburg: Deutschlandfunk, Zur Diskussion/Geschichte Aktuell, January 10, 1992); George Hermann Hodos, *Schauprozesse. Stalinistische Säuberungen in Osteuropa 1948–1954* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus Verlag, 1988); Jeffrey Herf, "Dokumentation. Antisemitismus in der SED: Geheime Dokumente zum Fall Paul Merker aus SED- und WS-Archiven," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 4 (1994): 635–67; id., "Der Geheimprozeß," *Die Zeit*, October 7, 1994; Wolfgang Kießling, *Partner im "Narrenparadies". Der Freundkreis um Noel Field und Paul Merker* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> On East German historians and the Jewish question, see Helmut Eschwege, *Fremd unter meinesgleichen. Erinnerungen eines Dresdner Juden* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1991). On East Germany and Israel, see Inge Deutschkron, *Israel und die Deutschen* (1983).

<sup>5</sup> This lecture draws on ongoing research for my study of *Politics and Memory in the Two Germanies*, forthcoming with Harvard University Press in 1996. See also Jeffrey Herf, "East German Communists and the Jewish Question: The Case of Paul Merker," *Journal of Contemporary History* (Fall 1994): 627–61.



German national question. He did so in part to insure that the latter "never again falls into the hands of brown or red totalitarianism."<sup>6</sup> He rejected the application of double standards in regard to dictatorships and human rights violations. Had he been Paul Merker's contemporary, I can well imagine that they might have met on the common terrain of the anti-Nazi resistance. His long-standing and genuine efforts on behalf of close West German-Israeli relations and his attempts to improve the dialogue between Jews in Germany and the United States are all a matter of public record. His premature death in 1985 deprived German politics and society of a badly needed senior, moderate conservative voice in support of a multi-ethnic as well as a unified and democratic Germany.

So perhaps it is not so strange after all that a lecture named after a Catholic, conservative politician should recall the persecution of a most secular German Communist from Berlin. Mertes and Merker would have disagreed about almost every aspect of German politics—but not about the Jewish question. Hence, it is fitting that an Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture examine an important event in the history of the Jewish question in East Germany. In so doing, I seek to extend our understanding of those traditions of German anti-Nazism and antifascism that were repressed by representatives of the official antifascism of the East German regime and left out of the antitotalitarian consensus in West Germany. In view of the continuing violence in Germany in recent years directed against people who, for the most part, should long ago have been called "citizens" rather than "foreigners," it is especially important that we recall those German political traditions that point toward a multi-ethnic democracy.

I can restate this plea in neo-historicist language of the German historian Thomas Nipperdey, who emphasized that German unification must not mean the suppression of the multiple continuities and lost causes of German history in the name of a homogeneous nation and *Volk*.<sup>7</sup> Rather, it offers the opportunity to examine those

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<sup>6</sup> Alois Mertes, *Verhandlungen des deutschen Bundestages* (June 21, 1978), 7823, cited in Jeffrey Herf, *War By Other Means: Soviet Power, West German Resistance and the Battle of the Euromissiles* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas Nipperdey, *Nachdenken über die deutsche Geschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1986).

traditions and aspects of German history that faded from view during the Cold War and that historians are now able and impelled to examine. One of those continuities was the German anti-Nazi resistance composed of the dissident Communists who fell afoul of Hitler, Stalin, and their own orthodox German comrades and who fought as fiercely against anti-Semitism and for a multi-ethnic Germany as they did against German capitalism. Paul Merker was the leading figure of this tradition.<sup>8</sup>

After the November pogrom of 1938, and especially after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the German Communist response to the Jewish question divided into two variants. The dominant current found expression in Moscow in the wartime speeches, radio addresses, and essays of Walter Ulbricht and Wilhelm Neck, the leading figures of the German Communist emigration in Moscow.<sup>9</sup> While the Nazis attacked "Jewish Bolshevism," the German Communists in Moscow reduced their public identification with the great outsider of the German nation, the Jews.<sup>10</sup> Ulbricht and Pieck focused on the suffering and later the triumph of the Soviet Union, as well as on their—bitterly disappointed—hopes for an indigenous German revolt to overthrow the Nazis. There were Jewish Communists in Moscow who recognized the connection between anti-Semitism and National Socialist anti-Communism and who spoke out clearly about the Holocaust. However, the Jewish catastrophe did not figure prominently in statements of the German Communist emigration in the Moscow group's first "Appeal" to the Germans published in Berlin in June 1945 or in Walter Ulbricht's

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<sup>8</sup> See Eschwege, *Fremd unter meinesgleichen*; Olaf Groehler, "Aber sie haben nicht gekämpft!" *Konkret* 5 (May 1992): 38–44; Wolfgang Kießling, "Paul Merker und der 'Sozialismus der dummen Kerls'," *Neues Deutschland* December 1, 1992, 14.

<sup>9</sup> See Jeffrey Herf, "German Communism, the Discourse of Antifascism, and the Jewish Catastrophe," in Michael Geyer and John Boyer, eds., *Resistance Against the Third Reich* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 257–94.

<sup>10</sup> On the links between Marxism, Communism, and German nationalism, see the important and provocative arguments of Liah Greenfeld in *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

main postwar text concerning Nazism, *Die Legende vom Deutschen Sozialismus* (The Legend of German Socialism).<sup>11</sup>

German Communism included a second minority tradition in which the Jewish question moved from the periphery to the center of the struggle against Nazism. It found its fullest expression in the German Communist emigration in wartime Mexico City, and Paul Merker (1894–1969) was its most important advocate. In Mexico City between 1942 and 1945 and, more quietly, in East Berlin from 1946 to 1948, Merker emerged as the one and only member of the German Communist Party's (KPD) Politburo and, after 1946, of the SED's Central Committee who put the Jewish question at the center of his concerns as a Communist. Merker joined the KPD in 1920. He was a member of its left wing and served in the Prussian legislature. Merker distinguished himself, in part, by the harshness of his attacks on "social fascism," that is, Weimar Social Democracy, and on the Social Democratic trade union leadership. He spent time in Moscow and served as a Comintern agent representing the *Rote Gewerkschaft Internationale* in the United States from 1931 to 1933. Here, under the code names Max Fischer and Siegfried Willner, he engaged in trade union work, attended meetings of the Central Committee of the American Communist Party, and befriended the party leader, Earl Browder. After a year in the Communist underground in Berlin in 1933–1934, he fled to Prague, Moscow, and then Paris, where, from 1936 to 1939, he, along with Walter Ulbricht and Franz Dahlem, directed the *Auslandssekretariat* (Foreign Office) of the KPD. From 1939 to 1941 he was interned in the Vichy internment camp in Vernet along with Arthur Koestler, whose brief description of the camp appears in his novel *Scum of the Earth*. In 1942, with financial and visa assistance from French Gaullists, the Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee in New York, and the subsequently infamous Noel H. Field, Merker, his wife, and other German Communists were able to flee to Mexico City.

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Ulbricht, *Die Legende vom deutschen Sozialismus. Ein Lehrbuch für das schaffende Volk über das Wesen des deutschen Faschismus* (Berlin: Verlag Neuer Weg, 1945). Also see Jeffrey Herf, "Multiple Restorations: German Political Leaders Interpret Nazism, 1945–1946," *Central European History* 26, No. 1 (1993): 21–57.

In Mexico City, Merker was the only member of the KPD Politburo.<sup>12</sup> From the fall of 1942 to December 1945, he contributed regularly to *Freies Deutschland* the bi-weekly journal of the German Communists in Mexico City, assumed responsibility for its general political line, and kept up an extensive correspondence with such leading figures of the German anti-Nazi emigration as Ernst Bloch, Thomas Mann, and, above all, Heinrich Mann. In sharp contrast to the writings of the Moscow group, Merker's publications on Nazism and World War II placed anti-Semitism and the Jewish catastrophe at the center of the antifascist struggle. The timing of the evolution of his views suggests that the impact of his stays in the United States, France, and Mexico, as well as the effects of the spirit of the wartime anti-Hitler coalition, contributed to a greater understanding of the Jewish question and to a greater willingness to work with non-Communist refugees.

Paul Merker was not Jewish. However, he was appalled by German anti-Semitism and understood and appreciated the contributions of Jews to German history, including their contributions to the socialist and Communist tradition. While in New York and Chicago, he met and worked with Jewish Communists, whose support for equality for American blacks and opposition to white racism within the American working class left a lasting impression on him. While in the Communist underground in Berlin in 1934, he was hidden by Jews who made their homes and apartments available to "illegal comrades." From the pogrom in 1938, he concluded that "the struggle of the German working class against anti-Semitism had been inadequate" and that it was "the special duty of non-Jewish people to decisively stand up against anti-Semitism."<sup>13</sup>

Soon after arriving in Mexico City, he published "Hitler's Anti-Semitism and Us" in *Freies Deutschland* in October 1942. He wrote that, "if all of the German rivers flowed with ink and all the German forests were made of quill pens, they would not suffice to describe the immeasurable crimes which Hitler fascism has commit-

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<sup>12</sup> On the German Communist emigration in Mexico City, see Wolfgang Kießling, *Alemania Libre in Mexiko. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des antifaschistischen Exils (1941–1946)* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> Merker, "An die Zentrale Kontrollkommission des ZK der SED."

ted against the Jewish people."<sup>14</sup> He stressed the commonality of the interests of Jews and Communists, supported restitution for the Jewish survivors, and expressed understanding for the growth of Jewish national feeling and the desire for a Jewish state. He envisaged a postwar Germany with a restored Jewish community. He supported practical financial assistance to help bring about this result. He also pointed to differences between the persecution of Jews and that of Communists: The former were persecuted because of who they were and thus had the same right as did "all of the nations Hitler invaded and oppressed." The latter were persecuted because of what they believed and did. They had voluntarily taken up the struggle against the Nazis and thus could not "expect material compensation for the sacrifices that result." Victory over Nazism was their compensation. Both in Mexico City during the war and in postwar East Berlin, these arguments met with considerable inner-party opposition.

In addition to his articles in *Freies Deutschland* in 1944 Merker published *Deutschland—Sein oder Nichtsein*, a two-volume study of close to a thousand pages on the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the nature of Nazi Germany.<sup>15</sup> Originally published by a press associated with the *Bewegung Freies Deutschland* (Movement for a Free Germany), the work, though highly praised by Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann, Ernst Bloch, and other intellectual and political figures of the German emigration, remained little known. The SED regime prevented it from being published in the GDR, and it did not play a significant role in the "fascism discussion" of the West German New Left in the 1960s. However, it is a stimulating work and one that bears comparison with another major study on Nazism published by a German left-leaning émigré in 1944, Franz Neumann's *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Merker, "Antisemitismus und wir," *Freies Deutschland* 1, No. 12 (October 1942): 9–11.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Merker, *Deutschland—Sein oder Nichtsein?* Band I: *Von Weimar zu Hitler* (Mexico City: Editoriale 'El Libro Libre Mexico, 1944; reprint, Frankfurt/M.: Materialismus Verlag, 1973); Band II: *Das Dritte Reich und sein Ende* (Mexico City: Editoriale 'El Libro Libre Mexico, 1945; reprint, Frankfurt/M.: Materialismus Verlag, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944).

More so than Neumann, Merker stressed the autonomous dynamic of Nazi racial ideology and its contribution to the unfolding Jewish catastrophe. One can take issue with Merker's conventional Communist arguments about the links between capitalism and fascism and his attacks on Weimar Social Democrats, yet still recognize the work to be an important contemporary analysis of the Nazi regime.

Though Merker's enemies within the party accused him of criticizing the Hitler-Stalin Pact, he vehemently disputed these accusations and, on numerous occasions, repeated his solidarity with the Soviet Union. Indeed, in Mexico City, he favorably contrasted the position of the Jews in the Soviet Union to that in the Russian Empire. He never published an essay critical of the Soviet Union, and he worked in a German-Soviet friendship society after his release from prison in 1956. The tone of his published work and his choice of friends during World War II convey the spirit of the anti-Hitler coalition and suggest a Communist able and willing to work with non-Communists. He never saw Communism as a god that failed. Indeed, his orthodoxy in regard to the leading role of the Communist Party made his dissent on the Jewish question all the more striking.

In 1946, before he returned to Berlin, Merker was elected to be a member of the Central Committee of the SED when it was founded in 1946. In the SED's office of labor and social welfare in East Berlin from 1946 to 1948, he worked with Leo Zuckermann, who was Jewish, a lawyer, a member of the *Freies Deutschland* group in Mexico City, as well as of the KPD and the SED, and a future chief assistant to East German President Wilhelm Pieck. Merker again argued in favor of financial restitution for all of the German-Jewish survivors and urged members of the occupation government to combat anti-Semitism in the Soviet zone. In bitter political and bureaucratic disputes within the emergent Communist governing apparatus, Merker argued for placing the claims of the Jewish *victims* on the same—elevated—moral and political level as those of former Communist "antifascist resistance *fighters*."<sup>17</sup> In the summer of 1948, Merker published "Der Krieg in Palästina" (The War in Palastine), in which he expressed his enduring solidarity with the

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<sup>17</sup> See SAPMO-BA, ZPA, Sekretariat Lehmann IV/2027/29-33 (Wiedergutmachung gegenüber den Verfolgten des Naziregimes 1945-1950).

Jews. He supported the creation of the state of Israel, praised the Jewish struggle against British imperialism, American oil interests, and "reactionary interests" of Arab princes and feudal strata, and appealed for close relations between Israel and the Soviet Union and the "new democracies" of Eastern Europe.<sup>18</sup> For Merker, "Der Krieg in Palästina" turned out to be a most untimely essay.

Merker's speeches and publications in Mexico City from 1942 to 1946 and his engagement on behalf of the Jewish survivors in East Berlin from 1946 to 1950 represent the only extended confrontation with the Jewish catastrophe by a member of the Politburo of the KPD or of the Central Committee of the SED in the history of German and East German Communism. They would become the most damning pieces of evidence in a six-year ordeal from 1950 to 1956, during which time he was expelled from the Communist Party in 1950, arrested as a spy in 1952, interrogated in prison from 1952 to 1955, convicted in a secret political trial in East Germany's Supreme Court in 1955, and declared innocent but not worthy of a full political "rehabilitation" in 1956.

In 1948 and 1949, Soviet foreign and domestic policy took a decidedly anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish turn away from support for these former "victims of fascism" toward an extensive and anti-Semitic assault on "cosmopolitanism" at home and Zionism abroad. Now the *Mexikaner*, that is, the German Communists who fled to Mexico City, fell under suspicion of being "cosmopolitans" and hence Western spies and agents. The attack on Paul Merker and others he knew in the French and Mexican emigration took place in this context. Within the SED, the key institution charged with purging the party of "spies and saboteurs" and "corrupt elements" was the ZPKK. Its key figure, the grand inquisitor of the SED, was its chairman, Hermann Matern.

Paul Merker's political career as a leading figure of German Communism ended in August 1950, when he was expelled from the Central Committee and the SED due to espionage accusations stemming from his wartime contact with Noel H. Field. His expulsion was announced in a public resolution of the Central Committee and

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Merker, "Der Krieg in Palästina" (August 1948), SAPMO-BA, ZPA, NL Paul Merker 102/45.

the Central Party Control Commission.<sup>19</sup> Though the denunciation of Merker in connection with the Field affair contained no explicitly anti-Zionist or anti-Jewish rhetoric, with the exception of Merker, all of the accused were Jewish. All had been in emigration in the West. Yet, if the Merker case had ended there, it would have remained only another of the espionage cases, like the Hiss and Rosenberg cases, linked to the rapid reversal of alliances and loyalties entailed in the shift from the anti-Hitler coalition to the Cold War. Or, given Merker's two years in the United States, six years in France, and four years in Mexico, it would have been another example of the suspicion and paranoia that greeted so many Communists who had fled to the West during the Nazi era.

Merker's denunciation in connection with Field, however, was only the beginning of his difficulties. His fate was sealed by the outcome of the show trial against Rudolf Slansky and other high-ranking Communist—mostly Jewish—defendants in Prague in November 1952. On December 3, 1952, four days after Stasi agents had arrested Merker in Berlin, Rudolf Slansky (the second most powerful figure in the Czech Communist Party and government), Otto Fischl (the former Czech ambassador to East Germany), and Merker's friend Otto Katz (André Simone) were among the eleven mostly Jewish defendants to be executed in Prague by hanging. In the trial, confessions of extremely dubious origins from the accused included accusations that Merker was linked to Slansky, Simone, and Fischl in an international conspiracy to destroy Communism in Eastern and Central Europe.

On December 20, 1952, with the publication of "Lehren aus dem Prozeß gegen das Verschwörerzentrum Slansky" (Lessons of the Trial against the Slansky Conspiracy Center), the Communist Party leaders in East Germany struck the decisive blow against Merker.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Erklärung des Zentralkomitees und der Zentralen Parteikontroll-kommission zu den Verbindungen ehemaliger deutscher politischer Emigranten zu dem Leiter des Unitarian Service Committee Noel H. Field." In *Dokumente der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands Band III* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1952), 197–213. The statement was written by and under the direction of Hermann Matern.

<sup>20</sup> "Lehren aus dem Prozeß gegen das Verschwörerzentrum Slansky." In *Dokumente der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Band IV* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1954), 199–219.



The author of the statement, Hermann Matern, denounced the "criminal activities of the Zionist organizations." According to Matern, the Slansky trial had clearly shown that "American imperialism organized and implemented its various espionage activities in the peoples' democracies with the state of Israel and with the help of Zionist organizations." Merker, Matern continued, had been shown to be the German branch of this international conspiracy. Zionism had "nothing in common with the goals of humanity." It was a tool of "U.S. imperialism and exclusively served its interests and the interests of Jewish capitalists."

Matern's denunciation rested on an old anti-Semitic stereotype, namely, the pejorative connection between the Jews and capitalism. In Mexico, Matern argued, Merker had defended "the interests of Zionist monopoly capitalists." Merker was a "subject of the U.S. financial oligarchy who called for compensation for Jewish property in order to facilitate the penetration of U.S. finance capital into [postwar] Germany. This is the real basis of his [Merker's] Zionism." Merker's support for *Wiedergutmachung* concerned, "above all ... wealthy Jewish economic emigrants." With such arguments, Matern retrospectively reinterpreted the wartime cooperation and solidarity between some German Communists in the Western emigration, on the one hand, and German Jewish emigrants, American Jewish and non-Jewish Communists, leftists, and liberals, on the other hand, into an enormous and powerful international conspiracy of American imperialists and Jewish capitalists. "Lehren aus dem Prozeß gegen das Verschwörerzentrum Slanski" presented the good old international Jewish conspiracy, this time in a Communist discourse. In Matern's statement, the Jews ceased to be "victims of fascism" and once again became the active perpetrators of a powerful international and anti-German conspiracy. Once again, a German government attacked the Jews for being cosmopolitans rather than true members of the nation. And, only seven years after the destruction of European Jewry, Matern described this conspiracy as small in numbers but extremely powerful and a major threat to the Communist states and parties. As the German political sociologist and historian Sigrid Meuschel has pointed out, German nationalism, this time of a

Communist variant, once again defined itself in opposition to a Western, capitalist, international, liberal, Jewish conspiracy.<sup>21</sup>

Matern also turned Merker's praise of the voluntary engagement and courage of Communist antifascists upside down in a contemptuous effort to say that their "sacrifice and suffering counts for nothing compared to the sacrifices and the suffering of the Jewish people." But it was Matern, not Merker, who turned the memory of the past into a zero-sum game in which recognition of the Jewish tragedy had to come at the price of non-recognition of Communist antifascist activities or the suffering of others. He imputed to Merker disdain and contempt for the suffering of the Communists that is nowhere to be found in anything Merker wrote or said.

The winter of 1952–1953 was the decisive turning point in the history of the Jewish question in the German Democratic Republic. In January and February 1953, fear spread through the tiny East German Jewish community and among the Jewish members of the Communist Party, all of whom were now potential targets of espionage accusations. Hundreds fled to the West. East German Communists who knew Merker and who agreed with his views on the Jewish question understood the dangers of remaining in the GDR. In December 1950, Alexander Abusch, the editor of *Freies Deutschland* in Mexico City, had been relieved of all his party functions in part because, as the Central Party Control Commission put it, "he published Merker's false views on the question of Jewish emigration," the nationalities question, and *Wiedergutmachung* toward the Jews.<sup>22</sup> In his exchanges with officials of the ZPKK, Abusch insisted that, though born into a Jewish family, he had no interest at all in Jewish matters.<sup>23</sup> He proved his lack of interest in testifying against Merker to the ZPKK and the Stasi, as well as in the secret political trial of 1955. He gained his sought-after political

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<sup>21</sup> See Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1992), 101–116.

<sup>22</sup> See "Betr.: Alexander Abusch, Berlin" (December 11, 1950), SAPMO–BA, ZPA, ZPKK IV 2/4/111, 54.

<sup>23</sup> See Alexander Abusch, "Ergänzungen zu meinen mündlichen Aussagen vom 10.11.1950," 42–45, and id., "Skizze der innerparteilichen politischen Diskussionen in Mexiko 1942/45," 47–51, in SAPMO–BA, ZPA, ZPKK IV 2/4/111.

rehabilitation in the summer of 1951 and even became the GDR's Minister of Culture from 1958 to 1961.

Leo Zuckermann, again Merker's ally, this time in bureaucratic fights over *Wiedergutmachung* in postwar East Berlin, also understood the dangers of partisanship on behalf of the Jews and/or Israel. In 1949 and 1950, Zuckermann had been the director of the office of East German President Wilhelm Pieck. In the wake of the Field affair, he resigned from that position in 1950 and took up a university teaching post. In January 1953, fearing arrest, he fled with his family to West Berlin. Julius Meyer, the head of the organized Jewish community in East Berlin, a member of the SED and the East German parliament (the *Volkskammer*), and a participant in the *Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes* (Association of Those Persecuted by the Nazi Regime), and Leo Löwenkopf, the chairman of the organized Jewish community in Dresden, did likewise. The arrest of Merker, followed by the flight of Zuckermann, Löwenkopf, and Meyer, meant the elimination from the political scene of the leading advocates for Jewish interests within the East German Communist Party and government. The entry or, as the case may be, re-entry ticket into the East German political elite for those Jews who remained, or recovered prominent positions, in the SED, such as Albert Norden and, after a while, Alexander Abusch, entailed saying little or nothing publicly about the murder of European Jewry. It also meant accepting without protest the diplomatic attack of the Soviet bloc on Israel and focusing antifascist energies on attacking developments in West Germany. As of December 1952–January 1953, it was clear that the silence concerning the Jewish question in East Germany was no longer primarily a result of the inadequacies of Marxist-Leninist theories of fascism and antifascism. By then, East German Communists, Jews and non-Jews, understood that sympathy for the Jews as expressed by Merker was not only "incorrect"; it was dangerous.

Merker was imprisoned in East Berlin from December 1952 to January 1956. During that time, he was interrogated by agents of the Stasi and the Soviet NKVD. Merker's Stasi file comprises over a thousand typed and handwritten pages.<sup>24</sup> He was repeatedly asked

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<sup>24</sup> For the Merker file, see Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,

if he "was a member of Jewish-Zionist organizations."<sup>25</sup> According to the conversations between Merker and his cellmate, who was a Stasi informant, during the early months of his imprisonment in the winter and spring of 1953, the NKVD and Stasi agents had threatened Merker with death and also threatened his family. They told him that his article "Antisemitism and Us," written in 1942, showed that he was a *Judenknecht*, a "servant of the Jews." They ridiculed him as "the king of the Jews," as one who "had been bought by the Jews" and whose intention was to "sell the GDR off to the Jews."<sup>26</sup> Again and again, they probed his contact with and assistance from Jews, both Communists and non-Communists, during the French and Mexican emigration for further evidence of his participation in an espionage conspiracy.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, with Lavrenty Beria close to the pinnacle of power in Moscow, the attack on Jewish Communists and their non-Jewish Communist friends continued. In 1954 in Budapest, Noel and Herta Field were cleared of the charges of spying for the United States. But Merker was not released from prison. Merker believed that the NKVD and Stasi were preparing a spectacular public show trial in Berlin in which he would be denounced as the German Slansky. Instead, he was tried in East Germany's Supreme Court, the *Oberste Gericht*. Merker refused to confess to participation in an espionage conspiracy. In addition to the presence of an uncooperative defendant, perhaps Merker's trial remained secret because Walter Ulbricht and the East German leadership understood how bizarre it would appear for an "antifascist" German government to be convicting a veteran Communist for espionage as a result of his sympathies for the Jews. The trial remained a secret until the collapse of the GDR in 1989 and the opening of access to the archives of the *Oberste Gericht*, which had been transferred to the Stasi archives. On March 30, 1955, the judges of the East German Supreme Court sentenced Merker to

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(hereafter referred to as BStU), Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (hereafter referred to as MfS), Archiv Nr. 192/56, Untersuchungsvorgang No. 294/52, Paul Merker, Bde. I-III; and BStU, 000156-000410.

<sup>25</sup> See "Vernehmungsprotokoll des Häftlings, Merker, Paul Friedrich" (March 3, 1953), BStU, MfS, Archiv Nr. 192/56, Untersuchungsvorgang Nr. 294/52 Paul Merker, Band II, 000122.

<sup>26</sup> Merker, "An die Zentrale Kontrollkommission des ZK der SED," 1.

eight years in prison.<sup>27</sup> Merker and his wife, Margaret Menzel-Merker, who were both loyal Communists, insisted that his entire prosecution was a violation of Marxist-Leninist principles. They never tried to flee to the West, to publicize the case within or outside East Germany, or to offer any evidence of disillusionment with the Party or the regime. The Merker case was no one's cause célèbre during the Cold War.

The court's verdict closely followed the political indictment that Matern had voiced in December 1952. Pointing to the Slansky trial, the judges convicted Merker of helping the imperialists try to destroy socialism from within by means of corrupting leading figures of the Communist parties. The court transformed Merker's political judgments during his years in France (1936–1942) and Mexico (1942–1946) into criminal acts. It accused Merker of contacts with a variety of suspicious organizations and individuals: the so-called Jewish aid organization, the Antifascist Refugee Committee in New York, which had helped him to escape from France; anti-Nazi Gaullists who had also helped Merker leave France; Otto Katz, who had been convicted in the Slansky trial as an "international spy, Zionist, and Trotskyist"; the so-called emigrant Jewish capitalists in Mexico City, and the now excommunicated American Communist leader, Earl Browder, someone who, the court declared, had "decisively weakened the struggle of peoples against fascism."

The court took as evidence to support these charges Merker's above-mentioned essays in *Freies Deutschland*. His arguments for restitution to Jewish survivors became a demand for "compensation of all Jewish capitalists." Like Matern, the judges of the *Oberste Gericht* attacked his attempt to distinguish between the persecution of Jews and Communists. The court explained Merker's engagement on behalf of the Jewish people as a result of the corrupting influence of "emigrant Jewish capitalists" and his "continuous contact with

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<sup>27</sup> The records of the political trials in the East German *Oberste Gericht* were placed in the Stasi files. For the court's judgment in Merker's case, see "Oberstes Gericht der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik I. Strafsenat I Zst. (1) 1/55. Im Namen des Volkes in der Strafsache gegen den Kellner Paul Merker" (March 29–30, 1955), BStU, Archiv Nr. 192/56, MfS, Untersuchungsvorgang Nr. 294/52, Paul Merker, Band III, 000138–000152. The verdict, along with two statements by Merker, appear in Herf, "Dokumentation. Antisemitismus in der SED."

Zionist circles, especially the organization of the World Jewish Congress," and "emigrant capitalistic Jewish circles." In Mexico, according to the Supreme Court judgment, Merker's base in the emigration did not lie on "the political but rather on the racial emigration," especially "emigrant, capitalist, Jewish circles." In Merker's support for compensation for all Jews who emigrated from Germany, recognizing the right of returning Jews to be regarded as a national minority, and the creation of a Jewish state, the court saw further proof of Merker's involvement in an international, anti-Communist espionage conspiracy. Thus, the verdict explained—and discredited—Merker's efforts to place the Jewish catastrophe at the center of Communist, antifascist politics as the result of his corruption by Jewish capitalists and clever intelligence services, to whom he was indebted. In placing the link among Jews, capitalism, and financial corruption at its core, the verdict stands alongside the ZPKK denunciation of December 1952 as an important document of postwar East German anti-Semitism.

Ten months later, on January 27, 1956, shortly before Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" and a period of de-Stalinization, Merker was released from prison. In April and May 1956, the ZPKK concluded that espionage accusations against Merker stemming from the Slansky trial "were insufficiently proven," that the guilty verdict was to be rescinded, and that Merker was to be declared innocent and thus "rehabilitated."<sup>28</sup> In July 1956, Ulbricht wrote elliptically to Merker that "the reexamination undertaken under new points of view led to the conclusion that the accusations made against you in the most important matters were of a political nature and do not justify judicial prosecution."<sup>29</sup> Yet Merker's request for a full political rehabilitation and return to a leading position in the party and

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<sup>28</sup>"Kommission des Zentralkomitees zur Überprüfung von Angelegenheiten von Parteimitgliedern" on April 19, April 25, and May 3, 1956, in SAPMO-BA, ZPA, IV/202/8 Zentralkomitee der SED; the report of Herta Geffke, the chair of the ZPKK: "Bericht der Gen. Geffke, Protokoll: Über die Sitzung der Kommission des Zentralkomitees zur Überprüfung von Angelegenheiten von Parteimitgliedern (May 3, 1956)," SAPMO-BA, ZPA, IV 2/202/8 Zentralkomitee der SED; and Merker's important letter to Wilhelm Pieck, April 14, 1956, SAPMO-BA, ZPA, NL Paul Merker 102/27.

<sup>29</sup> "Walter Ulbricht to Paul Merker, July 31, 1956," SAPMO-BA, ZPA, NL Paul Merker 102/27, 84.

government was unsuccessful. In July 1956, in the same Supreme Court that had convicted him, the same judges and prosecutor—who again met in secret session—followed the Central Committee directives and reversed the Supreme Court verdict of March 30, 1955, and declared Merker innocent.<sup>30</sup> Though Merker was released from prison, Ulbricht's letter had made it clear that his views remained politically incorrect.

The SED archives reveal further evidence that the political reasons for Merker's downfall were centered on the Jewish question. Upon his release, and in response to his efforts at full political rehabilitation, the Central Party Control Commission asked Merker to write a statement responding to the accusations made by Matern and the Central Committee against him in December 1952. On June 1, 1956, Merker submitted a remarkable thirty-eight-page statement on his position on the Jewish question.<sup>31</sup> He wrote that his Soviet and German interrogators were convinced that he must have been an agent for the United States, Israel, or perhaps Zionist organizations, because he had taken such a strong position on the Jewish question during World War II. They found no evidence that he was Jewish. Why, they reasoned, would any non-Jewish German Communist pay so much attention to the Jewish question unless he was an agent of American imperialists or Zionists and Jewish capitalists? Merker responded as follows:

I am neither a Jew nor a Zionist, though, certainly, it would be no crime to be either. I have never had the intent to flee to Palestine. I have not supported the efforts of Zionism. I have ... occasionally said that, after having been plundered by Hitler fascism, most deeply humiliated, driven from the homelands, and millions of them murdered, only because they were Jews, the feeling of a deepest bond and the desire for their own Jewish country emerged among Jews of different countries. This feeling was the expression of those

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<sup>30</sup> "Oberstes Gericht der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik 1. Strafsenat 1 Zst (I) 1/55, In der Strafsache gegen Merker, Paul Friedrich" (July 13, 1956), BStU, Archiv Nr. 192/56, MfS, Untersuchungsvorgang No. 294/52, Paul Merker, Band III, 000206.

<sup>31</sup> Merker, "An die Zentrale Kontrollkommission des ZK der SED."

most deeply harmed and outraged. Moreover: Hitler fascism emerged among us. We [Germans] did not succeed through the actions of the working masses in preventing the erection of its rule and hence the commission of its crimes. Therefore, especially we Germans must not and ought not ignore or fight against what I call this strengthening of Jewish national feeling.<sup>32</sup>

It was, he continued, “historically inaccurate” to describe Zionism as an agent of American imperialism. On the contrary, it was “the masses of Jews” in many countries, with support from the Soviet Union and in opposition to “English and American imperialism,” who had helped to bring the state of Israel into existence. “No one,” Merker boldly told his former colleagues on the SED's Central Committee, “will want to claim that the Soviet government was an ‘agent of American imperialism.’”<sup>33</sup> Merker argued that the logical result of Communist resistance to Nazism was support for the Jewish state, a view that was, by then, utterly out of step with Soviet and East German policy toward Israel.

What made Paul Merker such a difficult man for the Central Committee to deal with was his insistence that his views on the Jewish question had nothing to do with his alleged corruption by American imperialists and Jewish capitalists but everything to do with his long-held beliefs as a German Communist. He noted the contributions of Jews, including Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, to German Communism. He recalled the American Jewish Communists in New York and Chicago who had fought for racial equality in the United States and the German Jews in Berlin who hid him in their apartments when he was in the Communist underground in 1934.<sup>34</sup> He stressed that German Socialists had done too little to connect the fight against anti-Semitism to the struggle for democracy in Germany. In short, his statement gave to Ulbricht, Matern, and the other members of the Central Committee clear evidence that,

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Historians of American Communism have examined the impact of foreign Communists and Soviet influence on the American party. The Merker case suggests that it would be valuable to examine how American society and its multi-ethnicity influenced the views of the Communists who came here.



despite arrest and imprisonment, he had not changed his politically incorrect views on the Jewish question. Merker was discreetly readmitted to the SED, but he never occupied an important political office again. On the occasion of his death in 1969, the funeral oration delivered by a spokesman for the Central Committee praised Merker's unflagging contribution to the working-class movement but said nothing about the years of persecution from 1950 to 1956 or his public efforts concerning the Jewish question in Mexico City from 1942 to 1946, and in East Berlin from 1946 to 1950.

In conclusion, the suppression of a minority tradition of German Communism as articulated by Merker offers a partial answer to the riddle of how a government whose central legitimation lay in its antifascism could pursue policies that entailed support for more violence against the Jews living in Israel. In the next four decades, de-Stalinization, thaws, and *Ostpolitik* did little to moderate the impact of Merker's downfall, imprisonment, and partial rehabilitation. The Jewish catastrophe never found a central place in the history and memory of East German antifascism. The East German regime did not offer *Wiedergutmachung* payments specifically to survivors of the Holocaust. The government and society lived by the belief that, because fascism had everything to do with capitalism, which the Communists had abolished after the war, there was no additional need for a specifically Communist attempt to come to terms with the aspects of the Nazi regime that could not be derived from capitalist economics. After 1952–1953, there was no more protest or inner-party strife over East Germany's growing antagonism toward Israel. Beginning in the mid- and late 1950s, and continuing until 1989, the East German government developed close ties to the most radical and militant of Israel's Arab enemies: from Nasser's Egypt, to the PLO, to Iraq and Syria. East Germany voted for every anti-Israel resolution in the United Nations, including the resolution equating Zionism with racism. Its long-standing diplomatic support for the PLO in the years of greatest terrorism is a matter of public record. There is a dream-world quality to many documents of East German history. It is as if, to paraphrase Max Horkheimer's famous dictum concerning fascism and capitalism, those in East Germany who wanted to talk about fascism should only talk about capitalism. In the political discourse of East German Communism, talking about the Holocaust or anti-Semitism aroused suspicion of sympathies for that vast and powerful conspiracy of Zionists, American

imperialists, and Jewish cosmopolitans. Hence, the Jewish catastrophe remained a peripheral event in the dominant discourse of East German antifascist remembrance.

Paul Merker's political blunder was to lend support and empathy to the Jews when the Communists were seeking to present themselves as the genuine representatives of a unified German nation and after Moscow had launched a campaign against "cosmopolitans." As a veteran Communist, Merker understood how dangerous his untimely views on the Jewish question were. Nevertheless, he refused to adapt to postwar East German Communist nationalism or to break with his deeply felt solidarity with the Jews. The Merker case concerns a good and courageous man, just as much as the dangerous mixture of amnesia, broken solidarity, nationalism, and anti-Semitic prejudices that entered into the ideology and practice of the East German government's official antifascism. In the early years of the GDR, it was not sufficient to suppress all non-Communist political currents. The East German dictatorship also rested on the destruction of dissenting Communist memories of past solidarity with the Jews and ongoing support for the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Paul Merker was old and experienced enough to be able to remind his comrades that, at one time, solidarity with the Jews had something to do with the fight against Nazi Germany. He paid for this bit of untimely impudence with prison and the destruction of his political career. Merker's enduring solidarity with the Jews was incompatible with the dialectic of militant and even forgetful optimism that defined official East German antifascism, and with the subsequent evolution of that regime into an adversary of Israel. Historians need to present a balanced and critical account of politics and memory in *both* East and West Germany. The frequently and rightly discussed shortcomings of coming to terms with the past in West Germany should not deflect critical examination of how the self-proclaimed antifascist East German regime did and did not directly face the Nazi past.

There is a photo of Walter Ulbricht that shows him in 1961 leading the SED party elites out of the memorial to the victims of fascism at the former Nazi concentration camp in Sachsenhausen. Behind him is the smokestack of the concentration camp and a crowd of people attending the opening ceremonies of the memorial. He is flanked by East German soldiers and is waving the politician's wave of victory. The photo could be entitled "Communism rises like

a phoenix from the ashes of defeat." Now that the German Democratic Republic itself is gone, the opening of archives that were meant to be closed for many decades makes it possible to write the history of the lost causes and silenced voices that were absent and forgotten in that photo of a smiling Walter Ulbricht in Sachsenhausen in 1961.