

Jeffrey Herf. *Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West German Far Left, 1967-1989.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Illustrations. 493 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-08986-0.

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When the German terrorists Wilfried Böse and Brigitte Kuhlmann hijacked Air France Flight 139 on June 27, 1976, and separated Jewish and Israeli from non-Jewish hostages, the Nazi past seemed to resurge in a new, left-radical disguise. Since 1969, German leftists had maintained close contacts with Palestinian terrorist groups, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Fatah, the two largest groups forming the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). As a result of this collaboration, a series of anti-Jewish attacks were carried out in West Germany throughout the 1970s in the name of a so-called resistance against US imperialism and Zionist racism. The hijacking of the Air France flight and the “selection” of the Jewish passengers represent the zenith of German left-wing anti-Zionism that declined in the 1980s and has been increasingly challenged by leftist supporters of Israel since the 1990s.[1] However, the fine line between criticism of Israeli politics, hatred against Israel, and anti-semitism remains an urgent issue today.[2]

Historical research takes on an important role in uncovering the history of anti-Zionism and antisemitism in their manifold forms. Scholars of Jewish history have long argued that both Jewish and non-Jewish anti-Zionism prior to the Holocaust cannot easily be equated with antisemitism because the rejection of Zionism often stemmed

from a universalist critique of nationalism as it had evolved from the ideas of the European Enlightenment.[3] At the same time, late nineteenth-century antisemites already used anti-Zionist ideas to denounce Jews as being incapable of running a state.[4] After the extermination of European Jewry and the foundation of the state of Israel, anti-Zionism was directed not only against an ideology but also against the existing Jewish state of Holocaust survivors and their children and grandchildren. Thus, any attempt to critique Zionism before the mass murder has to at least face the accusation of historical blindness. Socialist and Communist movements and parties as well as the Communist regimes after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, including the German Democratic Republic (GDR), founded in 1949, only one year after the foundation of the Jewish state, had to face this conflicted heritage. In most cases, pre-Holocaust anti-Zionism was perpetuated or even radicalized under the influence of Joseph Stalin’s anti-cosmopolitan and anti-imperialist doctrines.

While the wars between the Arab states and Israel have attracted much scholarly attention and the West German left’s anti-Israel bias has also been intensely discussed in the last decades, the GDR’s role has been largely neglected.[5] In his new book, Jeffrey Herf, professor of modern European history at the University of Maryland,

examines the history of anti-Zionism and hatred against Israel between the 1967 Six-Day War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Drawing on rich primary source material from several archives—especially the German Federal Archives in Berlin and Koblenz, the German Military Archive in Freiburg, the records of the State Security Services (Stasi) of the GDR, and the Political Archive of the German Foreign Office—Herf writes the history of the GDR's contribution to a previously overlooked “undeclared war with Israel.” What Herf describes as components of this war ranges from hostile propaganda, efforts at diplomatic isolation and political warfare to formal alliances, military assistance, weapon deliveries, and military training with both Arab states and terrorist groups.

The starting point of his survey is the question of why “East German Communists, who had fought the Nazis and celebrated their anti-fascist traditions, [were] giving aid to Israel's enemies” (p. ix). Herf's answer can be found in thirteen very readable chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by a brief conclusion. The study opens with the Six-Day War, during which the GDR delivered “tens of thousands of machine guns, land mines, rocket-propelled grenades; millions of cartridges; and even dozens of tanks and jet fighters.” Understandably, Herf concludes: “It was more than enough to kill and wound many Israelis” (p. 74). The next chapter deals with the emergence of the anti-Israeli Far Left in West Germany, an already well-studied subject to which Herf has not much new to add. More interesting are the following chapters about the “formal alliance between East Germany, the Arab states, and the PLO” (p. 115), and especially the GDR's share in the political warfare within the framework of the United Nations that led to the infamous Resolution 3379 that officially defined Zionism as a form of racism. Chapter 10 reexamines the Entebbe hijacking and shows that East German propaganda, rather than condemning the attack, criticized Israel for violating Uganda's sovereignty.

After the rescue of most of the remaining hostages during Operation Entebbe, during which Israeli security forces had killed the hijackers and forty-five Ugandan soldiers, and after the destruction of a quarter of dictator Idi Amin's air force, the headline of the official East German newspaper *Das Neue Deutschland* read on July 10, 1976: “Israel's Zionist Policy Again Shows Its Racist Essence: TASS Commentary on the Act of Aggression against the Republic of Uganda” (p. 325).

In the following chapter, “An Alliance Deepens,” Herf discloses enormous weapon deliveries from the Stasi and the Defense Ministry to the PLO, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the PFLP in the years 1976 to 1982. Chapters 12 and 13 cover the terrorist attacks carried out by the PLO against Israel in Lebanon and the 1982 Lebanon War, which were accompanied by a comprehensive media campaign against Israel in East Germany, and by political support for the PLO. Interestingly, the internal reports by the state security services were sometimes much more realistic in their assessment of Palestinian terrorism than one might think; they were, for example, well aware of the antisemitic sentiments of some of their Palestinian partners, and they knew that the destruction of the Jewish state was an unrealistic goal.

The last chapter addresses the last years of the GDR, when the Communist regime remained what Herf calls a “loyal friend” to the Palestinian cause (p. 435). It was only in 1990, on the deathbed of the German Democratic Republic, that the Volkskammer, the unicameral legislature of the GDR, rejected “East Germany's antagonism to Israel” and apologized for its policy in the past (p. 448). Not the pro-Palestinian agenda but the extent to which the GDR funded the war against Israel came as a surprise to me. Overall, the GDR delivered, according to Herf, “750,000 Kalashnikov assault weapons; 120 MiG Fighter jets; 180,000 anti-personell land mines; 235,000 grenades; 25,000 rocket-propelled grenade (RPG)

launchers; and 25 million cartridges of various sizes” in the period under discussion here (p. 453). The exposition of the material dimensions of the GDR’s policy against Israel, combined with a thorough analysis of its propaganda and its political warfare in the international context, is one of the greatest merits of the book. In addition, Herf rightly points out that the West German left was part of the war against Israel but played a relatively minor role. Thus, his focus on the GDR makes sense, and the passages about the West German left for the most part repeat what is already known.

If one wished to criticize Herf, it would be for the insufficient attention he pays to the ambivalent role of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in this conflict. Although he poignantly portrays Willy Brandt’s policy of neutrality toward Israel, the FRG is mostly depicted as a positive force. Angela Merkel’s “bold and welcome words” of solidarity with Israel in her Knesset speech in 2008, says Herf, “were a rebuke to the ideas and policies examined in this book” (p. 461). This positive evaluation of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) fails to consider the connection between contemporary Germany’s self-ascribed role as a moralist and staunch defender of international law on the one hand, and a sometimes overdrawn denunciation of Israel’s alleged warmongering and “Nazi methods” against the Palestinians on the other hand, a position that regularly and absurdly depicts a learned Germany teaching its stubborn Israeli pupils how to behave appropriately.

But this is nothing more than a squabble about a topic that lays beyond the scope of Herf’s project. It does not in any way diminish the quality of this monograph. Herf has written a readable and informative study of the GDR’s position toward Israel, which adds a new chapter to the research of the history of German-Israeli relations. It is based on a large corpus of primary sources and is methodologically well composed. *Unde-*

clared Wars with Israel will be a useful source for those studying German and Israeli history, the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the history of international relations, and the history of the European left.

Notes

[1]. Despite her overall pro-Palestinian agenda, the Far Left party Die Linke emphasizes that “Israel’s existence and the history of its foundation are irrevocable consequences of the Shoah and the extermination of European Jewry, a historical consequence of a centuries-old anti-semitism that predates Nazi Fascism and that encompasses more than the European-Christian history of persecution. This world-historical emancipation is worth our unrestricted solidarity, and this possibility will be defended in all future” (translation mine). Die Linke, <https://www.die-linke.de/detail/eine-friedliche-zwei-staatenloesung-muss-ziel-bleiben/> (accessed October 12, 2017). Compared to other European leftist parties, this statement shows a profound transformation of the German left wing’s diction over the course of the last decades.

[2]. In a recent book about Operation Entebbe (*Legenden um Entebbe: Ein Akt der Luftpiraterie und seine Dimensionen in der politischen Diskussion* [Münster: Unrast, 2016]), edited by the Far Left activist Markus Mohr, antisemitism from the left is systematically downplayed, which has aroused a heated debate in the left-wing weekly *Jungle World*.

[3]. See for the transition Léon Poliakov, *Vom Antizionismus zum Antisemitismus* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Ça Ira, 1992).

[4]. See, for example, Eugen Dühring, *Die Judenfrage als Racen-, Sitten- und Culturfrage* (Karlsruhe, Leipzig: H. Reuther, 1881), 110n.

[5]. Unfortunately, Mario Kessler’s insightful monograph *Die SED und die Juden – zwischen Repression und Toleranz: Politische Entwicklungen bis 1967* (Berlin: Akademie, 1995) only covers the

period before the Six-Day War. More recently Lutz Maeke's book appeared: *DDR und PLO: Die Palästinapolitik des SED-Staates* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), which, in contradiction to Herf's work, concludes that the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) regime never pursued a systematic policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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