

The GDR in the Context of Stalinist Show Trials and Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe 1948–54

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Introduction

In the period 1948–54 a large number of show trials were staged in the East European countries which were under Soviet domination. The German Democratic Republic did not escape this wave of trials, though they were staged on a much smaller scale there than elsewhere.

Historians writing on the show trials do not seem agreed on whether the GDR should be included in 'Eastern Europe'. Lendvai, in 1971, for example, merely comments that 'in a more distant past' East Germany had also had 'anti-Semitism as an official policy, as a witch hunt', and then goes on to deal with all the countries where 'Zionism' was a charge made against any defendants, but leaves out the GDR.¹ Hodos, on the other hand, who outlines the trials without concentrating specifically on their anti-Semitic aspects, looks at all seven countries allied to the Soviet Union, including the GDR.²

It is no coincidence that a study which concentrates on the anti-Semitic aspects of the trials should leave out the GDR, despite Lendvai's claim about the 'more distant past'. Whilst there was a high proportion of defendants of Jewish origin in many of the trials staged, especially in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, this was true of only a small number of cases in the GDR. The criteria for selecting victims may initially appear to have been arbitrary, since the defendants included Jews and non-Jews, Social Democrats, communists and various others. I shall argue, however, that specific criteria were indeed applied, and that, in the GDR at least, they had little or nothing to do with Jewishness. 'Zionism' was a 'convenient' if insensitive additional charge levelled against defendants who happened to be of Jewish origin.

Hodos does not sufficiently differentiate between the circumstances of the trials in the GDR and in other countries, other than to say that the GDR was last in line for show trials and that Stalin's death interrupted proceedings, with the result that they were over almost before they had begun. He does

¹ Paul Lendvai, *Anti-Semitism Without Jews* (Garden City, 1971).

² George H. Hodos, *Show Trials* (New York, 1987).

claim, however, that because Stalin ruled only part of Germany he was more likely to show restraint in the GDR than in other countries.

In relation to the charges of 'Zionism', the fundamental differences between the show trials in the GDR and those in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary were dictated by a number of factors, connected with the GDR's status as only part of a country, with Germany's recent past, and with the SED leadership's attitude to the Jewish minority. Importantly, although the GDR was under Stalinist rule at this time, and thus subject to similar pressures from Moscow as the three countries mentioned, it was also part of Germany with a resulting cultural opening to the West denied its Eastern neighbours. Crucially, its leaders' awareness of Germany's recent past and the crimes against the Jews made them abhor the anti-Semitism which, as we shall see, was used by the ruling communists in neighbouring states to provoke pro-state sentiment or, at least, to channel dissent away from the state. In effect, anti-Semitism was semi-official policy in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland at this time and for many years after, whereas in the GDR (apart, possibly, from a brief period in early 1953) to be anti-Semitic was to be anti-state.

This article will also argue that the original purpose of the trials themselves was not anti-Semitic, although in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland the purges and trials became so inextricably linked with anti-Semitic actions and outbursts on the part of prominent public figures that the distinction became meaningless. The trials were primarily aimed at consolidating Stalin's hold over the communist parties in his new satellite states, by applying the principle *divide et impera*. The lack of original anti-Semitic purpose also made it possible for the GDR to prevent, at least partly, the trials there from taking an overtly anti-Semitic direction. All in all, the GDR was probably the state affected least by the show trials at this time.

Other East European Countries

Starting in 1948, every single country in which Stalin's writ ran staged a series of show trials, right up to, and in some cases beyond, the dictator's death. The chronological sequence, by country, was approximately as follows: Albania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Soviet Union, GDR.

Why Stalin should have chosen to stage show trials at this time seems reasonably clear. By instituting a reign of terror, he was able to divide communist parties, some of which were quite independent-minded, eliminate those who were potential opponents of absolute Soviet power, and at the same time strike fear into the minds of those who survived. Initially, the victims were those who fell into a number of 'suspect' categories: those 'returning' from Western exile; 'internationalist' veterans of the Spanish Civil War; Trotskyists; leaders of the home underground; 'cosmopolitans', a

euphemism for Jews;³ only those who had spent the war years in the Soviet Union, the so-called 'Muscovites', were initially safe. Nevertheless, the trials soon acquired a momentum of their own, so that even loyal Muscovites such as the Czech Minister for Defence, Ludvík Svoboda, fell victim.

On the question of 'cosmopolitans', Hodos, a Hungarian Jew, differs from Eschwege, an East German Jew. According to Eschwege, this term was not a euphemism for Jews, but was a term invented by Stalin to define those who had spent the War years in the West.⁴

The different interpretations can to some extent be put down to different experiences. Although the charge of 'cosmopolitanism' had been in the air since 1949, and was generally tied up with other charges relating to Social Democracy and Western contacts but not explicitly with Zionism, by 1952 in Prague all of the Jewish defendants were also accused of 'cosmopolitanism', as well as 'Zionism', and a similar connection was made during large-scale purges in Hungary. Hence Hodos' equation. This, however, was not the case in the GDR, where 'cosmopolitanism' was a charge almost never tied to 'Zionism'.

Various reasons have been offered for the charges of 'Zionism' levelled against a number of defendants. The deteriorating state of Soviet-Israeli relations after the founding of Israel in 1948, which Stalin had up to then supported, is one possible explanation.⁵ Another is Stalin's residual fear of Jewish intellectuals, and especially their internationalism, ever since his battles with Trotsky, another Jew, over 'socialism in one country'.⁶ Whatever the reasons, being an agent of Zionism or 'World Jewry' seems to have been merely a convenient label which could be added to the list of other accusations where the defendant was of Jewish origin.

What is clear in all of the show trials is that the instigators were not to be found in the East European countries themselves. The MVD, successor to the NKVD and forerunner of the KGB, was ever present, and the decision as to who should be arrested was usually made in Moscow. The Hungarian special branch, for example, 'was responsible both to Rákosi [party chief] and to MVD General Byelkin, head of the Soviet Security Services for south-eastern Europe'.⁷

The most notorious of the show trials was the so-called Slánský Trial in Czechoslovakia, staged from 20 to 27 November 1952. Rudolf Slánský was the second most powerful man in the Czechoslovak party, after Klement Gottwald. Both had been founding members of the party and both were loyal Muscovites. Slánský, however, was Jewish.

³ Hodos, *Show Trials*, p. 35.

⁴ Helmut Eschwege, 'Die jüdische Bevölkerung der Jahre nach der Kapitulation Hitlerdeutschlands auf dem Gebiet der DDR bis zum Jahre 1953', in *Juden in der DDR*, ed. Julius H. Schoeps (Cologne, 1988), pp. 63–100 (esp. p. 85).

⁵ Hodos, *Show Trials*, p. 75.

⁶ William V. Wallace, *Czechoslovakia* (London, 1977), p. 290.

⁷ Hodos, *Show Trials*, p. 39.

Of the 14 defendants, 11 were Jewish, 2 were Czech, and one was Slovak. In the indictments, their Jewish origins were stressed in all 11 cases. All 14 were found guilty of being Fieldist⁸/Imperialist/Zionist agents. Three of the Jewish defendants were given life imprisonment, the other eleven defendants were all sentenced to be hanged, and were executed on 3 December 1952. The whole trial, as well as the atmosphere in the country, had become 'more and more permeated with a rabid anti-Semitism'.⁹ There followed a number of trials in which large numbers of people, many of them Jews, were sentenced to prison and, in some cases, executed.

If it is accepted that there was an anti-Semitic thread running through the show trials, then the Rajk trial in Hungary initially appears much more bizarre. László Rajk was far and away the most popular man in the Hungarian leadership. He was Minister of the Interior in the government. He had fought in Spain, had spent virtually no time in Moscow, and of the entire top party leadership, he was the only non-Jew.¹⁰ The trial took place from 16 to 24 September 1949. Of Rajk's six co-defendants, three were Jewish—Pál Justus, a Left Social Democrat, Tibor Szönyi, who had spent the war years in Western exile, and András Szalai, a 'home' communist, i.e. a member of the resistance during the war. It was in this trial that the first accusations of 'Zionism' were raised. Although only a side issue, they came three years before the trials in Prague and Moscow. Rajk and three co-defendants, including Szönyi and Szalai, were executed. Three others, including Justus, were given long prison sentences.¹¹ In fact, this trial seems largely to pre-date the overt anti-Semitism of many of the later purges, though both Lendvai and Hodos include it in their analyses.

After the purge of Rajk, and despite the 'Zionism' charges, the Hungarian Politburo had thirteen members, of whom seven were Jews. In late 1952, in the wake of the Slánský Trial, a new purge was launched to uncover Zionist agents in Hungary. Hundreds of people were arrested, a large proportion of them Jewish, yet the three leading members of the Hungarian Communist Party, Rákosi, Gerö, and Farkas, all of them Jewish, remained untouched.

Why there should have been so many Jews in top positions in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and, to a lesser extent, the GDR, is uncertain, and can only be speculated upon. George Hodos, himself Jewish and a victim of the Hungarian purges, claims that, in Hungary and Poland at least, 'the virulently racist, anti-Semitic prejudices of the population, fanned and incited by the prewar, semi-fascist regimes, drove Jewish workers and intellectuals

⁸ Noel Field was an American government employee in Switzerland during World War II. Although from a Quaker background, he had communist sympathies and provided them with much help, including sometimes acting as a courier into Vichy France. During the show trials, any contact with him during these years was turned into 'collaboration with an American agent'.

⁹ Hodos, *Show Trials*, pp. 74–5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 38.

¹¹ Lendvai, *Anti-Semitism*, p. 308.

to the communists, the only party that had put up an uncompromising fight against the preparers of the Holocaust'.¹² That statement, however, does not explain the Slánský episode, since pre-War Czechoslovakia was neither semi-fascist nor particularly anti-Semitic.

Whilst in most countries Jews have almost always been over-represented, as a proportion of the population, in the membership of Marxist parties (the reasons for which lie beyond the scope of this article), the position in post-War Poland, at least, is underlined by the simple statistic that some 170,000 Jews returned from Soviet refuge¹³ and would thus, if party members, initially have been regarded as loyal Muscovites and consequently more liable to be given high positions. In Germany, as in the other countries, almost all of those placed in high positions had been in the Communist Party pre-1933, so that it is hard to establish whether individuals were promoted because of their Jewishness. One of the accusations made against Slánský was that he had deliberately put Jewish comrades into positions of power,¹⁴ but since, as in Germany, these were all party members of long standing, the accusation has the same hollow ring to it as all the other charges.

The Albanian and Bulgarian show trials were primarily aimed at Titoists. The accusations there were rarely fictitious: there had, indeed, been plans for a South Slav federation encompassing Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Albania, but these became anathema after the Stalin–Tito split. From Stalin's point of view, the leading supporters of federation had to be purged after the change of policy.

There were no charges of 'Zionism' in these trials. That any of the victims was Jewish is unlikely: unlike later trials in other countries such information formed no part of the proceedings. In Romania, the chief defendant was a Jewess, Ana Pauker, and the Jewish Democratic Committee had been sifted in the search for 'enemies' in 1949. But Pauker was never publicly accused of Zionism, despite a whispering campaign about contacts with Israel, and the non-Jewish secretary-general of the Romanian CP appointed a number of Jewish party members to positions at the head of the Foreign Ministry and the Central Committee.¹⁵

The overall impression is that there was no deliberate, consistent policy of removing all Jews from high office in Eastern Europe at this time. The situation varied from country to country. In the so-called 'Doctors' Plot' in Moscow, nine doctors, six of them Jewish, were arrested on 3 January 1953, and accused of murdering two party leaders and of planning to murder others. This, together with the mass arrests that followed, is an example of a widespread anti-Semitic campaign. The Slánský Trial in Prague and the

¹² Hodos, *Show Trials*, p. 149.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Jörg K. Hoensch, *Geschichte der Tschechoslowakischen Republik 1919 bis 1965* (Stuttgart, 1966), pp. 165–8.

¹⁵ Hodos, *Show Trials*, p. 105.

subsequent arrests there are another example. Yet, as we have seen, anti-Semitism played no part whatsoever in the Albanian and Bulgarian show trials, and only a negligible role in Romania.

Even in Hungary and Poland, where large-scale anti-Semitic campaigns were launched, Jewish communists still managed to retain high posts not only, as we have seen, in the party, but in the secret police as well. At the height of these campaigns, the Head of the Hungarian Secret Police, Péter, as well as the Polish Deputy Security Minister, Romkowski, and the Deputy Head of the top secret Tenth Department of the Polish Secret Police, Swiatlo, i.e. the very ones who were carrying out the mass arrests of Jews, were themselves Jewish. One estimate puts the proportion of Jews in the leadership of the Hungarian secret police at this time at 70–80 per cent.¹⁶

The trials were far more about establishing absolute Soviet power than about a vendetta against Jews or any other section of the population. The Muscovites were generally regarded as trustworthy, since they, for the most part, had survived large-scale purges in Moscow during the 1930s and after. Indeed, the Hungarian example would seem to indicate that being a ‘Muscovite’ was more important than being non-Jewish. Only when the application of the principle *divide et impera* forced Stalin to choose between two loyal Muscovites were other criteria applied, such as Slánský’s Jewishness in Czechoslovakia.

Nevertheless, the leadership in some of these countries was quite prepared cynically to exploit racist sentiment in the population at large, especially in Poland and Hungary, or to whip up such feelings where they were not yet widespread, with the result that very large numbers of Jews, just a few years after their numbers had been drastically reduced by the application of the Nazi *Endlösung*, were subject to harassment, imprisonment, torture, and even death. In Poland, a post-War Jewish population in the region of 200,000, already only a fraction of the thriving pre-War community of three million, was further decimated by emigration, which was a direct consequence of Stalinist anti-Semitism.

That, by contrast, a large-scale anti-Semitic purge never got properly under way in the GDR is due to a number of factors. Whereas the Soviets were in complete control in whole countries in the rest of Eastern Europe at this period, the political future of Germany was uncertain, even after 1949. In addition, a large part of the German communist movement was in the Western zones and thus outside Stalin’s immediate control. Widespread arrests were far more likely to lead to the kind of dissent that elsewhere could easily be stifled. Also, leaving for West Germany to escape an atmosphere of purges was an option much less traumatic in its consequences for East Germans than for others in Eastern Europe, who would have to leave their country entirely.

¹⁶ Estimate given by Róbert Gábor, a US agent in Hungary who escaped to the USA in 1947. Quoted in Charles Gati, *Hungary and the Soviet Bloc* (Durham, 1986), p. 101.

Significantly, however, the East German authorities themselves were still overtly pro-Jewish into the early 1950s, i.e. even after the Rajk Trial.

Relative Harmony in the Soviet Zone/GDR: 1945–52

Amongst those who returned to the Soviet Zone of Germany, later the GDR, after 1945, an unusually large proportion seems to have been of Jewish extraction. As a result, a large number of prominent figures in both the SED and in the state in the early 1950s were Jews by origin. Alexander Abusch, Anna Seghers, Klaus Gysi, Paul Merker, Leo Bauer, Arnold Zweig, and Stephan Hermlin are just some of the returnees of Jewish origin who were prominent in political and/or cultural affairs. Victor Klemperer, a Dresden philologist and one of those saved from extermination by the Nazis by the steadfast refusal of his 'Aryan' wife to divorce him, remained in Dresden and published *LTI (Lingua Tertii Imperii)*, a damning indictment of the twisting of language by Nazism which has run to several editions.¹⁷ Stefan Heym and Wolf Biermann, the latter what the Nazis called a *Halbjude*, arrived in the GDR in 1952/3. Louis Fűrnberg, the Bohemian German writer, who had spent the immediate post-war years in the service of the Czechoslovak government, moved to Weimar in 1954.

What is noticeable is that most of the Jewish exiles who returned had spent the War years somewhere other than in Moscow. Many of them, including Abusch, Seghers, and Merker, had been in Mexico. This was to prove crucial in the context of the show trials which, in the GDR, began in 1953.

To what extent these people considered themselves to be Jewish is uncertain. Some SED members, like Merker and Bauer, joined the official Jewish community out of a sense of solidarity in the immediate aftermath of the Nazi Holocaust. For the most part, however, the Jewishness of these 'Remigranten' seems to have been more in the minds of the Nazis and in some cases, as we shall see, of the GDR state prosecutor, than to have been something which governed their own consciousness. Certainly, there is no indication that Anna Seghers' Jewish origins were important to her, even though her doctoral thesis, completed in 1924, had been on the subject of *Jude und Judentum im Werke Rembrandts*. In Kurt Batt's biography of Seghers, published in 1973, he considers the fact that she spent childhood vacations in the Netherlands to be more relevant to the choice of topic than her Jewish origins, which are referred to only obliquely. This, however, may in part be a reflection of the tendency amongst GDR writers of the neo-Stalinist school to avoid, as far as possible, any reference to Judaism.¹⁸

¹⁷ Victor Klemperer, *LTI* (7th edn, Leipzig, 1975; originally published in Halle (Saale), 1947). The most recent Reclam edition was published in 1991.

¹⁸ Kurt Batt, *Anna Seghers* (Leipzig, 1973), pp. 25–6. 'Die Wahl des Themas *Jude und Judentum im Werke Rembrandts*, das auf eine Beschäftigung mit der eigenen geschichtlichen Herkunft hindeutet, mag zugleich mitbestimmt worden sein durch das frühe Erlebnis der Niederlande, an deren Küste die Familie Reiling zuweilen Ferienreisen unternahm.'

Stefan Heym, on the other hand, is very well aware of his Jewish origins. Yet even he prefers to emphasize the political, and could certainly not be regarded as a practising Jew. In a rather acrimonious debate with Hermann Kant in 1979, Heym defended himself against accusations of dishonesty about his membership of the pre-War communist movement. Heym quoted a Czech police report from 1935 and a US military intelligence report from 1943, in both of which he is accused of having communist sympathies, and stated: 'Ich wurde nämlich nicht nur meiner jüdischen Nase wegen verfolgt.'¹⁹

It seems clear that those non-practising Jews who either were members of or supported the KPD/SED did so out of a belief in the internationalist ideals which made their own Jewish origins irrelevant. Some of them had been in exile in Palestine during the War (for instance Arnold Zweig, Günter Stillmann), a fact which would seem to indicate an active awareness of their Jewishness (indeed, the case could be made that Zweig had been a Zionist), and there was, indeed, an attempt by many Jewish communists to return from Palestine.²⁰ The vast majority, however, had been elsewhere. The Jewishness of Alexander Abusch, Anna Seghers, and others is something that other people were far more concerned about than they were themselves.

In the immediate post-War period, relations between the SED and the Jewish community were friendly in the extreme. Whether because at that time Stalin was still supporting the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine, or perhaps because of the shared experience of exile from the Nazis, leading party members often took part in Jewish feasts. Indeed, in 1973, Heinz Galinski recalled taking part in a rally in East Berlin on the occasion of the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.²¹ In 1948 Gromyko had supported the UN partition plan for Palestine, but by 1950, at the latest, a change in Soviet policy meant that the SED was no longer quite so friendly towards the State of Israel. Yet the GDR still lagged behind the Soviet Union in condemning Israel. For while the Soviet journal *Literaturnaya Gazeta* attacked Israel as an accomplice of 'US imperialism' in April 1950, similar accusations were not found in *Neues Deutschland* until almost one year later, on 1 March 1951.²² And Jewish organizations were allowed to fly the Israeli flag on special occasions, right up to 1952, though the significance of this is disputed.²³

We have already seen that dual membership of the SED and the Jewish community was possible in the immediate post-War period. Paul Merker, a communist of long standing who had been editor of the journal *Freies Deutsch-*

¹⁹ Stefan Heym, *Stalin verläßt den Raum* (Leipzig, 1990), p. 174.

²⁰ Günter Stillmann, *Berlin-Palästina und zurück* (Berlin, 1989), pp. 123–61.

²¹ Peter Dittmar, 'DDR und Israel (I)', *Deutschland Archiv*, 10 (1977), 736–54 (esp. 741).

²² Michael Wolffsohn, *Ewige Schuld?* (4th edn, Munich, 1991), p. 56.

²³ Eschwege, 'Die jüdische Bevölkerung', p. 91. After his talk on 'Anti-Semitism in the GDR', given at the German Historical Institute in London on 26 Nov 1991, Dr Stefan Schreiner, a theologian at the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin and member of the Christian-Jewish dialogue group in the GDR since 1970, claimed, in response to a question, that the SED's friendly attitude had in fact ceased in 1948 and that the flag flown up to 1952 was merely an *Aushängeschild*.

land while in exile in Mexico, had considered it 'selbstverständlich' that he join the Jewish community.²⁴

Perhaps even more significant of the mood of toleration are the cases of Fritz Katten, then Chief of Police in Berlin, and Julius Meyer. They had both been communists for years, yet they were also *Cohanim*, i.e. orthodox Jews required to observe additional laws because of their descent from Cohens. The group within the Jewish community around these two was both strict in its religious observance and in its definition of who was Jewish, and also quite strongly Marxist, and it vied with a group around Heinz Galinski which, in keeping with the traditions of Judaism in Berlin, was liberal in religious matters and liberal or conservative (i.e. FDP or CDU in the post-War period) in politics.²⁵

Despite such harmony, however, there were one or two minor points of friction, largely centring on the question of Jewish identity and a number of related issues. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint) was distributing care packets to Jews throughout Eastern Europe at this time. The key to such assistance was membership in the Jewish communities. The result was that, just as in Schleswig-Holstein in this period additional assistance for Danes had led to a massive increase in the number of people identifying themselves as Danish (In a none-too-subtle inversion of the term 'Danish bacon' they were pejoratively referred to as *Speckdänen*), so it was suspected that many atheist Jews, especially communist ones, had joined the community purely for reasons of material gain.

Another bone of contention was the classification of most Jews who had survived Nazi incarceration as *Opfer des Faschismus*, whereas the politically persecuted were invariably classified as *Kämpfer gegen den Faschismus*. Although either category brought with it many privileges, the distinction was seen as a consequence of the communist theory that the Jews had been passive victims, a theory which utterly ignored the leading role of Jewish intellectuals in the communist movement.²⁶ It is partly in this context that we may understand Stefan Heym's rebuke of Hermann Kant (see p. 8 above) even though it was made some thirty years later. On a purely material level, it is also significant that designation as a *Kämpfer* rather than an *Opfer* brought with it a higher state pension.

A third issue relates to what would appear to be a theoretical conflict between the German communists and the CPSU. Stalin's tract on the Nationalities question, which he had written nearly half a century before, had defined the Jews as a nationality. Since the SED was copying much of Soviet practice at this time, the party membership card contained a reference to nationality.

Most Jews who returned to Germany at this time, and especially those who went to the GDR, regarded themselves first and foremost as German anti-

²⁴ Eschwege, 'Die jüdische Bevölkerung', p. 81.

²⁵ Robin Ostow, *Jews in Contemporary East Germany* (Basingstoke, 1989), p. 15.

²⁶ Eschwege, 'Die jüdische Bevölkerung', p. 70.

fascists. Comparative membership figures for the League of Victims of Nazism, most of whose members were probably of Jewish origin, and the Jewish communities, would appear to indicate that, despite the presence of some communists (i.e. atheists) amongst their ranks, only a small proportion of Jews were actually members of the Jewish communities.²⁷ The majority were quite happy to accept their official designation as *Bürger jüdischer Abstammung*, rather than insist on a separate Jewish nationality. Those who did insist on the distinction, as we shall see, invariably ran into trouble.

Nevertheless, an almost unanimous picture of harmony between the SED authorities and Jewish citizens is painted by most observers at this time. Even after the first signs of a possible anti-Semitic campaign were appearing elsewhere, and the SED was obliged to follow its Soviet leader in its pronouncements, especially on Israel, the party maintained good relations with the GDR's Jewish citizens. Whilst there had been signs that the atmosphere might not always be so harmonious, when the change came it was rather abrupt.

Show Trials in the GDR: 1953–5

In August 1950 the 'Fieldist' accusations reached the GDR. A number of party members, some of them Jewish, were accused of having been recruited by American intelligence and of having given Noel Field access to internal party documents. Among those named in the Central Committee declaration of August 1950 on emigrants' contacts with Field were Paul Merker, Leo Bauer, and Bruno Goldhammer (all three Jewish), and a number of others, mostly non-Jewish.²⁸ Six of those named, including Bauer and Goldhammer, but not Merker, were tried in secret by a Soviet military court in December 1952. Two were given death sentences, later commuted, and all six disappeared into the Soviet Gulag system. They were only released by Khrushchev in October 1955.²⁹ That a *Soviet* military court, rather than a GDR one, should have tried them is a measure of Stalin's and Beria's absolute control over institutions in the eastern part of Germany, even three years after the founding of the GDR. However, the secrecy is at least partly due to uncertainty, as a result of Stalin's lack of control over communists on an all-German level, as to whether show trials would be tolerated. As happened to Kurt Müller, a prominent (non-Jewish) West German communist, individual communists from the Western zones might be brought to East Berlin and then arrested,

²⁷ In 1984, Dr Peter Kirchner stated that there were 3,900 people in East Berlin recognized as having been persecuted by the Nazis, but only 200 members of the Jewish community. What the figure in 1950 might have been is not known, but it would undoubtedly have been much higher than 3,900. See Ostow, *Jews*, p. 16.

²⁸ 'Aus der Erklärung des Zentralkomitees und der Zentralen Parteikontrollkommission der SED: Zu den Verbindungen ehemaliger politischer Emigranten zu Noel H. Field, 24. August 1950', in *DDR: Dokumente zur Geschichte der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik 1945–1985*, ed. Hermann Weber (Munich, 1987), pp. 177–9.

²⁹ Hodos, *Show Trials*, pp. 123, 127.

but it was impossible to maintain absolute control over the Western party by means of terror.

In early 1951, acting under Soviet orders, the SED began a search for 'Social Democrats, cosmopolitans and objectivists' in its ranks.³⁰ Just five years after the forced amalgamation of the KPD and SPD, the authorities decided to root out the Social Democratic half of the Party. Large numbers of people were expelled in an action which finally put an end to the idea that the unified party was to be anything other than Marxist-Leninist.

In East Germany the Jewish element in the 1950 and 1951 campaigns of arrest does not appear to have been of any significance, despite the fact that, certainly by 1951, Stalin's break with Israel was all but complete. This was the start of a campaign to bring the party in the GDR firmly under his control. The targets seem quite clearly to have been Social Democrats and 'Westerners' (i.e. those who had been in exile in the West), amongst whom there were significant numbers of Jews. It would have been odd, indeed, if no persons of Jewish descent had been among those arrested, given their prominence in the party and amongst those who had been in the West, especially Mexico. However, it was not until after the Slánský Trial of November 1952 or, arguably, after the 'discovery' of the 'Doctors' Plot' in Moscow in January 1953, that an anti-Semitic campaign got under way in the GDR.³¹

In the Slánský Trial in Prague, three of the Jewish defendants named Paul Merker as a Trotskyist. Merker, who had been expelled from the party in 1950 in the wake of the 'Fieldist' charges, was immediately arrested. In January 1953 he was accused of abandoning the 'correct' Marxist-Leninist position on the national question and of being petit bourgeois for considering the Jews a national minority in Germany.³² Specifically, the accusation was made that Merker had written, while in exile in Mexico, 'in support of a Jewish national home and continued this support after he returned to Germany'.³³ The Orwellian nature of these charges is illustrated not only by Stalin's sometime support for a Jewish Soviet republic, to be called Birobidzhan, but also by the fact that as late as 1948 Gromyko, as we have seen, had supported the UN partition plan for Palestine, i.e. the creation of a Jewish national home. In 1955, Merker was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment for being an agent of the American and French secret services, of the Gestapo, and 'des Weltjudentums', but was rehabilitated in 1956.³⁴

³⁰ Ibid. 122.

³¹ In *Israel und die Deutschen* (Cologne, 1991), p. 187, Inge Deutschkron claims that Erich Mielke ordered the East German State Security Service to start keeping precise records of Jews and 'half-Jews' in the GDR, as well as whether they had been in exile in the West, as early as Jan. 1952. Yet her narrative makes it clear that she regards this as having happened *after* the Slánský Trial in Prague, and in the same month that Julius Meyer left for West Berlin. She must, in fact, mean Jan. 1953.

³² Hodos, *Show Trials*, p. 124.

³³ Anon, 'E. Germans in Disgrace', *The Times*, 5 Jan. 1953, p. 6.

³⁴ Walter Janka, *Schwierigkeiten mit der Wahrheit* (Berlin, 1990), p. 14.

Nevertheless, in the immediate aftermath of the Slánský Trial, the SED merely called for 'self-examination' by its members, whilst also attacking Zionism. Under Soviet orders, it set up committees to investigate the pasts of party members,³⁵ a sure sign that the undesirable categories listed above were to be weeded out. The main accusations against Merker and others were not made public until January 1953, and those accused included Kurt Müller, who was lured to East Berlin and then arrested on the accusation of 'having become a Trotskyist while in Russia when the Nazis were in power, and of being a "Trotsky-Titoist" when he returned after the war';³⁶ the CDU Foreign Minister of the GDR, Georg Dertinger, a non-Jew whose 'crime' may have been contact with Otto Fischl, one of Slánský's co-defendants, who in 1951 had been the Czechoslovak representative in East Berlin; and Peter Florin, a Jew, who was reported on the same day as Dertinger as having been replaced in his function as head of the department for Russia and the 'people's democracies'.³⁷

January 1953 was the month of the so-called 'Doctors' Plot' in the Soviet Union. Rabbi Peter Levinson's appeal to Jews in the GDR to leave for the West in order to escape the anti-Semitic atmosphere in the East was broadcast the day after the announcement of the plot by TASS, which had emphasized the Jewishness of most of the defendants. The very next day Julius Meyer and a number of other prominent East German Jews arrived in the West. Meyer had good reason to leave. Although a loyal party member, he had been head of the social welfare section of the SED in 1946 and had thus, of necessity, had contact with Joint. By this stage, at the height of the Cold War, such earlier contacts with an American organization had become a liability, and, in the case of Joint, the basis for both 'Imperialist' and 'Zionist' charges, as events in the Slánský Trial, widely reported in the GDR media, had shown.

By the end of the month, an estimated 400 or more had left.³⁸ Nevertheless, it is worth observing that in January 1953 one of the highest figures for all refugees from the GDR was recorded. In all, more than 20,000 people left the GDR for the West, of which the Jewish proportion was only very small. In total, and taking into account the differing estimates given by a number of sources as to the Jewish population of the GDR at various stages between 1945 and 1955, it can be estimated that something in the region of 25 per cent of the membership of the GDR's official Jewish community left for the West in the first few months of 1953. This, of course, represents a proportion of the Jewish community which is much, much higher than the proportion of the population as a whole that left. Nothing even approaching the figure of 25 per cent of the population as a whole ever left the GDR. However, it is worth recalling that probably only a small proportion of people of Jewish descent

³⁵ Anon, 'Self-Examination in E. Germany', *The Times*, 2 Dec. 1952, p. 6.

³⁶ Anon, 'E. Germans in Disgrace', *The Times*, 5 Jan. 1953, p. 6.

³⁷ Anon, 'Arrest of Minister', *The Times*, 17 Jan. 1953, p. 6.

³⁸ Anon, 'Scientists Warned in E. Germany', *The Times*, 24 Jan. 1953, p. 5.

were members of the Jewish communities (some estimates say one in ten), so that this figure represents a much smaller proportion than 25 per cent of the entire Jewish population of the GDR, though still a higher percentage than of the general population.

The SED Central Committee resolution of January 1953, which denounced Merker in the wake of the Slánský Trial, also denounced three of his comrades in Mexican exile, all of them Jewish: Alexander Abusch, general secretary of the *Kulturbund*; Erich Jungmann, editor of a party newspaper; and Leo Zuckermann, an aide to State President Pieck. All were expelled from the party. Abusch and Jungmann lost their positions, while Zuckermann fled to West Berlin.³⁹

The case of Abusch is one of the most interesting. His official biography, as printed in 1975, gives only the faintest hint that there may have been a gap in his career, stating that from 1946 to 1953 he was 'Bundessekretär des Kulturbundes zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands', and from 1954 to 1956 'Stellvertreter des Ministers für Kultur'. Abusch went on to be Minister for Culture (1958–61) and even a Deputy Chairman of the *Ministerrat* (1961–71).⁴⁰ There is no mention that he was accused of having espoused 'Zionism' during his exile in Mexico, although his editorship of *Freies Deutschland*, the journal he had supposedly turned into a Zionist organ, is freely mentioned, and he is even credited with having published an essay in 1953 with the very (neo-)Stalinist title 'Von der Wissenschaft und der Kunst der Sowjetunion schöpferisch lernen'. Despite the gravity of the charges Abusch was back in a senior position within eighteen months. Stalin had died and the East German leadership was able to admit that the charges were entirely unfounded. Of course, it did not do so explicitly—it merely reinstated Abusch.

The May 1953 resolution on the evaluation of the January 1953 resolution [*sic*] reiterated most of the charges above, as well as the 1950 'Fieldist' charges. It repeated the Imperialist/Zionist charges against Paul Merker as follows: 'Erst die Entlarvung der Rolle der Zionisten als einer imperialistischen Spionagezentrale führte zur völligen Demaskierung Merkers als eines Agenten des USA-Imperialismus . . .'.⁴¹ It also criticised Fritz Dahlem, a non-Jew who had been in exile in France and was now the secretary for the training of party cadres, and removed him from this position, and from the Central Committee and the Politburo. It was announced the same day that Hermann Axen, a (non-practising) Jew and concentration camp survivor, had taken over responsibility for training party cadres,⁴² a promotion which would tend to support the conclusion that the primary aim of the trials was not anti-Semitic.

³⁹ Eschwege, 'Die jüdische Bevölkerung', p. 94.

⁴⁰ *Meyers Taschenlexikon: Schriftsteller der DDR*, ed. Kurt Böttcher *et al.* (2nd edn, Leipzig, 1975), pp. 11–13.

⁴¹ 'Aus dem Beschluß: Über die Auswertung des Beschlusses des ZK der SED zu den "Lehren aus dem Prozeß gegen das Verschwörerzentrum Slansky", 14. Mai 1953', in Weber, *DDR*, p. 196.

⁴² Anon, 'E. Zone Leader Arrested', *The Times*, 15 May 1953, p. 7.

During this time the claim to Jewish *nationality* became a liability. Helmut Eschwege, a Jewish historian in the GDR and member of the SED until 1953, relates how he lost his job as section director in an East German museum for, amongst other things, reading and distributing Yiddish newspapers, for being on the Board of the Dresden Jewish community, and for having been in emigration in Palestine. A few days later he was expelled from the SED, primarily because of 'ideological unclarity', because he regarded himself as being of Jewish nationality. As a consequence of this he lost his status as a *Kämpfer gegen den Faschismus*, one of the few members of the Jewish communities to have been regarded as such.⁴³ Whilst the accusations which cost Eschwege his job appear entirely false, the accusation of 'ideological unclarity' is one which would seem to be entirely consistent with communist practice the world over, although thoroughly insensitive in the context of Jewishness in Germany so soon after 1945.

Two other events that fall broadly within this period are worth noting. One is that at the annual conference of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Hanover in September 1952, it was claimed that '800 members of the community had been arrested by the state security service in the Soviet zone, of whom 710 had been sentenced'.⁴⁴ Whilst the figures themselves are unconfirmed, it is the case that on 5 September 1950 the Sect of the Jehovah's Witnesses was banned in the GDR, amongst other things for supposedly organizing a 'systematische Hetze gegen die bestehende Ordnung und deren Gesetze unter dem Deckmantel religiöser Veranstaltungen'.⁴⁵ All this represents a campaign on a much larger scale than anything directed against the GDR's Jews. The reason may have been that Jehovah's Witnesses, unlike practising Jews, held their faith to be entirely incompatible with support for the institutions of a Marxist state. Throughout the history of the GDR, Jehovah's Witnesses went to gaol rather than do military service in the East German Army. Membership of this religious group thus represented a direct challenge to the authority of the state, in a way that mere membership of the Jewish communities did not.

The other is that, in January 1953, three East Germans were given prison sentences for spreading anti-Semitic propaganda and, in one case, for publicly welcoming 'the Fascist terror against the Jews'.⁴⁶ The sentences were in accordance with Article VI of the GDR's constitution, and the heaviest sentence was two years' imprisonment. Whilst this could be regarded as a cynical attempt to reassure those Jews who might have been thinking of leaving, it was a much more concrete, indeed constructive measure than Czechoslovakia's attempts to show itself as an opponent of anti-Semitism. During the Slánský Trial, André Simone, a Jewish defendant, was forced to

⁴³ Eschwege, 'Die jüdische Bevölkerung', pp. 98–9.

⁴⁴ Anon, 'Case of Dr Linse', *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1952, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Statement of the GDR Interior Minister, Dr Steinhoff, on 5 Sept. 1950, quoted in Peter Fischer, *Kirche und Christen in der DDR* (West Berlin, 1978), p. 58.

⁴⁶ Anon, 'Russian Concern at Refugee Exodus', *The Times*, 30 Jan. 1953, p. 4.

end his 'confession' with the following words: 'I have committed every possible crime against the Jews. I worked for Britain and the United States, where anti-Semitism is growing, and also Fascism. And I worked against the USSR, where there is no racial discrimination. My right place is on the gallows'.⁴⁷

Conclusions: Soviet Zone/GDR 1945–55

The anti-Semitic nature of the purges in Eastern Europe has been outlined in some detail above. The year 1952 had seen a strengthening of the GDR and its institutions as separate from West Germany, and it was by then firmly within the Soviet Bloc, if not yet a member of the Warsaw Pact. The show trials have been demonstrated to have been orchestrated largely by Soviet personnel in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and other countries, even if the instrument was often the native security services. East Germany could thus not expect to escape a similar campaign.

Nevertheless, the East German campaign seems to have been both the shortest and the least thorough of any of the countries concerned, with the possible exceptions of Bulgaria and Albania, the reasons for which have been discussed above. In Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, what started as Stalinist purges of the ranks of the communist parties developed into full-blown anti-Semitic campaigns with a national momentum of their own. That many non-Jews also fell victim is a testimony to the ultimately arbitrary nature of the campaigns once they had developed. They then operated on the principle that the more people were arrested, the less likely it was that anyone 'guilty' would escape. And yet, as we have seen, some prominent Jews, especially in Hungary and Poland, managed to avoid falling victim by themselves organizing the campaigns.

The picture in East Germany is, in many ways, similarly confused. Undoubtedly, many Jews escaped arrest only by fleeing to the West. Of those who remained, a significant number lost their jobs, were expelled from the party, and, in one or two cases, were imprisoned. Yet the GDR authorities seemed to delay this campaign as long as possible, and it would appear that the Doctors' Plot in Moscow, rather than the Slánský Trial, was what forced their hand. Unlike Czechoslovakia, the campaign was not systematic, for only four months after the initial charges, in May 1953, a Jewish party member, Hermann Axen, was given responsibility for training party cadres, replacing a non-Jew in the process. Also, if we accept the claims of the West German Jehovah's Witnesses, then the campaign against the Jews cannot have been nearly as systematic as that against the former. I have suggested above that the explanation for this lies in the different political standpoints attached to each religion. It also seems that in the GDR, unlike the other three countries mentioned, the Jewish victims of the purges were all party members, and the remaining victims were other party members (and some members of the

⁴⁷ Anon, 'Slansky's Editorial "Crime"', *The Times*, 24 Nov. 1952, p. 5.

Blockparteien) rather than other Jews. The conclusion that the show trials were primarily about a Stalinist power struggle rather than anti-Semitism seems inescapable.

What distinguishes the GDR is the speed with which the campaign came to an end. One or two trials dragged out beyond 1953, in particular that of Paul Merker (the Janka Trial in 1957, on the other hand, despite Merker's appearance as a witness for the prosecution, was a different matter altogether), but the middle of 1953 seems to be the point at which the GDR authorities decided to put an end to the victimization of Jewish citizens. As we have seen, Alexander Abusch was rehabilitated within eighteen months. Stalin died in March 1953, Beria was arrested in June of the same year, and the SED does not appear to have had the stomach to continue with what many of the leading members undoubtedly regarded as a particularly obscene aspect of the purges. Nevertheless, as with most Stalinists and neo-Stalinists, they were not averse to purges *per se*, so that there were to be more show trials in the future. And, of course, an admission that they had got it wrong, except in one or two cases of individual 'rehabilitation', was almost never forthcoming.

As relations between the SED and the Jewish community had been excellent for a long period after 1945, the change in attitude seems quite clearly, to many Jewish and non-Jewish observers, to have been a consequence of the GDR's obligation to toe the Soviet line. *The Times*, quoting an estimation of 2,600 Jews in the entire Soviet zone, including East Berlin, stated that if the reports of anti-Semitism were true, 'it can be little more than theoretical anti-Semitism, because scarcely any Jews are left in east Germany'. It then summed up the nature of the purges which were to follow thus: '... and a drive by German Communists to oust Jews becomes in practice only an ingratiating gesture to Moscow'.⁴⁸ 'Ingratiating' is the wrong word, because it implies choice. In fact, by January 1953 the East Germans finally had no option but to follow Stalin's and Beria's orders.

⁴⁸ Anon, 'East German "Purge"', *The Times*, 9 Jan. 1953, p. 4.