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Anatomy of a Non-Relationship: Israel and the German Democratic Republic

The State of Israel and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) never established diplomatic relations. Although prospects for relations seemed promising, divergent ideological and political interests led to antagonism. By the mid-1950s, larger Cold War alignments as well as specific East German developments made mutual recognition impossible.

The Soviet Union and Israel

Diplomatically, the Soviet Union was one of the initial supporters of the establishment of a Jewish state.¹ On 14 May 1947, Moscow's leading UN-delegate and deputy foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, stated that "it would be unjust [...] to deny the right of the Jewish people particularly in view of all it has undergone during the Second World War."² However, because Moscow's prime interest in the Middle East was weakening British and Western influence,³ the Soviets viewed withdrawal of British forces as the "first and essential condition"⁴ for any kind of independence in Palestine. Although the Soviets would initially have preferred the creation of a bi-national Arab-Jewish state, they were prepared to accept a two-state solution in the event that friction between Jews and Arabs continued unabated. By October 1947, after months of continued violence in

¹ In comparison, the USA, in February, 1948, retreated from its initial support for a Jewish state and suggested an international trusteeship for all of Palestine. Michael J. Cohen, *Palestine and the great powers, 1945–1948* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 345–366.

² "A.A. Gromyko's speech at the First Special Session of the UN General Assembly, 14 May 1947," in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet relations, 1941–1953*, ed. Eytan Bentsur. (London: Cass, 2000), 189–196.

³ For further motives see Arnold Krammer, "Soviet Motives in the Partition of Palestine, 1947–48," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2, no. 2 (1973), 102–119.

⁴ "B.E. Shtein to A. I.a. Vyshinskii, 6 March 1947," in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations*, 169–172.

Palestine, the Kremlin spoke out in favor of the creation of an independent Jewish state.⁵

Moshe Shertok (later Sharett), head of the Zionist UN-delegation and Israel's first foreign minister, viewed the Soviets "not just as our allies, but as our emissaries."⁶ No less important than Soviet diplomatic support, however, was the supply of desperately needed arms in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948/49 by Czechoslovakia, which continued until 1951.⁷

Home to the world's largest Jewish communities, the USSR and the USA were the main potential sources of Jewish immigration to Israel. Thus, for as long as possible, Israel tried to maintain a policy of *non-alignment* with either of the Cold War blocs.⁸ By the end of 1949, however, circles within Moscow's Foreign Ministry were convinced that Israel's policy was only "disguised as 'neutrality,'" and that it had adopted "a hostile, if at present restrained, attitude to the USSR."⁹ Indeed, once admitted to the UN, Israel gradually sided with the Americans. Yet the USSR never offered Israel any incentive for following a different course. Soviet Jews were not permitted to emigrate to Israel, and emigration from the Socialist countries in Eastern Europe was gradually restricted.

In October 1952, the Soviet legation in Tel Aviv assessed that Israel had "chosen a course which is incompatible with normal diplomatic relations,"¹⁰ and accused the Israeli government of instigating a countrywide anti-Soviet campaign.¹¹ Indeed, the Slánský Trial in Prague of November 1952, in which eight Jews were sentenced to death for alleged collaboration with the Gestapo and Zionist organizations, gave Jerusalem

⁵ See Seymon Tsarapkin's speech of 13 October 1947, printed in Yaacov Ro'i, *From Encroachment to Involvement. A Documentary Study of Soviet Policy in the Middle East* (New York: Wiley, 1974), 48–51. See also "V.M. Molotov to A. Ia. Vyshinskii, 30 September 1947," in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations*, 227.

⁶ "Excerpts from M. Shertok's Report to the Provisional Government of Israel, 26 October 1948," in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations*, 389–392.

⁷ Uri Bialer, "The Czech-Israeli Arms Deal Revisited," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 8, no. 3 (1985), 307–315.

⁸ Uri Bialer, *Between East and West. Israel's Foreign Policy Orientation 1948–1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁹ "I.N. Bakulin to A.A. Gromyko, 29 September 1949," in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations*, 534–539.

¹⁰ "A.N. Abramov to the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19 October 1952," in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations*, 840.

¹¹ "Excerpts from the Political Report of the USSR Legation in Israel, 31 January 1953," in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations*, 868–870.

reason to be concerned about the safety of Jews in Communist countries.¹² The Kremlin's Doctor's Purge of January 1953, in which Jewish physicians were accused of deliberately shortening the lives of Communist leaders at the behest of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, only added insult to injury.¹³

On 9 February 1953, a bomb exploded on the grounds of the Soviet embassy in Tel-Aviv. Despite Israeli apologies and promises to hunt down the perpetrators, the Kremlin protested that the "terrorist act [...] demonstrates the absence of the most basic conditions for normal diplomatic activity,"¹⁴ and broke off diplomatic relations with Israel. Although diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Israel were revived some months later, the relationship remained sour. In 1955, Moscow and Cairo signed a comprehensive arms deal granting substantial military support to one of Israel's biggest enemies. The brief honeymoon between Israel and the USSR was over.

Discussions about Indemnification

The failed relationship between Israel and the USSR alone cannot explain the fierce antagonism between Israel and the GDR. The other Socialist countries of Eastern Europe maintained full diplomatic relations with Israel at least up until the Six Day War in 1967. Rather, it was the question of indemnification for the Nazi genocide that proved a main obstacle in relations between the GDR and Israel. The GDR's ruling party, the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*), did not recognize Jews as a unique victim group of Nazism and was unwilling to pay compensation to the State of Israel.

Initially, however, some early signs hinted at East German readiness to find a solution. Most notably, in April 1948, Otto Grotewohl, co-chairman of the SED, privately floated the idea of paying collective compensation to a (future) Jewish state.¹⁵

¹² Peter Brod, *Die Antizionismus- und Israelpolitik der UdSSR. Voraussetzungen und Entwicklungen bis 1956* (Baden-Baden: Nomos), 88–91.

¹³ Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime. The Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948–1953* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003).

¹⁴ "Note from the USSR Government to the Israeli Legation in Moscow, 11 February 1953," in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations*, 883.

¹⁵ Angelika Timm, "Der Streit um Restitution und Wiedergutmachung in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands," *Babylon* 10–11 (1992), 128.

In retrospect, it is highly doubtful that Grotewohl's idea reflected an official position. On 5 October 1949, the Victims-of-Nazism Decree, prohibiting restitution of "arianized" private property and compensation to people living abroad, was passed for the Soviet Occupied Zone. Two days later, with the founding of the GDR, the decree was adopted law.¹⁶ Israel, however, continued to seek a negotiated settlement with the GDR until 1956.

In early 1951, Israel involved the West and the Soviet Union in the issue,¹⁷ attaining in September 1952 the Luxembourg Agreement, by which West Germany and Israel settled on 1.5 billion D-Mark as compensation,¹⁸ of which one third was to be paid by the GDR.¹⁹ But Israel and the GDR were caught in a deadlock situation: Israel was unwilling to recognize the GDR until the matter of indemnification was resolved, and the GDR refused to pay indemnification until it was recognized by Israel.²⁰ Further meetings, mainly in Moscow, clarified East Berlin's ultimate line of argument: Because Israel was founded only after the Nazi crimes had been committed, it could not be entitled to compensation for those crimes. Moreover, the GDR was unwilling to support a state that served the interests of international capitalism. The documents of the Foreign Ministry in East Berlin lack any reference to contacts with Israel between 1956 and 1971.²¹

The question of East German indemnification remained unresolved until the reunification of Germany. When, in November 1989, Erich Honecker resigned from all his political functions in the SED, the new government under Hans Modrow

¹⁶ Ralf Kessler, "Interne Wiedergutmachungsdebatten im Osten Deutschlands – die Geschichte eines Mißerfolgs," in *Arisierung und Restitution. Die Rückerstattung jüdischen Eigentums in Deutschland und Österreich nach 1945 und 1989*, ed. Constantin Goschler and Jürgen Lillteicher (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002), 197–213.

¹⁷ See Rolf Vogel, ed., *Der deutsch-israelische Dialog. Dokumentation eines erregenden Kapitels deutscher Außenpolitik, vol. 1* (Munich: Saur, 1987), 33–39.

¹⁸ Which amounted to a little less than half of the initially claimed 1.5 billion US-Dollars.

¹⁹ Angelika Timm, "Das dritte Drittel. Die DDR und die Wiedergutmachungsforderungen Israels und der Claims Conference," in *Arisierung und Restitution*, ed. Goschler and Lillteicher 216–217.

²⁰ Angelika Timm, *Hammer, Zirkel, Davidstern. Das gestörte Verhältnis der DDR zu Zionismus und Staat Israel* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1997), 93–95.

²¹ Stefan Meining, *Kommunistische Judenpolitik. Die DDR, die Juden und Israel* (München: Lit, 2002), 247 and 259–262.

started negotiations with the State of Israel in Copenhagen. In February 1990, the GDR's foreign minister, Oskar Fischer, reasoned that it would be "necessary to work out a new position on Jewish material claims."²² The first (and last) freely elected parliament of the GDR adopted in its opening session a declaration asking forgiveness of the people of Israel for the "hypocrisy and hostility of the official GDR policy towards the State of Israel".²³ The last candid efforts by the East German government to achieve an agreement with Israel were brought to a halt by the reunification of Germany on 3 October 1990.

The GDR and the Middle-East Conflict

After joining the Warsaw Pact in 1955, the GDR's top priority was to achieve increased international recognition, to which end the SED leadership eyed the Arab hopefully. However, Bonn's Hallstein Doctrine, calling for severing diplomatic relations with any state that fully recognized the GDR, made the Arab states reluctant to do so. Even the establishment in 1965 of full diplomatic relations between West Germany and Israel did not affect Arab hesitation to fully recognize the GDR.

An internal document of April 1956 best illustrates the GDR's official position towards Israel.²⁴ According to the document, Zionism had always been supported by the imperialist powers. The sole cause of war in 1948/49 and the "brutal and ruthless expulsion of the Arabs" had been the creation of Israel by "reactionary Zionist circles." Israel had become the "main instrument" of imperialist designs in the Middle East, designs that were detrimental even to the "vital interests of the Israeli people themselves."

During the Suez Crisis of June 1956, East Berlin quickly sided with the Egyptians. However, the SED's policies were seemingly contradictory. For example, it supported Israel's enemies in the Middle East, who were themselves not entirely free of antisemitism, while decrying West Germany as a neo-Nazi state. When Eichmann was put on trial in Israel in 1961,

²² Fischer to Modrow, "Informationen über die Gespräche mit Vertretern Israels," 15 February 1990. SAPMO-BArch, DO/1549, 10–11.

²³ Volksammer der DDR, "Gemeinsame Erklärung der Volkskammer vom 12. April 1990," *Deutschland Archiv* 5 (1990), 794–795.

²⁴ Informationsdienst der Abteilung Agitation des ZK der SED, "Die Rolle Israels als imperialistischer Brückenkopf im Nahen Osten," April 1965. SAPMO-BArch DY/30/IV A 2/9.02/17.

East Berlin sought to use the trial to “show that West Germany today is ruled by Eichmann’s accomplices.”²⁵ At the same time, however, East German agitation claimed a direct link between Adenauer and Ben Gurion. While a “gentlemen’s agreement” between Jerusalem and Bonn to remain silent about ex-Nazis in important West German government positions probably did, in fact, exist,²⁶ East Berlin’s propaganda twist went further, portraying Israel and West Germany as an imperialist Zionist-Nazi coalition oppressing the peoples of the Middle East.

In the 1960s, East Berlin stepped up its diplomatic efforts at wooing the Arab states. Walter Ulbricht’s visit to Egypt in February 1965 was a highlight of these efforts. Disappointingly, however, Ulbricht returned from Cairo not with full diplomatic recognition of the GDR, but merely with a joint declaration condemning “the aggressive plans of Imperialism, for which Israel had been created as a spearhead.”²⁷ When the Six Day War broke out in 1967, East Berlin lost no time in portraying Israel as the sole aggressor. The Ministerial Council of the GDR blamed Israel’s “adventurous policy” for the military clash.²⁸ Media outlets were ordered to show how the “bandog of the USA, West Germany, and Great Britain” had been heavily armed by the imperialistic powers.²⁹ The GDR’s only official national press agency, the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst* (ADN), compiled a documentation that mentioned



1 US emblazes Arab states with a torch named Israel

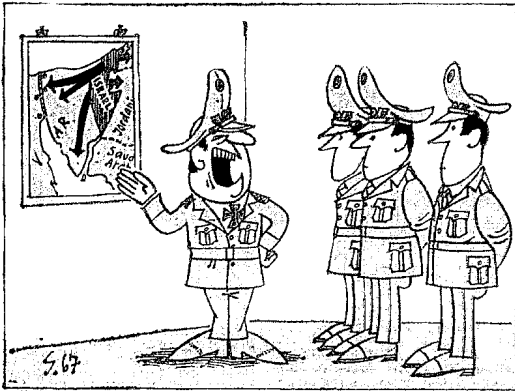
²⁵ “Argumentation des Büros des Präsidiums des Nationalrats der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschlands, Nr. 28,” 10 June 1960. SAPMO-BArch DY/6/4017.

²⁶ Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, “Adenauer – Ben Gurion – Sharett – Goldmann und die Entwicklung der deutsch-israelischen Beziehungen,” in *Adenauer, Israel und das Judentum*, ed. Hanns Jürgen Küsters (Bonn: Bouvier, 2004), 26.

²⁷ “Dokumente zur Haltung der DDR gegenüber der aggressiven Politik des Staates Israel, zum ökonomisch-militärischen Komplott Bonn-Tel Aviv und zur Palästinafrage,” June 1967. SAPMO-BArch DY/30/IV A 2/9.02/55, 20.

²⁸ “Erklärung des Ministerrats der DDR zur Aggression Israels,” 7 June 1967. Printed in *Neues Deutschland*, 8 June 1967.

²⁹ Werner Lamberz, Presseanweisung “Zur imperialistischen Aggression gegen arabische Staaten,” 5 June 1967. SAPMO-BArch DY/30/IV A 2/9.02/54.



2 „People without space! Blitzkrieg! They have learned this from us, Comrades!“

demanding the publication of “all oral and written testimony” proving that Israel was proceeding against the Arab states just like Hitler had against the USSR in June 1941.³¹

The ADN documentation chose its words carefully, speaking of “repeated bloody pogroms” against the Arabs in Israel and accusing Israel of keeping Arabs in “ghettos.”³²

The GDR’S admittance to full UN membership in 1973 did nothing to alter its stance towards Israel. Turning a blind eye to the role played by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in international terrorism, East Berlin broadly supported the PLO, including in the field of paramilitary activities.³³ The GDR actively supported the UN-resolution of 1975 which branded Zionism as a form of racism. It also introduced as official celebrations the “Week of Solidarity with the PLO” and the “Day of Solidarity with the Victims of the Israeli Aggression.”³⁴ Some experts claim that by the 1970s, the GDR had become “the most decisive enemy of Israel in the Socialist world.”³⁵

only Israeli provocations in the run-up to the war and blamed Israel for abusing “the longing of Jews persecuted by Hitler’s Fascism ... for a safe haven.”³⁰

In times of war, the SED’s agitation against Israel always came to the brink of open antisemitism. On 9 June 1967, while fighting raged in the Middle East, Albert Norden, son of a rabbi and for many years the central figure in the SED’s agitation apparatus,

³⁰ “Zur israelischen Aggression und ihren Hintergründen,” *Neues Deutschland*, 9 June 1967 and *Neue Zeit*, 11 June 1967.

³¹ Norden to Lamberg, 9 June 1967. SAPMO-BArch DY/30/IV A2/2.028/49.

³² “Zur israelischen Aggression und ihren Hintergründen,”

³³ Meinung, *Kommunistische Judenpolitik*, 307–310.

³⁴ Thomas Haury, “»Das ist Völkermord!« Das »antifaschistische Deutschland« im Kampf gegen den »imperialistischen Brückenkopf Israel« und gegen die deutsche Vergangenheit,” in *Exklusive Solidarität. Linker Antisemitismus in Deutschland. Vom Idealismus zur Antiglobalisierungsbewegung*, ed. Matthias Brosch et. al. (Berlin: Metropol-Verl., 2007), 286.

³⁵ Meinung, *Kommunistische Judenpolitik*, 305.

A delegation from East Berlin that visited Israel in November 1980 delivered a devastating report,³⁶ accusing Israeli youth of “fascist tendencies” and behavior towards the Arab characteristic of “Herrenmenschentum.” But by the mid-1980s, the GDR had slightly modified its stance towards Israel. East Berlin hoped to open channels to American-Jewish businessmen. On 9 November 1988, the 50th anniversary of the *Reichspogromnacht*, the GDR opened its archives for selected Israeli scholars from the *Yad Vashem* memorial and research facility. From 29 January to 3 February 1989, East Berlin’s state secretary for religious affairs, Kurt Löffler, visited Israel. Following Löffler’s visit, the first ever by an official representative of the GDR government, the SED decided that steps towards establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel were to be made depending on Israel’s progress toward resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.³⁷

Contacts with the Israeli Communist Party

The only constant dialogue between the GDR and Israel took place between the SED and the Communist Party of Israel. Not surprisingly, this dialogue ran along the lines of a typical exchange between sister parties. When the Communist Party of Israel split into two, with the newly founded *Rakakh* diverging from the *Maki* party, the SED officially remained unbiased. Unofficially, however, the GDR favored the Soviet-dogmatic *Rakakh*.³⁸ There is still much research to be done on relations between the SED and Israeli Communists.

In conclusion, chances for an Israeli-GDR understanding existed until the mid-1950s. With the unresolved issue of indemnification, the general deterioration of Israeli-Communist relations, and the increasing clashes of the two states in global politics, the Israeli-GDR relations over the following decades

³⁶ Egon Winkelman, Otto Funk: Information für das Politbüro des Zentralkomitees der SED. Bericht über den Aufenthalt einer Delegation in Israel vom 05.–15. November 1980. SAPMO-BArch DY/30/11538, Bl. 52–71.

³⁷ “Bericht über den Aufenthalt des Staatssekretärs für Kirchenfragen der DDR, Genossen Kurt Löffler, vom 29.1. bis 3.2.1989 in Israel,” 20 February 1989. SAPMO-BArch, DC/20/I/3/2781, 11–17; “Beschluß des Politbüros des ZK der SED,” 14 February 1989. SAPMO-BArch, DC/20/I/3/2781, 3–6.

³⁸ “Entwurf einer Information an alle Mitglieder und Kandidaten des Politbüros über ein Gespräch des Gen. Paul Markwoski mit Genossen Vilenska und Silber am 24. August 1966,” August 1966. SAPMO-BArch DY/30/IV A 2/20/828, 29–40.

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1 Junge Welt – Organ des Zentralrats der FDJ, 15 June 1967.

2 Neues Deutschland – Organ des Zentralkomitees der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands, 7 June 1967.

were characterized by harsh antagonism and occasionally even fierce enmity. The GDR's official line portrayed Zionism and the State of Israel, at times in openly antisemitic terms, first and foremost as instruments of imperialism in the Middle East.