Antisemitism “not in spite of Auschwitz, but because of it”

In the summer of 1923, Ruth Fischer (Elfriede Eisler) rallied supporters of the KPD with the following remarks: “Wer gegen das Judenkapital aufruft, meine Herren, ist schon Klassenkämpfer... Sie sind gegen das Judenkapital und wollen die Börsenjobber niederkämpfen. Recht so. Tretet die Judenkapitalisten nieder, hängt sie an die Laterne, zertrampelt sie” (cited in Brosch et al., p. 69). For many of the authors under consideration here, these comments capture perfectly a deeply rooted antisemitic undercurrent on the Left, a historical legacy transformed, but in no way eliminated, in 1945. Both of these monographs address the antisemitism of the European Left. The volume edited by Matthias Brosch, Oliver von Wrochem, and others analyzes the case of the German Left, while Christina Späti examines the Left in Switzerland. Many common themes connect the two narratives. Separately, these volumes make valuable contributions to the study of antisemitism in the European Left; together, they provide an opportunity for an engaging dialogue with authors from many different backgrounds and viewpoints.

The Brosch volume is the product of the conference, “Anti-Semitism and the German Left,” organized by the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung in Berlin (2004). It was triggered by an e-mail exchange following the 2003 outbreak of the Iraq War that generated a scholarly debate on the nature of antisemitism, anti-Zionism, and anti-Americanism. Twenty-two articles, presented in a broadly chronological framework, have been included in the resulting volume. The authors themselves include historians, psychoanalysts, political commentators, journalists, and others. The volume takes into account the historical development of antisemitism on the Left, its evolution during the era of the FRG and GDR, and its relationship to ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Two articles—which present diametrically opposed views—conclude the collection.

The first group of articles considers early forms of left-wing antisemitism in Germany and their ideological underpinnings. Markus Kneer evaluates the works of G. W. F. Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, and Karl Marx, concluding that all four saw Jewish particularism as an obstacle to the universal systems they favored. Kneer argues that that this attitude constituted neither religious nor racial antisemitism; however, one can see how later thinkers, building on these works, could interpret their writings as endorsing discrimination against Jews. Olaf Kistenmacher’s analysis of antisemitism in the KPD during the Weimar years reinforces this point.
Kistenmacher demonstrates that, even as Vladimir Lenin and Nikolai Bukharin were condemning antisemitism as a dangerous misinterpretation, KPD intellectuals and party functionaries consistently represented Jews as the personification of the destructive hegemony of international (that is, foreign) capital. During the Weimar years, Jews were viewed as both weak and cowardly, yet in possession of great strength and power. This perception created a uniquely dangerous form of racism. Kistenmacher concludes that, in its discourse, the KPD reproduced and reinforced modern racial antisemitism.

The second section of the collection examines developments during the National Socialist period. Two of the authors—Linde Apel and Jörg Wollenberg—focus on the relationship between Jewish prisoners and political enemies of the Third Reich (designated by red stars on their uniforms, often communists or social democrats). Both authors echo Primo Levi’s claim that Jews always found themselves at the lowest end of the camp hierarchy, viewed as passive victims and helpless children by politically active prisoners. Wollenberg examines the brutality exhibited by the so-called Red Kapos, who were often accused of willingly, even enthusiastically, carrying out the orders of their SS overseers. Though resisting claims of blanket responsibility, Wollenberg nonetheless demonstrates the ease with which the line between perpetrator and victim blurred under the horrendous conditions of the camps.

Regina Scheer’s overview of the Herbert Baum Group provides an interesting look at postwar memorialization in the GDR and, later, in reunified Germany. For the most part, the Baum Group was comprised of Jewish communists (though Scheer acknowledges that Baum’s family had largely lost touch with its Jewish faith). The postwar memorial in the GDR focused only on the communist origins of Baum’s anti-fascism as an indication, according to Scheer, of the underlying antisemitism of the GDR’s communist elite. When the memorial was remade after reunification, the discrimination was reversed. The new commemorative inscription omitted any reference to the group’s communist origins, instead focusing on the Jewishness of a majority of its members. Here, although the essay does not place itself in the context of other literature on memorializations in the GDR, we see the degree to which issues of antisemitism and anti-fascism are connected to broader questions of state-building and identity.

The next group of articles focuses specifically on questions of antisemitism and German identity. Ilka Quindeau provides a psychoanalytical examination of antisemitism. Quindeau notes that antisemitism provides a function analogous to racism; it distinguishes between “I” and “the other” (Brosch et al., p. 157). As a “foreign element,” the Jews became the target of those who sought to correct their own failings and those of society. The Nazis actualized this longing to destroy the foreign element. In the aftermath of the Shoah, however, traditional antisemitism was largely discredited. Jews now became the source of ongoing German guilt, well beyond the perpetrators’ generation, and thus an obstacle to a healthy national identity. They were now hated “not in spite of Auschwitz, but because of it” (Brosch et al., p. 162). This “secondary antisemitism” continues to be a dangerous preoccupation; Lars Rensmann examines its implications. Rensmann argues that the anti-imperialism of the Left easily developed into an anti-Zionist and antisemitic worldview. In an effort to rehabilitate Germany’s national identity after the Nazi era, elements of the Left sought to relativize the crimes of the Nazis by drawing parallels to the bombing of German cities. The extreme Left went so far as to equate Israeli actions against the Palestinian people with those of the National Socialists against Jews. With this perpetrator-victim reversal, a positive national identity could be reasserted. Rensmann notes that not all negative observations about Israel are antisemitic, but those claims that demonize Israeli politics as the new Nazism, that perpetrate antisemitic stereotypes, that delegitimate the Israeli state, and that impose a double standard on Israel must be identified as secondary antisemitism. This section of the book concludes with an interview with Micha Brumlik, former director of the Fritz Bauer Institute for the Study and Documentation of the History of the Holocaust. Other contributions reiterate many of the book’s main themes, including the Left and the conflict in the Middle East, as well as questions of guilt and identity. An article of particular interest by Rosa Fava, one of the founding members of the Kreuzberg Initiative against Anti-Semitism, discusses the group’s concrete efforts to combat antisemitism in the immigrant communities of Berlin-Kreuzberg. (Her author biography, important for explaining her viewpoint, was unfortunately omitted from the book).

The fourth section of the collection draws together several articles on the connection between anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism. Christian Schwabe provides an excellent introduction to the topic, tracing the evolution of anti-Americanism from the late nineteenth century to the present era of globalization. Schwabe demonstrates...
how the negative association of America with modernity and capitalism often overlapped with negative stereotypes of Jews. Early anti-Americanism tended to be the purview of the Right and to include strongly anti-western elements, but even in the 1920s fears of American colonization could be found on the Left. After 1945, the anti-western element of anti-Americanism disappeared, as the Left came to focus on U.S. imperialism, political corruption, militarism, and arrogance (most evident during the Vietnam War era). By the 1990s, anti-Americanism became synonymous with anti-globalization. The presidency of George W. Bush only solidified left-wing anti-American sentiments. Schwaabe acknowledges that criticism of U.S. politics is legitimate; however, stereotypical assertions about the United States as a "warlike, arrogant nation" replace intellectual analysis with a facile conflation of diverse political agendas (Brosch et al., pp. 236-237).

Andrei Markovits explores the link between anti-Americanism and antisemitism further in the next article. Markovits emphasizes the interconnected nature of perceptions of America and perceptions of the Jews. Even after 1945, when traditional stereotypes of American Jews no longer found a foothold in serious public discussion, anti-Americanism and antisemitism remained connected. Israel, especially after the Six Day War in 1967, appeared as an imperialistic extension of American power into the Middle East. This perception coincided with the idea that the Jews were responsible for the culture of shame and guilt in Europe since the Shoah, an accusation that led to a sharp increase in antisemitic discourse in Europe. Markovits demonstrates that European anti-Americanism (with strongly antisemitic overtones) culminated in the early twenty-first century in a Kulturkampf against George W. Bush’s United States—a struggle that was an integral part of the formation of a new European identity.

Many of the key ideas in this section—perhaps the richest in the collection—are summed up in two contributions: Thomas Haury’s article, which considers the struggle of the Left in the GDR against both Israeli imperialism and the German past, and Wolfgang Kraushaar’s piece, which focuses on the student movement of the late 1960s. Haury notes that anti-imperialism was always a key element of communist ideology and of the identity created by the GDR as the “good” anti-fascist Germany whose founders were free from the taint of the Shoah. Haury demonstrates that the seeds of antisemitism had already been sown in this anti-imperialist founding narrative. With increasing conflict in the Middle East and hardships imposed on Palestinians by Israeli actions, guilt came to be attributed to Zionist capital and the power of international Zionism. This secondary antisemitism, according to Haury, remains pervasive on the Left, despite the collapse of the GDR. Kraushaar focuses on West Germany and the crucial period of student activism, beginning in 1967 with the death of Benno Ohnesorg (which occurred just days before the Six Day War). The article explores the increasing radicalism of the student movement, as well as the role of intellectuals such as Theodor Adorno, who likened the plight of the students to the fate of German Jews during the Nazi era. Kraushaar discusses the common perpetrator-victim reversal in this era, with Israel assuming the role of imperialist aggressor against the Palestinians. He concludes, however, that the ’68 movement itself was not antisemitic; the movement reflected a range of views from peaceful opposition to Israeli policies to the virulent eliminatory antisemitism of the RAF. Even so, Kraushaar notes that the radicalism of the last phase would have been impossible without the basic assumptions of the movement’s founders.

The final thematic section contains two articles on the Middle East conflict, Europe, and the German Left, by Stephan Grigat and Elfriede Müller. Here the editors might have incorporated several of the articles in the lengthy preceding section, since the topics and the conclusions are quite similar. Grigat extends themes he has developed elsewhere into a lengthy article, arguing for the necessity of preserving the state of Israel (referred to here as the “state of the Shoah-survivors”) at all costs in the face of continued antisemitic threats, now disguised as “enlightened anti-Zionism” (Brosch et al., pp. 400, 403). Müller counters with the view that Israel can no longer be viewed through a simplistic “good vs. bad” schema. Nor can it be seen only as the state of the survivors of the Shoah. Rather, Israel has a sixty-year national history as a powerful state, a global actor, and a complex, modern society. Müller argues against singling out the Left for its antisemitism when these views are hardly different from the social mainstream. Instead, efforts must be made to combat all forms of antisemitism, as well as anti-Muslim hatred.

The goal of the editors was to document the conference by acknowledging the wide diversity of opinions on the theme. They clearly accomplished this goal. Still, the chapters suffer from unevenness. Some articles, for example, are comprehensively documented, others less so. Not all of the articles fit clearly into the sections in which they are included. The decision by the editors to distance themselves from the opinions in the ar-
articles by Grigat and Müller by segregating them from the other pieces seems unnecessary. While the opinions of the anti-Germans, including Grigat, are controversial, the papers could have been integrated more effectively into the relevant sections. As well, a summary chapter addressing questions of methodology and, most importantly, definitions—which vary widely from one article to another—would have been useful in pulling together the broad themes that arise from the collection. Even so, the articles presented here offer a very good introduction to the breadth of the debate on antisemitism in the German Left. Perhaps the vigorous and ongoing discussion is a sign that indifference towards and ignorance of left antisemitism is coming to an end.

In comparison with the edited collection, the monograph by Christina Späti considers a broader spectrum of issues, including philosemitism, anti-Zionism, and antisemitism, within the Swiss Left over a shorter period of time. Späti focuses largely on the period from 1967 to 1991, though she does include a brief overview of the period from the founding of the state of Israel to the Six Day War, as well as a historical overview of the evolution of modern antisemitism. The monograph concludes in 1991 because of the profound global changes that accompanied the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the Middle East peace process. Späti divides her analysis into several distinct periods: from the Six Day War to the Yom Kippur War; from 1974 to the 1982 Lebanon War; from Lebanon to the First Intifada; and from 1988 to the Gulf War and the start of the Oslo process. She also examines the various facets of the Swiss Left separately: Social Democrats and unions; communists; the so-called New Left; the New Social Movement; autonomous antifascist groups; and left-wing newspapers and journals.

Späti’s historical overview reveals that the period between 1967 and 1973 produced an intense discussion of Israeli policy in Switzerland and a broad range of opinions regarding appropriate responses to what the Palestinians referred to as al-Nakba, the catastrophe. During this period, the more revolutionary leftist groups, including Maoist and revolutionary Marxists, were heavily and uncritically influenced by the position of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); however, other parts of the Left remained strongly anti-Arab and pro-Israeli. Späti makes an interesting point regarding philosemitism: she argues that when the idealized vision of the philosemites was confronted with the reality of Israeli actions in the 1960s, this encounter, too, contributed to the growth of antisemitism.

Between 1974 and 1982, criticism of Israel grew stronger on the Left, especially with the rise of Likud. This era saw the introduction in the United Nations of a resolution condemning Zionism as a form of racism. Moreover, by the time of the Lebanon War, elements of the Left (though not the Social Democrats) had ceased denying Israel’s right to exist. Traditional antisemitic stereotypes of “world Jewry” and “Jewish capitalism” resurfaced, along with the assertion that the Jewish quest for world power had provoked the actions of the Nazis. Traditional prejudices had not disappeared in 1945; rather, they had been sublimated and redirected. In the aftermath of the Lebanon War, however, changes in the Middle East once more affected the Swiss Left. Späti singles out the creation of a national unity government in Israel, the new proximity of the PLO to Jordan, and early peace initiatives as key catalysts. Views on the Left now splintered, with the moderate majority coming to accept the two-state solution. While the extreme Left continued to be critical both of Israel and of the more moderate Swiss left-wing groups, this period of relative calm mostly saw an end to antisemitic attacks. Finally, Späti looks at the period from the First Intifada until the Gulf War, noting considerable sympathy for stone-throwing Palestinian youth. A great deal of good will was lost when the PLO endorsed Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. While elements of the Left intensified their anti-Israel and even openly antisemitic rhetoric during these years, supporters of a two-state solution continued to work for peace.

Späti concludes with three essential points. First, a large part of the Swiss Left has not distanced itself adequately from antisemitism. Second, the Left is generally indifferent to antisemitism (and tends to view it as a “German” or “Austrian” problem), even though it is highly sensitive to racism and anti-foreign sentiment. Finally, stereotypes and prejudices regarding Jews remain prominent in contemporary discussions of Israel. At the same time, Späti reminds us, the Left does not take a unified position and the vast majority of leftist criticism of Israel derives from sympathy with the Palestinians and not from a fundamental ideological antisemitism. At least one reviewer has criticized Späti for undermining her own argument with this assertion. However, her analysis makes clear that the Swiss Left encompasses such diverse opinions that labeling every part of it as ideologically antisemitic would be misleading.

Overall, Späti provides a clear, concise argument, reinforced by consistent reference to secondary literature. She acknowledges opposing views and controversial is-
sues and, most importantly, establishes a clear set of definitions at the outset of the work. That said, the methodological chapter, while essential to the author’s definitions, is lengthy in relation to later chapters. The book also needs an index, given the large number of organizations, journals, and newspapers that appear in each chapter. Although her decision to conclude her account in 1991 has merit, enough continuities remain that some discussion of the Swiss Left since then would have been informative. Hopefully, this study will encourage further work in this area.

Taken together, these works underscore several key points regarding the European Left and the pervasiveness of antisemitism. To begin, the importance of definitional clarity and consistency stands out. Anti-imperialism (and its corollary, anti-Zionism), anti-Israeli sentiment, and antisemitism are not synonymous, though as several authors underscore, enough commonalities are shared between them to create dangerous gray areas in which traditional antisemitic stereotypes easily resurface. In particular, Späti demonstrates that anti-Zionism most readily gives way to antisemitic comparisons between Zionism and National Socialism and generalizations about “Zionist goals” and “Zionist conspiracies” (Späti, p. 327). The authors also support the idea that antisemitism after the Shoah was qualitatively different from its pre-1945 counterpart. Traditional prejudices did not disappear, but instead were transformed; that is, the Jews came to be blamed for the guilt that affected the nations of Europe—not only the perpetrators, but also the bystanders. The vital role of the Six Day War in triggering a new wave of left antisemitism is also evident. As Israel transformed from beleaguered state to aggressor against the Palestinians in the eyes of many, attacks on Israeli policy and sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians often developed into virulently antisemitic outbursts. Finally, the causes embraced by the student movements of the 1960s—for civil rights, against imperialist wars such as that in Vietnam, and above all against U.S. aggression—clearly fed into more radical left-wing attacks on Israel. Subsequently, Israel came to be seen as a projection of U.S. power into the Middle East. To summarize this overall point in a different way: The words and actions of Ulrike Meinhof and the RAF cannot be used to indict the entire German Left.

Note


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