

Chapter 2

Deportation of the Jews, from Belomorie to the Screen

Negotiating a “Socialist” Reading of the War

Hristo Radevski (poet): What’s at the heart of the film?

Emil Petrov (film critic): At the heart of the film is, I think, the relationship between Ruth and Walter.

H. Radevski: Between a Greek Jew and a German soldier? Why make such a film?

E. Petrov: You would have to ask the producers; that question is irrelevant in evaluating the artistic work as an artistic production.

Nikola Mirčev (painter): Bulgarian Jews weren’t sent to Auschwitz.

H. Radevski: On the other hand, we are making a film that will help strengthen Bulgarian-German bonds.

—Meeting of the East German–Bulgarian Artistic Council,
January 5, 1959¹

January 5, 1959. We are back in Sofia, fourteen years after we left it. In the city center, the zeal of the builders of socialism has consigned all traces of the war, as well as the prewar era, to dust. Now, Stalinist neoclassicist buildings surround the Largo, a vast triangular square where streets of shops once wound in and around Jewish-owned businesses. Crowned by a red star, the Headquarters of the Bulgarian Communist Party (*Bălgarska komunističeska partiija*, BKP) towers over the view, facing left toward the future presidency building, right toward the gleaming Central Universal Mall (*Centralen Universalen Magazin*, CUM)—Bulgaria’s first shopping mall, built in 1957.

1 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 27.

Bulgarian socialism has entered the age of consumption, its arrival hailed by singer Lea Ivanova in a jazzy popular song “Cum! Cum! Cum!”

Let us continue our stroll. A few strides away from the capital city’s political center, the East German–Bulgarian Artistic Council holds its meetings (a brief excerpt from one can be found in the epigraph). As in other European cities, in the final quarter of the nineteenth century Sofia had developed by unfurling out from a large central avenue: blanketed, in 1907–8, with a distinct swath of small, straight, bright yellow cobblestones. The street, opportunely renamed Lenin Avenue, now runs along the party headquarters before greeting the mausoleum of the departed socialist leader G. Dimitrov, his embalmed body maintained with scientific care. White, massive, and angular, the memorial stands opposite the former Bulgarian Royal Palace, now an art museum, where—though few passersby would recall it—the Ottoman governor of the Sofia district once resided. Turning right, one continues alongside the Rakovski Street cinemas—some of which were converted into theaters in the 1940s—before weaving in and out of side lanes to reach Slavejkov Square, known in the prewar period for its buzzing cabaret nightlife. Following the tracks of the tramway and the emblematic Holy Seven Saints Church, there appears Šišman Street, named after one of the medieval khans who ruled over Bulgaria. (The city’s histories have not all been effaced to an equal extent.) Here, the national Bulgarian cinema company, D. P. Bălgarska Kinematografija (Bulgarian Cinematography), a public monopoly created in 1948, has installed a projection room where artists, producers, directors, and party leadership representatives gather. On the docket: socialist art and ideological correctness.

Object of investigation: the film *Zvezdi/Sterne* (Stars), coproduced by the Studio für Spielfilme of the Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA) and the Bulgarian *Studija za igralni filmi* (SIF Bojana), directed by the East German filmmaker Konrad Wolf, from a screenplay by the Bulgarian Angel Wagenstein.²

Mark of distinction: the first—and only—Bulgarian socialist film to address the deportation of the Jews from the Greek territories under Bulgarian occupation during the war.

Critical response: the work was entered into the Cannes Film Festival in 1959 under the Bulgarian flag—a geopolitical necessity, given that the German Democratic Republic was not recognized by France³—where it

2 Note on transliteration: Angel Wagenstein’s name is spelled in its usual English variation, except in connection to texts written in Bulgarian.

3 The rule to be followed was that the selected works must stem from nations with which France, as the host country, had diplomatic relations. In 1955,

was awarded the Special Jury Prize, while François Truffaut's *Four Hundred Blows* won the Grand Prix, heralding the start of the "New Wave."

Plot: the story of impossible love between a young German commissioned lieutenant and a Greek Jewish teacher, detained with her fellow Jews in a transit camp in southwestern Bulgaria. Walter, a painter whom the war has thrust into the heart of the fighting, lives out the conflict in a state of disengaged disillusionment; transformed by the amorous encounter, he will attempt, ultimately in vain, to save the woman he loves, before deciding to join the Bulgarian resistance—choosing humanist (and Communist) values over murderous national loyalty.

We enter the history of the film's shooting at a turning point: January 5, 1959, the final meeting of the East German–Bulgarian Artistic Council. The German team has arrived in Sofia with some apprehension. Rumors have been circulating: while the East German studios have recently approved the movie, the leadership of Bulgarian Cinematography is said to hold certain reservations about it. From the outset of the bilateral meeting, the intentions of its representatives are loud and clear: recommending to the Science, Education, and Arts Department of the Central Committee (*Otdel Nauka, obrazovanie i izkustvo*) that the film be banned.⁴ It falls to Hristo Radevski, a conservative poet recently replaced by the even more doctrinaire Georgi Karaslavov at the helm of the Writers Union (*Săjuz na pisatelite*),⁵ to launch the debate.

Bluntly, Radevski asks, "We have arranged for a film about Greek Jews to be directed by German and Bulgarian filmmakers. But shouldn't our German comrades make their own film on these Jews? Why should we get involved?"⁶ When the tense deliberations come to a close at 11:30 p.m., the attendees are still divided.⁷ The waiting begins. On January 16, Albert Wilkening, director of Deutsche Film AG (DEFA)'s Studio für Spielfilme, bids his Bulgarian counterpart Georgi Jovkov "to communicate to us as soon

West Germany had adopted the Hallstein Doctrine, according to which, as the sole legal representative of Germany, it would break off diplomatic relations with any nation that recognized East Germany. France established diplomatic relations with East Germany in 1973.

4 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 130, l. 6–53. According to Wagenstein, the German delegation had been advised upon its arrival in Sofia that a special commission of the Bulgarian Communist Party's Central Committee had decided against distributing the film. Vagenštajn, *Predi kraja na sveta*, 261.

5 Hristova, *Spesifika na "bălgarskoto disidentstvo"*, 190–205.

6 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 130, l. 56.

7 Ibid., l. 59. The Bulgarian members of the Artistic Council were divided—some for, some against, and some with qualified support for the film.

as possible your point of view on the question [of whether *Zvezdi/Sterne* should be submitted to international festivals],” a proposition approved by the East German vice minister of culture. He adds, equivocally, “Obviously we would be thrilled if our two countries could present this film together, but we would be prepared to present it on our end alone.”⁸ The thought that the DEFA might benefit from the collectively created work may well have convinced the Bulgarian authorities to approve the release of the feature film.⁹

The previous chapter described the legal framing of crimes against the Jews as World War II drew to a close. Here, our focus shifts from knowledge and representations of the past, as formed in the judicial arena, toward those created via fictional reconstructions of the war. In the earlier setting, the trials remained haunted by the Germans, absent from the defendants’ bench despite having presumably inspired the acts committed by their Bulgarian vassals. Now, “flesh and blood” Nazis, if such a term can apply to bodies onscreen, take center stage in a dialogue between East Germans and Bulgarians. Still, the paths of our protagonists involve dodges and feints, with each striving to produce a self-promoting national narrative—and in so doing to elude responsibility, perhaps, for the appalling events of the recent past.

Construing the production of *Zvezdi/Sterne* as a historical object is a less straightforward enterprise than it may first appear. In Eastern Europe, the art of film was considered an instrument of mass education, as well as a diplomatic weapon. This chapter takes shape in conversation with a body of scholarly works that have, of late, sought to problematize visual accounts of the Holocaust, whether in film, television, photography, or, more recently, comics.¹⁰ Questions regarding the legitimacy of representations of the destruction of European Jews have largely dominated the scholarship: are

8 Ibid., 1. 335–36; see also Georgi Jovkov’s acceptance letter, January 31, 1959 (ibid., 1. 333). The required changes included the deletion of the image of the newborn at the start of the film, a cut in the market scene, and the amending of the symbol of the cross. The Artistic Council’s meeting minutes in Sofia have been preserved in Bulgarian; those of the Babelsberg meetings, in Bulgarian and in German. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations here are from the Bulgarian.

9 The work first appeared in theaters in Sofia on March 23, 1959, then once more after the announcement of awards at Cannes. With 1,579,913 tickets sold, the film was among the period’s box office successes. Janakiev, *Cinema. bg*, 298.

10 Hirsch, *Generation of Post-Memory*; Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*; Schandler, *While America Watches*; Kleinberger and Mesnard, *La Shoah*; Germa and Bensoussan, “Les écrans de la Shoah,” 21–620; Maeck, *Montrer la Shoah à la télévision de 1960 à nos jours*; Gundermann, “Real Imagination?,” 231–50.

not representations a kind of re-creation, one that threatens to substitute for the absences that such work seeks to account for?¹¹ In an effort to broaden the purview of historical research by abjuring internal cleavages within the profession, an ever greater number of authors have recently begun to interrogate the conditions in which visual documents, fictional or not, can enrich our interpretation of the past. In doing so, they have turned the visual history of the Holocaust into a fascinating subfield in the historical discipline.¹²

As a film, *Zvezdi/Sterne* has been the subject of multiple studies (figure 2.1). Seen from an auteurist perspective, the work has been described as one stage in the career of East German director Konrad Wolf.¹³ The solitude of man in the face of his fate, identity dilemmas, and the entanglement between political commitments and the crossing of national borders—all have been identified as persistent motifs. Yet in considering such themes as beholden to the artist's biographical trajectory, this strain of writing overlooks how art worlds (to borrow Howard Becker's formulation¹⁴) are enmeshed with a web of individualities and professions. Especially in coproductions, specific motifs cannot be reduced to the intention of a single artist. Alternatively, the film has been interpreted as a keystone in cinematic representations of World War II, antifascist resistance, and the Holocaust in East Germany.¹⁵ This discovery of connections between East German and West German productions, while belated, has shown how the arts contributed to the rivalry between two inheritors of a divided Germany; it has tempered a view of East Germany's commissioned works as unwaveringly silent on the Holocaust.¹⁶ In analyzing the movie's fictional content, however, the focus has largely been on the prominent themes, the main characters and their motives, and, less often, the visual aesthetics.

The concerns of this chapter lie elsewhere. The aim is less to evaluate the artistic qualities of *Zvezdi/Sterne* than to use the feature film as a prism onto a specific moment in recounting anti-Jewish persecutions, one located at a particular junction. Considered from a national perspective, the film offers

11 On the polemic between documentarian Claude Lanzmann, director of *Shoah* (1985), and historian Georges Didi-Huberman relative to the use of images of the Holocaust, see Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*. See also Chérour, *Mémoire des camps*; and Crane, "Choosing Not to Look," 309–30.

12 Milton, "Images of the Holocaust—Part I," 27–61; Milton, "Images of the Holocaust—Part II," 193–216; Shneer, *Grief*; Lindeperg, "*Night and Fog*"; Bruttman, Hördler, and Kreuzmüller, *Die fotografische Inszenierung des Verbrechen*; Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Trophy, Evidence, Document," 509–28.

13 Elsaesser, "Histoire palimpseste, mémoires obliques."

14 Becker, *Art Worlds*.

15 Bathrick, "Holocaust Film," 109–34.

16 Pinkert, *Film and Memory*.

an angle on the consolidation of socialism, fifteen years after it was established, as it vacillated between professional artists' quest for autonomy and a continuation, even intensification, of political control over artistic creation. Viewed from the standpoint of accounts and remembrance of the Holocaust on a global scale, however, *Zvezdi/Sterne* takes shape within a moment of transition: two years later, the arrest of Adolf Eichmann in May 1960 and his subsequent trial in Israel in 1961 would transform public knowledge of the extermination of the European Jews worldwide. Two years earlier, in 1956, the withdrawal of Alain Resnais's film *Night and Fog* from selection at Cannes had provoked a shock wave in Western and Eastern European artistic milieus. The East German–Bulgarian coproduction thus frays the edges of long-standing depictions of this period (1949–61), in both East and West, as rendering anti-Jewish crimes poorly visible—depictions that, as we shall see, may call for a reconsideration.

More specifically, this analysis of *Zvezdi/Sterne* aims to retrace the intertwined movements by which two Eastern bloc countries attempted to produce, simultaneously, a national vision of (partially) divided pasts and an “Eastern European” reading of the war. To do so, they had to employ all resources that circulated internationally and that transcended the cleavages of the Cold War. Unfolding in three parts, the investigation first interrogates how a coproduced film contributed to crafting competing nationalist readings of World War II. Bulgarian and East German cultural leaders expected two distinct narratives from *Zvezdi/Sterne*: whereas DEFA officials were awaiting “a film on Jewish tragedy and German Guilt,” in the words of director Wolfgang Kolhaase,¹⁷ the Bulgarian Cinematography directors, for their part, were not met with the mainstream antifascist work that they had anticipated. In their eyes, the film was meant to prove the existence of Communist resistance to the German “occupier,” thus exempting Bulgarians from responsibility in the occupied territory roundups. From the East German point of view, the goal was to demonstrate the existence of “another Germany” innocent of Nazi crimes, while leaving room for the re-creation of Jewish suffering during World War II and, incidentally, interrogating present-day attitudes toward Nazi crimes in both West and East Germany. Whereas the German cultural elites, in Berlin, were in search of shades of gray, in Bulgaria only the black stains of Nazism could confer the desired relief on the partisan movement. The opposing judgments that the two partners would cast on the film can be traced back to this foundational misunderstanding.

17 CDA, F 404, op. 3, ae. 130, l. 161 (trans. from German). On December 31, 1958, in Babelsberg, director Kurt Maetzig had praised a work that “tells the tragic fate of the Jews and, with it, the tragic fate of Germans in the era of fascism.” CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 130, l. 102 (trans. from German).

Second, *Zvezdi/Sterne* offers a vantage point onto the negotiation of a concordant reading of history, on the part of the states that would come to be known as the “Eastern bloc.” In this case, the fact that the collapse of the partnership between Bulgaria and East Germany was only narrowly avoided suggests that these dialogues were not always as straightforward as has been assumed. The configuration is unsettling in another respect: unlike, for instance, Romania and Hungary, Bulgaria and the GDR had never maintained intricate historical relations. There is no equivalent, here, to the situation of East Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union, which had to move beyond their former status as enemies and find ways of becoming allies. Both Bulgaria and East Germany had inherited a fascist past from which they wished to escape. From this surprising parallel was born a bilateral cooperation that would contribute to fashioning an Eastern European way of rendering Nazism. Yet this East-East solidarity only developed by overstepping its bounds. Far from being limited to two protagonists, the collaboration between the Bulgarian and East German studios was peopled with actors who would, subsequently, be cut in the editing process—chiefly, those from West Germany and the USSR. Ultimately, the production of a shared interpretation of the recent past saw its coordinates defined by, but not limited to, divisions between East and West.

This brings us to a third and final point. Beyond the dynamics of nationalization and the formation of a geopolitical order, *Zvezdi/Sterne*’s representation of the genocide of the Jews borrowed from visual and symbolic repertoires that, around the time the movie was shot, were being formed on a global scale. Whether they concerned definitions of Jewish agency—and the recourse to gendered categories to describe it—or the religious resonance of the catastrophe, these codes fractured the East-West borders that narratives like *Zvezdi/Sterne*’s were meant to bolster. What emerges here instead is thus a concomitant coproduction of national, regional, and international scales. Rather than opposing national dynamics to international processes, or, failing that, presuming as self-evident the transnational circulation of visual and historical imaginaries, we will discover instead a diverse array of transmissions, varying across territories and time.

In introducing and discussing *Zvezdi/Sterne*, we have taken some artistic liberties. The camera was initially set inside the meeting hall of the East German–Bulgarian Artistic Council. Though beginning with the decisive meeting of January 5, 1959, sample shots were taken from earlier meetings, in a syncopated back-and-forth between the production of the film and those earlier events.¹⁸ In the gaps between these exchanges, the manufacturing of the reels carried on. Later, the lens absconds, shunning the meeting room in order to capture aspects of the shooting, which was mainly carried

18 January 6, April 30, July 10, and December 31, 1958, respectively.

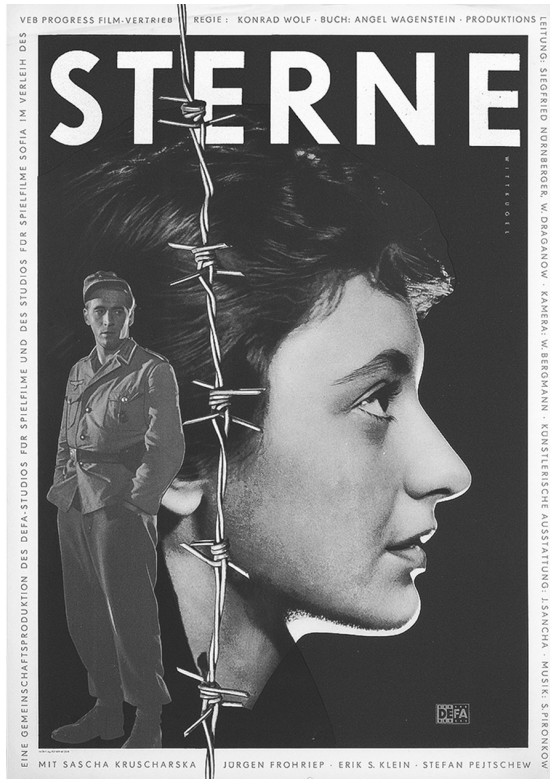


Figure 2.1. German poster (working copy) of the film *Sterne/Zvezdi*. Source: Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft © DEFA.

out in Bulgaria, in the bucolic region of Pirin. Finally, a third angle on the film emerges, like a cutaway scene, from the crosscutting of an excerpt from the screenplay, the storyboard, and the images that would ultimately be displayed. Juxtaposing these three variants of a specific scene will serve as a corrective to the belief that the final visual and sound product of the film was entirely molded by the Artistic Council and that the wordy transcripts of the meetings preserved in the archives suffice to illuminate the diversity of human crafts, techniques, and sensitivities involved in its making. Working over the maladjustments between the three layers will enable us to restore the work of hands and voices, which do not all feature in such accounts. This chapter adopts its narrative structure as a response to the dilemma of inscribing images that the reader does not see, and can only speculate on, in lingering over the written word.

Cinemas on Unequal Terms in Bulgaria and East Germany

Bulgaria and Germany's Soviet occupation zone entered the end of the war with contrasting cinematic traditions and with partially divergent national stakes. They did, though, share a definition of the role of art. In the modest-sized Balkan country, a taste for moving images had been manifest since the interwar period, fed by American, German, and French films,¹⁹ though without the development of its own film industry. When the Fatherland Front came to power, the Bulgarian catalog counted forty-six titles.²⁰ Vălko Červenkov, who chaired the Committee on Sciences, Arts, and Culture, decided to give a priority role to the large screen in "the political and cultural education of citizens, particularly the youth."²¹ To do so, he needed to create a national cinema: in 1948, any private production, distribution, or operation was forbidden. A new national company, D. P. Bălgarska Kinematografija, was put under the authority of the Committee on Sciences, Arts, and Culture. Young filmmakers, screenwriters, and technicians were sent abroad for their degrees, mainly to the USSR and Czechoslovakia; the infrastructure benefited from Promethean investments, as the number of movie theaters grew from 213 in September 1944 to 1,045 in 1951.²²

Ordinance No. 91 of the Council of Ministers, of January 31, 1952, strictly defined the requested film repertoire: "Bulgarian cinematography must primarily produce films devoted to the socialist construction of our country that show images of the new man on screen—the heroes laboring in factories, mills, and mines, machine-tractor stations, and TKZs [collective farms], our border guards, the Dimitrovian youth, works in the domain of our socialist culture."²³ The narratives are sketched on a standardized canvas: the heroes are clearly distinguished from the villains; group dynamics are preferred to the description of individuals, who, for their part, are meant to blend in to a collective history. Although the notion of sacrifice may be elevated, the tone of the works is tasked with promoting an optimistic and linear vision of time. A screenplay must respect the rules of "socialist realism," which, though never as uniform and exclusive as it has often been described,

19 In 1924–25, 358 films were distributed in Bulgaria, including 31.6 percent from Germany, 29.3 percent from the United States, 24.3 percent from France, 6.1 percent from Italy, 2.5 percent from Denmark, and 1.1 percent from the USSR. Janakiev, *Cinema.bg*, 62.

20 *Bulgaran is Gallant* (*Bălgaran e galant*), the first Bulgarian film of Vasil Gendov, came to screens in 1915.

21 Quoted in Deyanova, *Nacionalno minalo i golemija dekor*, 3.

22 Garbolevsky, *Conformists*, 15–64.

23 *Kino 2* (1952): 1–4 (here, 2).

nonetheless designated a strict system of constraints.²⁴ The repressive climate of the Červenkov era (1949–54) and the lack of trained creative and technical personnel led to anemic levels of production.²⁵

In 1950, artistic councils (*hudožestveni saveti*) were created at studio headquarters.²⁶ These were intended to stimulate filmmaking, all while reaffirming political control over the process. This Bulgarian institution was similar to the Soviet Union's, which had come into being ten years earlier.²⁷ Composed of cinema professionals (producers, directors, operators, screenwriters, editors, etc.), a secretary from the Communist Party, and sometimes also external consultants (literary critics, journalists, etc.), these bodies were responsible for overseeing the projects from the screenwriting through the final shooting. They were to survey the production plans, discuss the scripts, direct the choice of actors, watch the finished films (in addition to, at times, the rushes), and submit their views on the artistic and ideological quality of the works. Gradually, these councils would become avenues of professionalization for the cinema branch. At the same time, they never overcame a muddled connection between aesthetic conformity and political conformity. Juxtaposed to collegial relationships were love affairs, professional and generational rivalries, and multiple artistic sensibilities. Mobilizing ideological arguments sometimes became a way to assert artistic points of view; aesthetic criteria, a means to defend political choices.

Far from limiting itself to banning or tinkering with the films—"retouches" imposed on the script, during shooting, or at the moment of release—such control was registered in the material embodiment of the film process itself. Every artist knew what it was like to have a scene, editor, or actors imposed; to fail to obtain the desired cameras, reels, or editing schedules; or to receive a disappointing number of copies and a too-brief release in theaters. Censorship was its own coproduction, delegated in part to artists who attempted to circumvent the constraints of the period they lived in, in the name of principles they had internalized.²⁸

Although shaken by the destruction of war, food rationing, and a Soviet occupation that most people did not exactly welcome as a liberation, the German zone of Soviet occupation (1945–49) entered the postwar period under better auspices. It inherited the basic film infrastructure of the Third Reich, from the workshops of the Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft (UFA), the Terra-Filmkunst, and the Tobis, to the film production plants

24 Kărdžilov, "Filmi razdeli," 96–111; Pozner, "Le 'réalisme socialiste,'" 11–17.

25 Yanakiev, *Cinema.bg*, 297–311.

26 CDA, F 404, op. 3, ac. 2, l. 3, 3a.

27 Laurent, "Le Conseil artistique du ministère soviétique du Cinéma," 71–80.

28 On the Soviet model, see Godet, *La Pellicule et les ciseaux*.

Kodak and Agfa.²⁹ Despite the lack of equipment and film, a rapid uptick in production was enhanced by the May 1946 creation of the Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft, which was financed and controlled by the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (*Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland*), and the Central German Administration for the People's Education (*Deutsche Zentralverwaltung für Volksbildung*).

The Soviet authorities made the "reeducation" of the masses through culture a priority. Officers and civil attachés in Berlin, who happened to be great admirers of German culture, reopened theaters, concert halls, and opera houses. Promoting a Cultural Alliance for the Democratic Rebuilding of Germany (*Kulturbund zur Demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands*), the Soviet administration advocated broad antifascist front policies.³⁰ The first Congress of German Writers organized in Berlin in October 1947 illustrated this ambition—one that, paradoxically, it would put to an end. That is, behind the debates on humanism and antifascism emerged a split: between artists who, under Nazism, had made the choice of interior exile and those who had opted for armed struggle or emigration. Before the war, this divide originally spanned the boundaries between Soviet and Western occupation zones; it would be reconfigured as an East-West line of demarcation in the Cold War.³¹

Finally, the beginning of the shooting process benefited from a relative continuity between the UFA and DEFA in terms of technical and creative staff.³² The paradox is evident, if familiar: revolutionary times are experienced and felt as more radical when those who craft them are able to mobilize visual imaginaries, cultural references, and knowledge borrowed from defunct eras. Beginning with the creation of the GDR in October 1949, the East German Communist Party nonetheless strengthened its grip on the cinematic industry. Thematic outlines valued heroic figures turned toward the future; ideological instructions were as indecipherable as they were imperative, which lent a certain languor to the production process. In this context,

29 Moine, "RDA (1946–1990)," 167–72.

30 Genton, *Les Alliés et la culture, Berlin*.

31 Agocs, "Divisive Unity," 56–78.

32 Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 19–44; Schenk, "Auferstanden aus Ruinen," 476–81. Joshua Feinstein has underlined some of these continuities: Friedl Behn-Grund, director of photography for *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (The murderers are among us) and for *Ehe im Schatten* (Marriage in the shadows), had in 1941 directed *Ich klage an* (I accuse), a Nazi-commissioned film justifying the politics of euthanasia. Wolfgang Zeller composed the music for the propaganda film *Jud Süß* (Süss the Jew, 1940) before *Ehe im Schatten*.

the USSR's crushing of the Berlin uprising of June 1953³³ had an ambivalent effect; if the decision to resort to repression contributed to reinforcing political surveillance throughout the creative spheres, it also resulted in a stabilization of structures, leaders, and commands addressed to the film industry. A venue was opened, too, for more popular, commercial cinema.

Until 1953, the horizon of German reunification had continued to inhabit the East German imaginary. The intensification of the Cold War and the integration of West Germany into NATO in 1955 gradually led to the conviction that the East-West divide was there to stay: East Germany would have to invent another way of being German. As pivotal actors in shaping this new identity, the arts were enjoined to portray, at once, German historical continuity, a rupture with the Nazi past, and a demarcation between West and East German identities. While claiming the legacy of German high culture, the new German Democratic Republic would not tarry in shifting the blame for the Nazi age, though lived in common, onto its capitalist neighbor. In the meantime, political pressures sharpened: in 1957, at the end of a show trial, Walter Janka, former director general of the DEFA (1948–49), and Wolfgang Harich, a philosopher, were condemned to five and ten years of prison, respectively, for “counterrevolutionary conspiracy.” The fact that the former was freed in December 1960, following an international campaign of support, and found employment once again as literary secretary in charge of finding and reading scripts at the DEFA in 1962, did not diminish the force of the message addressed to intellectuals attempting to think freely, albeit on the left.³⁴

In Bulgaria, the years 1957–58 also hosted a scene of more stringent control. In the wake of the Khrushchev report, the Central Committee meeting of April 1956 ousted Červenkov from his leadership positions in the Communist Party and the Bulgarian state. A duo took his place: from it would emerge the nimble figure of First Secretary Todor Zhivkov.³⁵ This handover of power left some room for hopes of a liberalized cultural sphere, in the model of Polish, Hungarian, and Yugoslavian reforms. In the Union of Writers, members of the new generation denounced the routine of formulaic writings and clichéd storylines.³⁶ The revolt soon spread to film circles, where certain creatives, trained abroad and familiar with the world's

33 On June 16, 1953, a protest movement by construction workers against an increased rate of work and low salaries broke out in East Berlin and quickly spread to all of East Germany, before being repressed with the support of Soviet tanks. Spittmann, “Dr 17,” 594–605.

34 Hoeft, *Der Prozess gegen Walter Janka und andere*.

35 Hereafter the name of the Bulgarian Communist leader will be spelled using the usual English transcription.

36 Dojnov, *Bălgarskijat socrealizăm*, 128.

contemporary masters, were keen to espouse the tenets of Italian neorealism.³⁷ The repression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 brought this quest for freedom to a brutal halt. In the spring of 1957, Armand Baruh, former chairman of Bulgarian Cinematography's screenplay commission, deplored the recent scripts' "poverty of ideas."³⁸ A few months later, two plays were taken off the bill for having failed to portray antifascist resistance with all its proper luster. On April 8, 1958, the first secretary criticized the filmmakers: "For several years, the [Bulgarian] Cinematography has proposed a series of apolitical films bereft of ideas and with a deformed vision of life in our country. . . . Some workers in the cinema sphere, cut off from life and endowed with poor Marxist-Leninist preparation, have yielded to 'innovative' outside modernist influences, diverging from the method of socialist realism and realist traditions in our own art, and have created inappropriate films. It is now obvious that the Central Committee and the government cannot but intervene in the work of the Cinematography."³⁹

Five films were subject to censorship, one of which was banned outright. Shot in 1957 by two artists known for their commitment to socialism and their role in the antifascist resistance, Binka Željazkova and her husband, Hristo Ganev, and entitled *Life Flows Quietly By* (*Životăt si teče tiho*), this film recounted the betrayal of the antifascist legacy by former partisans whose social success and attraction to a consumerist way of life had estranged them from their former political vision.⁴⁰ In the film crew, three names stand out: Željazkova, who, upon the signing of the East German-Bulgarian agreement in the spring of 1958, was to be first assistant director for *Zvezdi/Sterne*—a decision later canceled;⁴¹ Isaak (Zako) Heskija, who would nonetheless be recruited as assistant cameraman for the film; and camera operator Vasil Holiolčev (whose path we will cross again in chapter 3). The vice director of Bulgarian Cinematography, Martin Ginev, defended the ban: "Those who decided on the film's fate . . . are no less attached [than the filmmakers] to the national cinema, nor do they understand our reality any less."⁴² His statement did not put an end to expressions of discontent amid the artistic milieu. On July 5, 1958, the Central Committee ordered the return

37 Janakiev, *Cinema.bg*, 219–26.

38 Ibid., 213.

39 *Kinoizkustvo* 5 (1958): 4–7.

40 "Životăt si teče tiho . . .," in Genčeva, *Bălgarski igralni filmi*, 2:103–5; Ragaru, "Unbearable Lightness," 240–48.

41 See below in this chapter.

42 Marin Ginev, "Za pozicijata, iskrenostta I . . . greškite," *Narodna Kultura* 33, no. 16 (August 1959).

to “clear Communist ideas and adherence to the party line.”⁴³ Directorial turnover was quick to follow. During the summer of 1958, Trifon Trifonov handed over management for the studio for feature films to G. Jovkov—just as *Zvezdi/Sterne* was being filmed.

Elusive Presences of the Holocaust on the Screen

In the film representations of anti-Jewish persecutions, there is a striking contrast between Bulgaria and East Germany. German filmmakers in the immediate postwar period felt an urgent need to understand the origins of Nazism, people’s devotion to Adolf Hitler, and the ravages of the war. Several works, semiautobiographical in nature, addressed the recent past head on.⁴⁴ Their creators were filmmakers, screenwriters, and actors who had suffered from Nazism; some had been imprisoned (Erwin Geshonneck), while others had survived in hiding (Kurt Maetzig, a “half-Jew,” according to Nazi terminology); still others had been forced into exile (the physician and politically active writer Friedrich Wolf, father of Konrad Wolf, among others). In their interrogation of German responsibility, they addressed a collective “we” that glanced back to a time before a rupture between East and West.

The list of notable titles included Wolfgang Staudte’s iconic *Die Mörder Sind Unter Uns* (The murderers among us, 1946), a project that had been submitted to the American and British occupation forces before receiving Soviet support. Filmed with expressionist accents, the work recounts a military doctor’s return to a devastated Berlin, as he is kept alive by the hope of avenging a captain’s order of the assassination of Polish civilians. His love for a concentration camp survivor will dissuade him, at the last minute, from enacting justice. The accommodation, if not complicity, of witnesses is at the heart of the plot; the (possible) Jewishness of the hostages is never made explicit. Shortly thereafter, K. Maetzig released *Ehe in Schatten* (Marriage in the shadows, 1946), a film inspired by the life of actor Joachim Gottschalk, who killed himself with his Jewish wife and their son in 1942 in order to escape arrest by the Nazis. German introspection also burrowed into deeper historical grooves, tracing the warning signs that would anticipate support for the Führer’s racial theories. *Die Affäre Blum* (The Blum affair, 1948), directed by Erich Engel, was inspired by a true story, the tale of a Jew falsely accused of murder in Magdeburg in 1926. The creation of the GDR nonetheless tuned down efforts at critically investigating issues of responsibility up until the second half of the 1950s. While the mentioning of anti-Jewish

43 *Kinoizkustvo* 8 (1958): 4.

44 Mückenberger, “Anti-Fascist Past,” 58–76.

crimes did not disappear, nor did attempts at reckoning with the Nazi past, but these endeavors increasingly had to be inscribed within a framework structured around an opposition between West Germany, considered essentially fascist, and East Germany, an altogether different regime with irreproachable citizens.

One searches in vain for similar interrogations in postwar Bulgarian cinema. World War II was certainly omnipresent on-screen: it took its place amid a reinvented historical continuity where revolutionary fervor, having reached maturity in 1944, could be traced back to the anti-Ottoman struggles of the nineteenth century, before continuing with the abortive Communist uprising of September 1923 (*Septemvrijski*, Septembrists, Zahari Žandov, 1954), the defense of Dimitrov at the Leipzig trial in 1933 (*Urokăt na istorijata/Urok istorii* [A lesson in history], a Soviet-Bulgarian coproduction codirected by Lev Oskarovich Arnshtam and Hristo Piskov, 1956), and, finally, resistance during the war. Heroism shattered in its prime took on the features of Nikola Vapcarov, a poet and member of the resistance who was executed in July 1942 (*Pesen za čoveka* [Song of man], Borislav Šaraliev, 1954), or a collective portrait of groups of partisans, minus those who, though ready for individual sacrifice, would risk hindering collective progress (*Zakonăt na moreto* [The law of the sea], Jakim Jakimov, 1958). Nevertheless, these narratives functioned within a cultural and educational system that muted anti-Jewish violence in Bulgarian-held territories.⁴⁵ In the rare instances when moral questions were sketched out, they were entrusted to the elites of the now-sunken monarchical world. In this regard, *Trevoga* (Alarm, 1950) was emblematic. An adaptation by Angel Wagenstein and Orlin Vasilev of the eponymous play by Vasilev, the feature, which is often described as Bulgaria's first antifascist movie, explored the ethical dilemma of the father of a young gendarme who had rallied to fascism; meanwhile, his son-in-law has espoused the Communist cause. The rendition of this triangular plot was entrusted to the safe hands of a dedicated Communist, an experienced film director: Zahari Žandov; however, this spared him neither criticism from the party nor an alteration of the film's final scene.

The meager production output in Bulgaria (thirty-six films between 1950 and 1957) is not sufficient to shed light on the silence about the predicament of Jews during wartime. The emigration of some 90 percent of the Jewish

45 Liliana Deyanova has underlined the contrast between, on the one hand, the high school history textbook of 1946, which mentions the adoption of the Law for the Defense of the Nation and the deportation of "11,410 Jews" from the "new lands" while concluding that "the Bulgarian people were opposed to this extraordinary crime," and, on the other hand, the 1954 textbook, where the events are condensed into a single line. Deyanova, *Očertanija na mälčanieto*, 160.

community to the new State of Israel understandably shrank the Jewish presence in the cultural sphere.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, young Communists were beginning to reach renown, from the screenwriters Baruh and Wagenstein to the camera operator Isak Šekerdžijski. The explanation must be sought elsewhere. The aliyah increased pressure for compliance among the Bulgarian Jews who chose to remain in Bulgaria. By the beginning of the 1950s, the institutions that had ensured the reproduction of Jewish identity had either been dissolved or subordinated to the central government: on May 19, 1947, the Jewish section of the Fatherland Front was transformed into a democratic Jewish committee deprived of any influence.⁴⁷ Most Jewish municipalities were closed after the emigrations of 1948–49, and the Jewish Scientific Institute of the Central Consistory lost its autonomy in 1951. A glance toward Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign—the shelving of *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry* on anti-Jewish crimes, compiled by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman; the termination of the Jewish Antifascist Committee in the winter of 1948–49; the arrest of over a hundred figures of the committee; the trial of fifteen of them in May–July 1952; and execution of thirteen committee members, among them five Yiddish writers, in August of that year⁴⁸—encouraged Bulgaria's Jewish artists to adopt a low profile in their homeland. Against this background, references to the fates of the Jews who had not survived the war seemed inopportune. And yet they would occur several years later, in a country newly keen on improving its international standing.

One Coproduction, Two Institutions, Several Agendas

In the Bulgarian film industry, the technical and personnel needs were immense. In September 1944, the Bălgarsko Delo Foundation, which produced Bulgaria's newsreels, owned a mere four cameras and one editing table; two years later, the numbers had reached eleven and seven, respectively. One struggles to imagine the lengths to which the Bulgarians had to go in order to overcome that deficit. In 1946, they agreed to barter with Hungary: Bulgaria would furnish furs and cigarettes in exchange for Aeroflex

46 Vasileva, *Evreite v Bălgarija*, 125; Hachohen, *Immigrants in Turmoil*, 267.

47 CDA, F 1B, op. 6, ae. 306, l. 1.

48 On the Jewish Antifascist Committee and the trial of May–July 1952, see Estraiikh, "Life, Death, and Afterlife," 139–48; and, more broadly, the special section "The 1952 Trial of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the Soviet Union," with additional contributions by Anna Schur, Harriet Murav, Alice S. Nakhimovsky, Alexander Nakhimovsky, and Ber Kotlerman, <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/feej20/48/2?nav=tocList>; as well as Redlich, *War, Holocaust, and Stalinism*.

cameras, Leica instruments, projectors, and projection lamps. Alas, judged to be of poor quality, the furs were turned back at Hungarian customs, while 110 kilograms of cigarettes disappeared under mysterious circumstances in Vienna. Those may well have ended up in the gratified hands of the French occupying forces.⁴⁹

Bulgarian cultural officials had first turned to the Soviet Union: in November 1944, June 1946, and June 1947, Soviet task forces came to Sofia, with disappointing results. Promises of technical assistance were reiterated in a bilateral agreement on cultural cooperation in 1948. After long and protracted negotiations, filmmaker Sergey D. Vasilyev came to Sofia to film an epic celebrating the role of Russia in Bulgarian emancipation from “Turkish oppression.” *Heroes of Shipka* (*Geroite na Šipka/Geroi Shipki*) promulgated echoes between the first (1877–78) and second (1944) “liberation” of Bulgaria—first by Russians, then by the Soviets. Packed with spectacular scenes of battle, the film won the Best Director Award (in a tie) at the 1955 Cannes Festival.⁵⁰ In order to reduce their cultural isolation, Bulgarian authorities also encouraged imports from West Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania; East German and Hungarian Film Weeks were organized in the Bulgarian capital. Links with the West expanded: beginning in 1952, a Bulgarian delegation attended Cannes each year.⁵¹ The proportion of Western films in theaters increased significantly, going from 0.14 percent in 1952 to 31.12 percent in 1957.⁵²

All the conditions were in place to encourage a possible partnership with East Germany, which would have the double advantage of an imagined continuity—dictated by the prestige of antebellum German culture—as well as novelty. East German leaders reached a similar conclusion via other avenues. Early on in their rivalry with West Germany, they began to seek keenly after Western partners. Between 1956 and 1960, the DEFA aroused the interest of French left-wing artists such as Gérard Philippe (*Bold Adventure*, Gérard Philippe and Joris Ivens, 1956), Simone Signoret (*The Crucible*, Raymond Rouleau, 1957), and Jean Gabin (*Les Misérables*, Jean-Paul Le Chanois, 1958).⁵³ Several Communist sympathizers, including the documentary filmmaker Ivens; the writer, translator, and screenwriter Vladimir Pozner; and the film historian Georges Sadoul, fostered these connections. Although an accumulation of political challenges eventually slackened such momentum,

49 Garbolevsky, *Conformists*, 22–23.

50 Piskova, “*Geroite na Šipka*.”

51 Garbolevsky, *Conformists*, 35.

52 Imports from “capitalist countries” fell sharply (15.51 percent in 1961) after the crushing of the Budapest uprising. *Kino i vreme* 5 (1973): 15.

53 Val, *Les relations cinématographiques entre la France et la RDA*.

the Babelberg studios achieved their goal: they had demonstrated their ability to manage multinational productions.⁵⁴ Though rather less impressively, the signing of an agreement with Bulgaria belonged to the same quest for recognition. As Kolhaase declared before the Artistic Council on January 5, 1959, geopolitical barriers to East German influence could be circumvented: “Today, in Western societies, under the effect of the shared threat of war arising from West Germany, public opinion is being reborn, in the sense that the GDR, after being refused recognition for years, is increasingly entering the public eye. We are currently organizing a DEFA Film Week in London, which will replace the UFA Film Week initially planned. We cannot underestimate the fact that with films like *Zvezdi*, which raise a number of issues, we will reach a vast audience with highly diverse viewpoints.”⁵⁵

On May 31, 1957, in Babelsberg, the DEFA and D. P. Bălgarska Kinematografija signed a framework agreement laying out a foundation for future collaboration, which would begin with the making of a film tentatively titled *Zvezdi/Sterne*. The joint work was to be enacted under financial (point 2, I) and artistic (point 3, I) parity: “The two countries should contribute to the entire artistic development to approximately the same degree.” Although the “country that provides the director assumes responsibility [for the coproduction], . . . the screenplay will be approved by both parties” (point 10). The operation expenses and per diem payments would be the responsibility of the country of origin (point 12, I). One final guideline was of particular note: “the film will be shot as follows, in one sole version: the Bulgarian actors will speak Bulgarian, and the German actors, German” (point 4, II). Two negatives would be made; Bulgaria would retain the distribution rights for Bulgaria, while the DEFA would hold the rights for East and West Germany (point 4, I).⁵⁶

On March 12, 1958, the project was further specified: it would be a 2,800-meter film whose screenplay, entrusted to the Bulgarian Wagenstein, would be reworked with Wolf. The calendar was carefully defined: the script had to be finished by the end of May 1958, with distribution approved in Sofia by May 5 and in Babelsberg by the 15th. The sets and costumes were to be ready by May 31, the shooting scheduled by June 5. The goal was to complete the shooting in five months (June 15–November 5), editing in two months (November 6, 1958–January 2, 1959), and to submit a first version of the film to the German and Bulgarian studio directors on December 5 and 10, respectively. The final approval was fixed for January 5, 1959—that is, three days after the soundtrack recording.

54 Buffet, *Défunte DEFA*, 115–19.

55 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 46.

56 Ibid., l. 149–53.

A more careful reading of the agreement nonetheless indicates an asymmetry between so-called equals. The East German Cinematography proposed three title roles: German second lieutenant Walter, Captain Kurt, and the young Jew Ruth.⁵⁷ The more marginal figures would come from the Bulgarian studio: resistance member Baj Petko, young partisan Blaže, and a fascist policeman. If the shooting was to take place in Bulgaria, the Germans would provide the cameras, film, and sound equipment; Babelsberg would be responsible for the sound engineering and development of the negatives. Despite the appointment of two production managers—Vălčo Draganov and Hans-Joachim Schöppe, the latter eventually to be replaced by Siegfried Nürnberger⁵⁸—the Bulgarians seemed like feeble understudies. The director Wolf would be supported by a Bulgarian assistant: Ganeva/Željaskova, whose name was subsequently removed; the German director of photography (Werner Bergmann), by a second Bulgarian operator (Todor Stojanov); the German production designer (Alfred Drosdek), by an assistant provided by the Bulgarians (José Sancha); and so on.⁵⁹ Furthermore, it was decided that only one negative, co-owned by the DEFA and the Bulgarian studio, would be preserved in Babelsberg.⁶⁰ In exchange, Bulgaria would receive two release prints (a double negative and a reserve copy), a certified copy calibrated to the Bulgarian version, a soundtrack (excluding voice), and a master copy for the creation of a 16mm version.⁶¹ Finally, on July 1, 1958, the financial indicators for the coproduction were confirmed. Bulgaria would contribute 60 percent; Germany, 40 percent.⁶² For the nascent Bulgarian cinema, this was nonetheless a success: in these few pages, the disparity between unequal film histories seemed to diminish.

57 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 130, l. 127.

58 Ibid., l. 127.

59 Multiple other changes came later: Isak Heskijsa was designated assistant director in February 1958 (CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 130, l. 180), followed by Rangel Vălčanov in August 1958 (ibid., l. 182). The latter would appear in the credits as “consultant to the director.” On October 5, Nenčo Červenkov and Ivan Karadžov were hired as assistant producers (ibid., l. 181).

60 In April 1958, Albert Wilkening noted that, “for artistic reasons,” the replies from the German characters would be subtitled and not dubbed. Ibid., l. 353.

61 Ibid., l. 131. A rider to the coproduction agreement, dating to February 25, 1959, replaced the provision of a master copy by the granting of three hundred meters of film.

62 By the end of 1958, the question of exceeding the budget had led to spirited debates, with the DEFA calling for a revision of the July 1, 1958, agreement. On March 24, 1959, the initial division of expenses was confirmed. Ibid., l. 173.

Konrad Wolf and Angel Wagenstein, a Dear Friendship

Located at a juncture between two countries, *Zvezdi/Sterne* was also the result of an encounter between two men. During their studies at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography in Moscow, Konrad Wolf and Angel Wagenstein (1922–2023)⁶³ embarked on a friendship that would end only with the death of the German director in March 1982.⁶⁴ Their biographical trajectories are remarkably parallel. Both artists were born in the 1920s in leftist Jewish families; Wolf's father was a doctor as well as a famous Marxist writer. Wagenstein's origins, in Plovdiv, were more humble as he came from a family of artisans.⁶⁵ Experiences of exile and war nonetheless muted the power of these social contrasts. The Wagenstein family fled to France to escape the wave of arrests of Communist militants following the failed assassination attempt on King Boris in April 1925; they would remain there from 1928 until 1934. After the Nazis came to power, the Wolf family escaped to Austria, Switzerland, and then France in 1933, before reaching Moscow in 1934, where the young Konrad spent his childhood.⁶⁶ During World War II, both men took part in the antifascist struggle: Wolf joined the ranks of the Soviet army, in particular as a translator-interpreter; in May 1945, he entered liberated Berlin as a lieutenant.⁶⁷ Incriminated in a resistance action, Wagenstein was arrested in Sofia in December 1943 and condemned to death (see figure 2.2).⁶⁸ The Red Army's invasion of Bulgaria and the overthrow of the wartime regime in September 1944 saved his life.

The fact that these two men met around the aspiration of bringing anti-Jewish persecutions to the screen is not surprising. As the project was being launched, Wolf had already distinguished himself with *Lissy* (1956), a film that related the story of a young woman divided between her loyalty to her husband, a member of the Nazi Party, and her Communist brother. The director had also just finished shooting *Sun Seekers* (*Sonnensucher*, 1958), a

63 Wagenstein was part of the first group of Bulgarian students sent to Moscow in 1947 alongside two screenwriters, two directors, one photographer, and two film editors. *Kinorabotnik* 5, 1980, 10.

64 Besides *Zvezdi/Sterne*, their most notable collaboration, Wolf and Wagenstein also cooperated on other projects, including an adaptation of a Lion Feuchtwanger novel, *Goya*, coproduced with the USSR (1971), and an adaptation of *The Little Prince* for East German television (1966).

65 Vagenštajn, *Predi kraja na sveta*. On his trajectory, see also the documentary by Simon, *Angel Wagenstein: Art Is a Weapon*.

66 Arnold, *Die Revolution frisst ihre Kinder*.

67 Wolf told the story of this experience in *Ich wahr neunzehn* (I was nineteen), RDA, DEFA, 1968. See also Werner, *Konrad Wolf*; and Wedel and Schieber, *Konrad Wolf*.

68 CDA, F 2123K, op. 1, ae. 5744, l. 111–14.

polyphonic representation of German-Soviet relations whose plot unfolds in the uranium mines of Wismut, property of the USSR. Lacking the idealism usually ascribed to representations of German-Soviet friendship, the film was met with an icy reception by officials of the DEFA and the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. Two weeks before the filming of *Zvezdi/Sterne*, Wolf had to reshoot several scenes of *Sonnensucher*.⁶⁹ Despite this political setback, exploring the stakes of multiple identities and conflicting loyalties would continue to motivate the director's creative energies.

A similar sense of urgency and inner necessity preoccupied Wagenstein. To the history narrated in *Zvezdi/Sterne*, he had been a direct witness: during the war, Wagenstein was mobilized into a Jewish forced labor battalion. Because he could read and write, having been trained as a construction mechanic, he was tasked with overseeing the building of the road railway Krupnik-Demir Hisar (Sidirokastro) that controlled access to occupied Northern Greece. It was in this capacity that he saw the passing convoys, in March 1943, carrying Thracian Jews to the Gorna Džumaja transit camp, as re-created in *Zvezdi/Sterne*. In 1945, during the preliminary investigations of the Seventh Chamber of the Bulgarian People's Court, the aspiring artist had reported these facts to the militia: in close proximity to the events (and, possibly, with a view to the specific political situation at war's end), Wagenstein blamed the deportations on the Germans alone.⁷⁰

That the Bulgarian–East German coproduction was also, and perhaps primarily, the result of a human encounter, is beyond doubt. One point, however, remains to be clarified. Had Wolf and Wagenstein seen *Night and Fog* when they conceived of *Zvezdi/Sterne*? Might Alain Resnais have influenced their approach? We know that the making of the documentary was in cooperation with the Polish Cinematography; however, *Night and Fog* was only distributed in East Germany in June 1960 following translation controversies, which have been brilliantly reconstructed by Sylvie Lindeperg.⁷¹ Among Polish and East German movie professionals, nonetheless, the film received wide acclaim even before its official release. According to Perrine Val, Wolf “saw the film for the first time in East Germany no later than the first half of 1957, when the DEFA proposed a new translation of the commentary.”⁷² A fine expert on the director, Thomas Elsaesser, for his part, has claimed

69 In October 1959, as a result of the intervention of the Soviet ambassador, the film premiere in East Berlin was canceled: Buffet, *Défunte DEFA*, 111–14.

70 CDA, F 1568K, op. 1, ae. 138, l. 192–93. The future screenwriter was featured among the witnesses listed in the indictment, but he did not testify before the court. After 1989, Wagenstein offered a novel reading of the events. This time, he assigned the Bulgarians as exclusive a role in the deportations as he had given the Nazis in his 1945 account.

71 Lindeperg, “*Nuit et brouillard*,” 191–200.

72 Val, email correspondence, June 10, 2018.



Figure 2.2. Shot of Anžel Rajmond Vagenštajn arrested by the Bulgarian police (1943). This photograph features in the police file put together after his arrest in Sofia, on December 2, 1943, for “attempted theft in the Armenian cooperative and attempted murder of a second lieutenant.” *Source:* CDA, F 2123K, op. 1, ae 5744, l. 111–12. Courtesy of the Bulgarian Central State Archives.

to have identified motifs of *Night and Fog* in *Zvezdi/Sterne* (for example, the strings of barbed wire, the presence of a young girl at the entrance to a passenger wagon). One may not follow him on this track.⁷³ For now, let us suspend such lingering questions.

73 Elsaesser, “Vergebliche Rettung,” 73–92. I agree with Perrine Val that the widespread use of such figurative codes as barbed wire makes it difficult to ascertain the existence of a direct influence—all the more given that the train scene echoes a shot of the actual deportations of the Greek Jews filmed in

Shooting Notes and Other Digressions

The digression that follows will lead us into the path of a shooting process where international and national scores would play out.

1. The storyboard is approved on July 17, 1958, on the condition that the remarks of the Artistic Council on the return of the “Bulgarian line” be taken into account.”⁷⁴ The shooting begins one week later in the charming town of Bansko, in southwestern Bulgaria. Located in the Pirin area, this market town borders the Rhodope Mountains, whose summits are dusted with snow throughout the year. Typical last-minute defections are in order. One actor, for instance, leaves the production in a huff after realizing that he is to play a simple blacksmith and not the heroic resistance character he had imagined.⁷⁵ How to select the actress who would play Ruth is a challenge of another order entirely. The choice ultimately alights on the young Saša Krušarska, then a student at the Institute for Theatrical Studies of Sofia (*Viš institut za teatralno izkustvo*). Her name is confirmed on July 29, five days after the start of shooting. “The actress who has been hired does not have the requisite experience,” warns Draganov, the producer, in a letter addressed to the studio director on August 3, 1958; the director insists she remain in Bansko so that he could practice during her free time. “We have given our agreement,” Draganov notes, before adding, “Given that this was not specified in the production budget, there is a real risk that we might exceed the planned budget under ‘fees’ and ‘operations.’”⁷⁶ The calendar must be revised: the scenes between Walter and Ruth are postponed to the end of August.⁷⁷ This temporal compression will be reflected in the film: what seems like an unmoving present of conversations is superimposed onto the linear progression of the plot. Otherwise, the shooting is uneventful; for the film crew, the anniversary of the “revolution of September 9, 1944” is a day off; Wolf falls ill for a short time. Nothing out of the ordinary.
2. Nonetheless, on set there prevails what we might call a meteorological issue. In summer, the south of Bulgaria is awash in brazen sunlight. Yet the deportations of Jews from Northern Greece had taken place in

March 1943, which Wagenstein had shown to Wolf and his photography director, Werner Bergmann. His intent in so doing was precisely to help his colleagues offer an authentic rendering of this scene.

74 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 130, l. 69.

75 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 130, l. 221, 223.

76 Ibid., l. 212.

77 Ibid., l. 357.

March, in a cold that made the conveyance of the Jews arrested in the early hours of the day particularly dreadful. Unable to reproduce such a cruel cold, the director and his director of photography, Bergmann, decide to film the boarding of the trains under a torrential rain.⁷⁸ In mid-October 1958, the crew returns to Sofia, where a water cannon is employed as a remedy to the imperfections of reality. In the finished work, the contrast between the daylight, summertime world and the final night of deportations has great power of suggestion. Might these weather-related challenges explain why the filmmakers will situate the deportations in October 1943 (and not in March)—the camera lingering over the sign “10.1943” appended to the cars? Or should this dating be seen as a minute shift that heralds entry into a fictional world?

3. If the Bulgarian production file is to be believed, bilateral cooperation proceeds smoothly. Citizens—ordinary or not (for who would dare to adjudicate this point in the absence of robust proof?)—seem to have determined to give their own high appraisal of the advance of East German socialism over its Bulgarian counterpart. The file notes, for instance, the disappearance of a few expensive cameras: on October 21, 1958, during a shoot in Bansko, assistant director Michael Engelberger is divested of his Exakta Vare, lens 326741, showpiece of the famous Ihagee company in Dresden, with unquestionable technological quality, elegance, and price.⁷⁹ Two days later, at Zemen station, the daydreaming lieutenant Walter, alias Jürgen Frohriep, declares the “loss” of a Super Ikonta Zeiss Ikon, with a Tessar lens, leading product of another large German company based in Dresden, Ziess Ikon.⁸⁰
4. Let us leave the world of image to venture into that of sound. *Zvezdi/Sterne* involved finely honed work on intonations, languages, and melodies. The story is narrated by voiceover. Melancholy and supple in the German version, as if to imitate Walter’s bearing, in Bulgarian it is dull and cold. At the meeting of the Artistic Council, the choice of the male voiceover on the newsreel is deplored. Its impeccable ideological correctness clashes with the narrative of tragic love. Around this first voice, however, interweaves a garland of languages—Bulgarian, German,

78 Bergmann, trained in photography before the war, then as assistant photographer for the Bochner company in Dresden, covered front operations for the German newsreels before a serious accident, in 1943, that led to the amputation of one arm. Employed by the UFA, then the DEFA, he met Wolf during the filming of a documentary by Joris Ivens in 1951; their collaboration resulted in twelve films and a friendship that lasted twenty-five years.

79 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 130, l. 235.

80 Ibid., l. 225.

Greek, and Ladino⁸¹—whose shimmering hues will brim over into the images. The voiceover and linguistic mosaic, in turn, are fringed by the song “S’brent/Undzer shtetl brent,” adapted from a poem by Mordechai Gebirtig composed after the pogrom in Przytyk, Poland, on March 9, 1936.⁸² Written in Yiddish, but sung here in German, “Our shtetl burns”⁸³ opens and closes the film, fostering a sense of alarm that rings like a call to arms. If a spectator were to listen to *Zvezdi/Sterne* with her eyes closed, before looking at the images with the sound off, she would have a singular experience: wherever the visual content most aligns with the conventions of the “antifascist film” genre, the sound choices resolutely anchor the work in the realm of fictional renditions of the Holocaust. Were the filmmakers aware of these layering effects? Be that as it may, both had expressed their desire to offer an “internationalist” vocal rendering of Jewish fates—a choice possessing a certain boldness, only a few years after the latest campaigns against “cosmopolitanism.”

Script, Storyboard, and Film: Effects of Cutting and Framing

In order to illuminate how the film came into being, including the choices made by the film crew, one artifice consists in isolating a specific scene and its unfulfilled possibilities, thereby revealing the subtle transformations and minute variations through which its narrative was crafted. Here, the chosen scene is that of the Jews’ arrival in a small Bulgarian town after they were rounded up in Greece. Within the filmic economy, central to our purposes, it opens with Captain Kurt and Second Lieutenant Walter gazing with carefree contemplation at mountains backed by the frame of a blue sky.

The reader will encounter, in what follows, three consecutive rewritings. The first, within a black frame, stems from the literary screenplay in the version published by Wagenstein in 2002.⁸⁴ The second, within a dotted line, is excerpted from the storyboard (*regijsorski scenarij*) preserved in the Bulgarian Central State Archives (CDA).⁸⁵ The repartition of stage directions and dialogues figures in the original document. Finally, the third rewriting, with a gray background, retranscribes the dialogues of the completed film—translated from German—together with a description of the

81 Romance language spoken by the descendants of the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492.

82 In the film credits, the song appears with the German title “Es brennt!” (“It’s Burning!”) and is attributed to “Mordechai Gebirtik [*sic*]” “ermordet 1942” (“killed in 1942”).

83 The notion of “shtetl” refers, literally, to a village or small town, and by extension a neighborhood, where the majority of the population is of Jewish origin.

84 Vagenštajn, *Tri scenarija*.

85 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 128, l. 175.

images. Several sentences have been bold-faced in order to emphasize how the three forms evolved. From one version to the next, the material words grow sparser, eroding amid the turn to the image: in making the film, the dialogue was progressively cut, any unnecessary words gradually pruned. Through these travels, however, the narration also underwent a major shift: the men and arms who once framed the convoy of deportees were gradually erased until giving the impression, in the finished film, that the deportees are moving forward in disarray with only a handful of policemen on horseback by their sides.

Literary Script, Wagenstein

Scene 10.

Daytime. A hill above the town.

It is almost twilight; the firs are casting long shadows over the valley, as between them, the winter roses and fresh needles work their way toward the light. Opposite, the mighty mountain range is still white with snow; below, at the very bottom, in the valley sheltered from the winds, the first fruit trees are already in bloom.

Lieutenant Kurt Müller is lying down on the grass, half-clothed, while Walter whistles and works away at the activity most strictly forbidden to him—drawing.

Kurt stretches leisurely, with an almost animal pleasure under the heat of the sun, the crystalline air, and simply the feeling of being alive.

– Walter, you know what I was just thinking?

Walter stops and looks astonished.

– You’re saying you sometimes think?

Kurt is not offended; he throws a small object in the direction of his friend and continues:

– Yes, this is my soldier’s philosophy: too much thinking gives me a stomachache! . . . But, suddenly I remembered where we were before. Leningrad!!! . . . Brrr, you remember?

Walter raises his eyes from the drawing, where he has portrayed the snow-white mountain with a small village below in the valley. His eyes have lost their usual smile; a deep, hopeless sadness cloaks his face.

– Yes, I remember. So?

Kurt tears off a twig, begins to chew at it, and lies down again, hands under his head, gazing happily up at the blue sky.

– And here, a silent and wild refuge. Here there is no war. Such calm! Listen, listen . . .

Somewhere above, though invisible, planes roar in the distance.

– The Yankees! They pass over and *goodbye*!

The lieutenant shakes a fist up at the sky, though in a friendly way, as if they could see him from above. Then he goes on:

– The only bad thing about the situation here is the women. It's not that they don't want it, but they're ashamed. It's the Orient—you know how it is! . . . Ideas are ideas, Walter, but in wartime the most important thing for a man is to save his skin . . . No, no, I'm happy!

Walter keeps drawing and speaks without lifting his head:

– Because you're a chimpanzee . . . you're really to be envied, Kurt. For two million years humanity has been creeping up, only to go back to where it started. It's too bad—all these efforts gone to dust!

Kurt replies casually:

– In times of war, everyone is a chimpanzee. Look, here's a little monkey! . . . When I see kids, I always think of the three of mine in Bavaria . . . Monkey, come here, come here, I'll give you some chocolate!

These words are addressed to a shepherd who has led his flock to the hill. The boy gets scared and runs away with his goats.

Kurt laughs happily:

– No, it's incredible, what a backward country: the children don't even know what chocolate is.

Suddenly, Kurt springs to his feet; annoyed, he spits to the side and begins to pick at the threads of his uniform jacket.

– Damn the war, and the Jews who started it!

In the folds of the lower peaks, like a dark snake, winds an ornamental line over which a small train is crawling slowly—something like a children's toy, with small, open cattle cars, full of people.

Walter points with his pencil at the children's cars, as they move along, guarded by Bulgarian policemen—before each wagon stands a policeman with a pistol.

– What is that?

– Greek Jews, may the Devil come and take them one and all! . . . I have to go meet the convoy, no way around it.

With a truly poetic flourish, he makes a sweeping farewell gesture:

– Goodbye, tranquil and verdant hamlet!

And, buttoning up his jacket, he speeds down the slope to meet the human transport.

Walter starts to whistle; the question of the Jews has clearly not interested him; and, under his pencil blooms a small village cradled within the white mountain.

We turn to the ancient steeple . . .

Storyboard (l. 26–30)**Scene 11. 125.5 meters**

A steep slope above the city
(Outdoors—Nature—Razlog—
daytime—a sunny afternoon).

Characters: Walter, Kurt

Minor characters: the young shepherd.

Extras: Greek Jews – men – 480

Greek Jews – women – 420

Greek Jews – children – 100.

German soldiers – 30.

Cinematic technique: a small crane

53 – 16 m.

Panorama. From a long to medium shot
(small crane)

The dialogue is in German.

And before us stands the majestic
mountains, bathed in colors from the
sloping afternoon sun

The camera moves, *legato*, through a
panorama.

Already, yellowed fields, some plowed,
stretch down the side of the mountain
to the city that extends below us,
dappled by the afternoon sun.

We now see that we are atop a
precipitous hillside.

A steep trail weaves and winds up to
the city.

On the hillside grazes a small herd of
goats. Beside him, a shepherd plays with
a large dog. In the foreground arise the
ends of tobacco stalks, almost full of
mature leaves ripe for harvest.

We leave behind the field and into the frame enters a black withered branch, an officer's cap hung upon it.

Behind the top of a tree appears the lieutenant. He is lying down, happily stretched out on the grass, with an almost animal joy at the sun, the air, and simply the feeling of being alive. Kurt sits up, leans on his elbow, and says:

– Walter, you know what I was just thinking?

The camera now turns toward Walter, seated, his back half-turned to his friend, exactly at the edge of the hill; he whistles and is doing what the captain has strictly forbidden him from doing: drawing.

– Don't tell me you think!

54. – 12 m.

Mid-angle shot.

Kurt is not offended, he picks up a pebble, throws it in the direction of his friend, and laughs good-naturedly.

– Listen, Rembrandt! Don't you know that this is the military principle: You should not think too much because that hurts the stomach!

A distant roar of airplanes can be heard more clearly

Then his face becomes expressionless.

– When I look at this paradise . . . I suddenly remembered where we came from, you and me. Leningrad! Do you remember?

55. – 4 m.

Mid-angle. (steep from below to cloudy sky)

Walter looks forward with unseeing eyes – Yes.

that have suddenly lost their usual
sneer, his face stiffening for a moment.

Then he relaxes again and turns to Kurt. – So what?

56. – 23 m.

Crane shot, from a large shot (the steep
path seen from above) to a medium
shot.

Kurt tears off a twig, begins to chew at
it, and lies down again, hands under his
head, gazing happily up at the sky.

– What?... Leningrad! And here—a
calm and wild small island. There is no
war, none! Such silence!

The camera pulls back slowly and
behind Kurt captures the vast landscape
with lots and lots of sky above him.

Kurt takes the twig out of his mouth
and points upward:

– American planes... They pass over and
goodbye!

He sits up again and scratches a bit
behind his ear:

– The only bad thing about the
situation here is the women! My God,
it's not that they don't want it, but
they're ashamed.

He turns to Walter once more, excited
by an idea that has just gone through
his mind:

– We should organize something at the
kráčka [bistro].

Since Walter doesn't react, he lies back
down on his back and, to conclude, says:

– No, Walter, I'm happy!

...

57. – 11 m.

(like in 55)

Walter smiles, sarcastically, still occupied

by his drawing:

– Because you're a chimpanzee!...
You're really to be envied, Kurt. For two million years humanity has been creeping up, only to go back to where it started. It's too bad—all these efforts gone to dust!

And concludes dryly:

– A shame, such work carried off by the winds!

The voice of Kurt, who always knows better:

– In times of war, all men are chimpanzees.

58. – 9 m.

Mid-angle.

Medium shot.

In the foreground, slightly below the summit, the young shepherd has just taken hold of a goat that had gotten away. The boy and the dog try to get it back up the hill.

Standing out against the background of the mountain, Kurt has sat up, and cries out:

– Ah, look, a little chimpanzee!

The child stops and turns around.

Kurt:

– Like the **three of mine at home.**

Then he shouts in the child's direction:

– Chimpanzee!

The child draws the goat close to him and runs away fearfully. The dog, as if to defend his little master, begins to bark loudly.

– Dog barking –

59. – 13 m.

Medium shot. Seen from below (low-angle shot)

Kurt quickly rummages through the pocket of his jacket, thrown on the grass: He takes out a piece of chocolate, shows it to the shepherd, waving his hand:

The boy runs down the slope even faster.

Kurt turns, disappointed, toward the camera, and, with a short, embarrassed laugh, mutters:

His gaze wanders off, then suddenly becomes attentive; he sits up.

60. – 10 m.

Wide-angle, distant, general.

In the foreground, an arrangement with the black branch and the officer's cap on it stand out in the composition.

The other side of the hill is not so steep. Here, before one's eyes opens the broad plain that detaches itself brusquely from the peaks of the high mountains in the sky.

From the mountain in the distance up until the foot of the hill winds a dusty road.

Over the road stretches an endless

– Hey, chimpanzee, come here!

– Come on! I'm giving out chocolate!

– The barking subsides –

– Damn, what a backward country!
The children don't even know what chocolate is.

Kurt's exasperated voice:

– Damn it!

column of people, guarded on both sides by policemen on horseback. A cloud of dust floats down into the valley.

61. – 1.5 m.

(as in 55)

Walter looks over his shoulder and asks: – What is it?

62. – 11 m.

Wide-angle—distant general shot

(as in 60).

Kurt enters the frame:

– Greek Jews . . .

He takes his cap, puts it on his head and leaves:

– . . . The devil take them.

I have to watch them until the freight cars arrive.

He leaves the frame.

Along the road the column of Jews marches endlessly, painfully.

63. – 8 m.

Medium shot.

In the foreground, Walter is shot from behind.

Kurt has already crossed (while buttoning his jacket) part of the mountain path. He turns once more to Walter and yells over to him, back to his simple, goodhearted joviality:

– Goodbye, Rembrandt! Enjoy our little paradise, at least you can.

He then continues down the slope.

On the way, he sings loudly:

Some lines from a German song, such as “You, My Silent Valley”

(“*Dich, mein stilles Tal*”)

(Im schönsten Wiesengrunde)

The Finished Film⁸⁶

Several white clouds scatter over a mountain revealed in a slow panorama shot from right to left, with a background of birdsong and bells. The camera glides over a cap hanging on a branch, as Kurt's stretched-out body enters the shot, partly reclining, a cigarette in his hand, then stops at the blond lieutenant, in a white T-shirt, who is drawing in black pastel the landscape before him.

– You know what I'm thinking about, Walter?

– You're thinking?—well then.

– Hey, listen, Rembrandt, thinking too much hurts your stomach. You know, what we can see here, it's paradise (he draws a puff on his cigarette). When I think about where we've come from, Leningrad (with a grimace).

His shirt is open, his hair is brown, soft, captured by the midtorso-level lens.

– You remember? When we were captured?

The camera films Walter's face, still drawing; his gaze fixes the lens, then hardens for a moment. The noncommissioned officer is seen from a low-angle shot, the drawing's cardstock cutting out a black geometric space on the blue sky.

– So?

– So? Stalingrad, and this silent and wild island. (Kurt, cigarette in his mouth, stretches out on the grass). No, no, there's no war. Without a doubt. There's nothing; only silence.

The scene is interrupted by the noise of airplanes in the sky. Kurt rises up:

– Americans, they're flying over us...and *goodbye*.

With his right hand as a visor, he stares at the sky; Walter's back remains in the frame. Kurt gives a short wave.

– The only bad thing about the situation here is the women. **It's not that they don't want it, but they put on airs.** Say, Walter, what if we organized something in the *kráčma* [bistro]?

86 The dialogues have been retranscribed from German and the images described by the author.

Stretching between two remarks, he turns back jovial, toward Walter, whose back is still turned.

– I’m happy.

The camera has lingered over Kurt’s good-natured face. Walter’s voice can be heard.

– Because you’re a chimpanzee.

The second lieutenant’s face appears.

– Oh, Kurt, I envy you. Civilization has crept forward for two million years only to return to where it started. It’s too bad, what a waste!

– In times of war, everyone’s a chimpanzee. Look, over there, too, there’s another little chimpanzee.

Below, a young daydreaming shepherd appears in the foreground, leaning over a wooden stick, his flock behind him. Kurt calls out: “Hey, chimpanzee!” The boy turns around: “Come here, chimpanzee,” then, in bad Bulgarian, “Come on! I’m going to give you some chocolate.” His slender body leaps up in a movement that seems to bring him closer to the Germans, before branching off toward the herd, which he hastily gathers back. The sound of bells accompanies this disorderly movement.

– What a backward country! The children don’t even know what chocolate is.

Cigarette in his mouth, Kurt seems to notice something. **Over a dusty dirt path, a vehicle is leading a column of deportees, who are heading forward by foot, slowly, painfully, sagging under the weight of their luggage.**

Annoyed, he throws down his cigarette:

– By God!

He stands up; Walter hadn’t moved, at most making a slight movement of the head to the left before asking:

– What is it?

Kurt’s torso, which occupies the left third of the screen, partly conceals the column, as does the cap hanging on the branch, to the right.

– Greek Jews.

Cap in hand, Kurt pulls up the suspenders hanging over his pants.

– **The Devil himself should come and get them**, he says, adjusting his cap. I have to manage them until the trains come and collect them.

The column is difficult to see behind Kurt's broad figure. A careful viewer might discern a few isolated policemen on horseback, too distant and shadowy—in contrast to the dusty-white dirt—for their uniforms to be identified with certainty by an untrained eye. No reaction has been filmed on Walter's face.

From script to storyboard to film, we witness a fascinating process of refining and paring down. With the shooting and the editing, Kurt has forgotten that he was the father of three children in Bavaria; but the throwing of a cigarette has replaced the moment when he spits to the side. As for Walter, the T-shirt and his turned back have taken center stage. There are no more exoticizing and/or culturalist evocations of the landscape: the leaves of tobacco, one of the region's major crops with its mostly Bulgarian-speaking Muslim workforce, no longer offer their brown contrast to the white mountain. A mention of "oriental" female reticence toward liberated sexuality has also disappeared. Above all, the meaning of the scene has been reshuffled: guarded by Bulgarian policemen the rounded-up Jews no longer arrive by train; they enter the town on foot in a column rendered almost abstract by being filmed from a distance, blurring the individual figures. If the storyboard called for the presence of "30 German soldiers" and portrayed policemen on horseback, the lens only ended up filming four or five Bulgarian agents of order on horseback, only one of whom can be seen, and briefly at that. At what point were these changes decided on? Archival documents do not allude to them. It is nonetheless difficult to imagine that budgetary constraints led to this contraction: in a planned socialist economy, it only cost a modest sum to provide extras, who were paid at most a nominal fee. It is also hard to dismiss the role of political variables, given how central ideological control over films was at the time, judged in strategic terms. One would be curious to know when the version of the script that Wagenstein offered for publication in 2002 dates back to, given that it explicitly includes the presence of Bulgarian policemen.

Two Very Different Wars: The Bulgarian Lens

Equipped with these questions, we can now return to the tumultuous meeting of the East German–Bulgarian Artistic Council in January 1959. As in the three variations of the scene of the deportees' arrival, reconstructing these clashes will serve to place three disputes into relief: competing

endeavors aiming at the nationalization of the past, the delicate negotiation of a “socialist” understanding of the Nazi era, and the symbolic restitution of anti-Jewish persecutions.

The Bulgarian Cinematography officials had agreed to the making of an antifascist film. The result, a movie on the deportations of Jews from occupied Greek territory, left them speechless. The recounting of historical events was strongly criticized, particularly the reconstitution of the war, relations between Bulgarians and Germans, and the partisan movement:

If the film deals with the great ideas of the war and fascism as social evils, with the need to fight against them, since the action takes place in our Bulgarian situation, the way this situation is rendered, how the participation of the Bulgarian people and its point of view on these questions are shown, is of particular importance to the Bulgarian viewer. . . . First, here the direct consequences of the war, of the factual occupation of Bulgaria by German soldiers during this period do not transpire. The result is thus that in the one or two crowd scenes we see, somehow the Bulgarians and Germans live much too peacefully, and much too well.⁸⁷

In this statement of January 5, 1959, Venelin Kocев, director of the *Narodna Mladež* (Popular youth) publishing house and representative of the Cinematography management within the Artistic Council,⁸⁸ exposed a Bulgarian leitmotif.⁸⁹ In order to extract itself from the legacy of fascism, Communist public discourse conventionally presented Bulgaria as a state subjugated to the Reich. Against this background, to choose a languid village in the slumbering splendor of snowcapped mountains in order to conjure up the war was seen as inappropriate. And what to make of the market, brimming with supplies, that was recorded on camera?⁹⁰ Defending the film, the director Borislav Šaraliev deployed a wealth of ingenuity to suggest at once the realism of the plot *and* its political inadequacy: “At first glance, it cannot be said that things weren’t that way, since, even during the most difficult years in 1943–44, in the villages chickens could be found on the

87 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 14.

88 Venelin Kocев would have a career as a party ideologue, becoming successively secretary of the Central Committee (1966–71), deputy member of the Politburo (1972), and vice president of the Council of Ministers (1972–74).

89 Taking part in the meeting were the Bulgarian members of the Council, the secretary of the party organization within the studio (Ivan Dimitrov), several representatives from the DEFA (Willi Brückner, Wolfgang Kolhaase, and Wolf), as well as outside guests (Vălčo Draganov, Isaak Heskija, Borislav Šaraliev, Rango Vălčanov, Wagenstein, and A. Zajdel). The poet Hristo Radevski was the chair. CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 6–7.

90 Ibid., l. 14.

market, even eggs and butter could. But if, logically thinking, we reflect, one cannot possibly follow the writer and director into the market scene. . . . [This scene] gives the viewer the sense of an overly calm life, one that has remained almost untouched and unaffected by the war.”⁹¹

Beyond the privations of war, the very nature of relations between Bulgarians and German “occupiers” came under debate. In this case, filming the second lieutenant Walter sketching in chalk a female nude on a trailer, before a coterie of young Bulgarians looking on appreciatively, seemed clearly inappropriate. To be sure, the complicity between the Bulgarian fascist chief of police and Captain Kurt was portrayed in the intoxicating atmosphere of the *krăčma*, inhabited by women of easy virtue with sensual attributes and of dubitable sobriety. The exaggerated characterization respected the standards of the era: gluttony and sexual avidity were traits often ascribed to fascists. However, the enemy was considered to have been insufficiently condemned in the film. During the meeting on April 30, 1958, the film critic Jako Molhov had even insisted that *Zvezdi/Sterne* amounted to a rehabilitation of fascism.⁹² Ginev grew indignant in turn. Wolf retorted: “In my feeling—I always allowed myself to be stung by this feeling—the film should not end with compassionate tears, as abstract humanism does, but with a strong fighting feeling of hate and love. . . . This is not abstract humanism. This is, in my opinion, a humanism of combat.”⁹³ The major concern of Bulgarian Cinematography was nevertheless to be found elsewhere: in the representation of the Bulgarian antifascist struggle.

Since the first meeting on January 6, 1958, the meetings of the Artistic Council condemned with metronomic regularity what they considered to be a picturesque treatment of Bulgaria, as if the territory was a kind of colorful backdrop to an exclusively German plot. Through a metonymic effect, the Bulgarian people themselves were to be rendered ornamental. Thus would result a face-to-face encounter between Nazis and Greek Jews, which would reduce, even evacuate, any Bulgarian contribution to the antifascist fight. On January 5, 1959, Dako Dakovski, director of the patriotic *Pod Igoto* (Under the yoke, 1952), condemned the ease with which Bulgarian resisters put their fates into the hands of a German, in this case Walter:

For me, the greatest weakness . . . lies in the presentation of our resistance movement. In this section, according to me the film absolutely does not correspond to reality. Here the question is no longer on the place given to the Bulgarian partisan movement. It is about something much more serious—the erroneous historical perspective of the relationship to Hitler’s

91 Ibid., l. 33.

92 Ibid., l. 80.

93 Ibid., l. 49.

occupation soldiers. For me, today as last time, the scenes in the forge still sound absolutely false, artificial. In the first place, when Walter goes to Baj Petko, and Baj Petko reveals to him that they tried to steal weapons. . . . I think we have no right to lie to our German comrades by letting them believe that the relations between Hitler's occupation soldiers and the Bulgarian partisans can be represented and developed in this way.⁹⁴

Hampered by the waves of exile in the 1920s and 1930s, the internal purges of the Communist Party, and the marginalization of the radical wing in the name of the Fatherland Front policy, the Bulgarian partisan movement during World War II was only consolidated relatively late. Decades of literary, poetic, cinematic, and theatrical production would strive to compensate for this fact. All the same, *Zvezdi/Sterne* included only a few combat scenes, reduced to one nocturnal theft of medicine for resisters holed up in the mountains and Jews interned in the camp. Two characters were to embody the partisan movement: Baj Petko, the archetype of the clever, deceptively good-natured Bulgarian; and Blaže, a blond adolescent who would be abused by a cruel police chief. In the eyes of the film censors, the invitation of a (non-Bulgarian) Jewish family to hide Ruth, with the possibility of her escape, was a further failure.

From the first discussions on the script, Wagenstein had developed a line of defense: his goal was not to provide a representative vision of the resistance, but rather to tackle antifascist combat through the history of a missed encounter. One might have forgiven the relatively minor weight given to heroism. But how to make up for a representation that failed to assert the ideological roots of the struggle? The writer Pavel Vežinov, a member of the Artistic Council, protested against the motivation given for Walter's joining the antifascist combat—love and humanism:

Actually, the dramatic conflict unfolds between Walter and Ruth. Walter is a nice person endowed with a certain degree of integrity—he dabbles in philosophy to present himself as a good person and closes his eyes to the crimes committed around him. Ruth is the one who has a certain influence over the mask he wears. And it's through general humanist positions that she weighs on him. . . . It would be good for the author to find some small means, some marginal changes in the script, to give the sense that the Bulgarian revolutionary movement also influences Walter's ethical position, his moral position in these relationships.⁹⁵

94 Ibid., l. 39.

95 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 63.

Two changes were considered essential: highlighting the fraternal relationship between partisans, and showing that Walter embraces resistance and faith in communism in the same breath.

The German guests generally listened to these (intra-)Bulgarian jousts with studied patience and reservation. However, at times they reminded their colleagues that the coproduced film was meant to reflect an actual historical situation: the collaboration of Bulgarians with the Third Reich. On December 31, 1958, during a meeting organized in Babelsberg in the presence of the Bulgarian producer Draganov, screenwriter Wagenstein, and composer Simeon Pironkov, *Zvezdi/Sterne* had an enthusiastic reception, a prelude to its approval by the East German authorities. During the conversation, however, Wilkening, the director of the German film studio, had explicitly invited his “Bulgarian friends” to embark on a process of reckoning critically with the past: “The film will leave many people with a feeling of profound sadness, but that type of sadness that can lead [the audience] to a greater consciousness of what they might have done, what they should have done and did not do. . . . *In this film, we also show the culpability of those who collaborated, through the character of the chief of police. For this reason, [the film] will be of great significance to our Bulgarian friends too.*”⁹⁶

The day after the Babelsberg meeting, in a letter to the Bulgarian studio, German production director Nürnberger was quick to welcome “the central artistic and ideologically correct conception [of] a film that exerts a strong emotional influence and that, through its resonances, will lead the audience to reflect and to activate their support to our common struggle for peace.” He had no difficulty in presenting the film as a work on fascism *and* anti-Jewish persecution, in the tradition “of a series of good films from the DEFA such as *Ehe in Schatten*, *Der Mörderer sind unter uns*, [and] *Der Rat der Götter* [The council of the gods, K. Maetzig, 1950],” before concluding: “We believe that the making of this film, precisely in this moment, as West Germany is making great strides toward a restoration of fascism *and the open persecution of Jews*, has contemporary political significance.”⁹⁷

At the time of the January 5, 1959, meeting, the Bulgarian Cinematography officials had the minutes of the Babelsberg meeting at their disposal. Yet, for them there could hardly be a question of Bulgarian responsibility for the deportation of Jews from Northern Greece. The storyboard had planned to represent the repressive Bulgarian system via a chief of police and a unit commander of forced laborers. Annoyed that a Jewish carrier had spilled water on his boots, the commander would hit him in the face and

96 Ibid., l. 96 (emphasis added).

97 Ibid., l. 112.

leave him in a heap, covered in blood.⁹⁸ But this scene disappeared from the finished film. Above all, an elision was enacted in the sequence of the convoy's departure for Poland, identical to that in the scene of the deportees' arrival.

Opening the valve via flashback, *Zvezdi/Sterne* begins and closes with shots of a train station, railroad, and cars. Shot at night, the boarding area shimmers in lustrous black. All while cursing at the Jews "*Schneller! Schneller! Schneller!* [Faster! Faster! Faster!]," Captain Kurt, rain streaming down his uniform, helps a child to climb aboard a wagon, and holds out his hand to Ruth, who refuses it. Erased from this scene is the shot where "German Wehrmacht soldiers, soaked with rain, occupy the entire length of the ramp. In their eyes, there is neither cruelty nor compassion—instead, indifference and fatigue. A soldier, with raindrops dripping down his cap, whispers to his neighbor, 'When is all this going to be over? I'm falling down, I'm so tired.'"⁹⁹ The "endless line of soldiers' boots," contained in the script and storyboard, has been dispersed: what remains is only a brief "I'm tired" that the lens records while the camera prepares a high-angle shot over the deportees. No Bulgarian policemen enter the shot: in *Zvezdi/Sterne*, Nazis accompany the convoys. However, as for the protagonists of this sequence shot, the storyboard had offered the following description:

First scene. 159 meters, including 60 caption meters.

Railway ramp

(Outdoors—nature, Sofia and a combination of night, wind, rain).

Characters: Ruth, Walter, Kurt, Ruth's father.

Background characters: an old Jew with a violin, a young boy with a backpack, an old Jewish woman, a young Jewish mother, an unshaven Jew, a Jewish woman with a young child, 1, 2, and 3 German soldiers, a person ill with fever.

Extras: 500 in total, including 430 Jews (180 men, 170 women, 80 children), 30 German soldiers, 30 Bulgarian policemen, 10 railwaymen.¹⁰⁰

So where did these "30 Bulgarian policemen" go? At what point in the production did they peter out? The poet and writer Valeri Petrov, son of the famous Communist lawyer Nisim Mevorah, went so far as to express surprise that the camp had not been placed under the responsibility of a significant number of German officers: "For example, what makes an impression is

98 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 128, l. 19.

99 Vagenštajn, *Tri scenarija*, 13.

100 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 128, l. 1b.

the fact that, if I am not mistaken, or at least in the viewer's memory, only three Germans remain—Walter, Kurt, and this Amur, the one who follows them, and a captain who appears at the beginning and then suddenly disappears never to return. Such a thing, from the organizational point of view of the Wehrmacht, was not possible—that such a camp should not have been guarded by so few people, even if our gendarmerie was there too. There are only three people there.”¹⁰¹ These choices in the film's pictorial outfit were nonetheless not enough to satisfy the Cinematography officials. They would have wished to see Bulgarians express faultless solidarity toward the Jewish victims. The ideologue Venelin Gocev was deeply upset: “Another problem is in the way in which the attitude of our people toward the anti-Semitism that at the time was manifested is concretely shown in the film. The fact that a few individuals show compassion and help the victims of fascism with all they can—in this case, a group of Jews who are to be sent to Poland—is weak, very bland, and insufficient in essence. We believe that in this respect if the film is not corrected, the Direction of the Cinematography will insist that it is not released on screen.”¹⁰²

Having remained silent during the critical moments of the debates, Wolf tried to defuse the conflict: “I feel uneasy,” he noted in his final speech, “when [a coproduction] is placed on a scale and we begin to weigh the German percentage, the Bulgarian percentage. Up until now, I had been skeptical about certain coproductions. And what made me happy about this film was that national aspirations hadn't been sidelined, but rather were subordinated to a common cause.”¹⁰³ His rhetorical art was impeccable; the reference to internationalism, unassailable. What the German filmmaker failed to recognize was that the East German partners were also advocating a political agenda. The negotiation of the appearance of Nazis *and* Germans would be a particularly acrimonious affair.

Negotiating an East-East Reading of Nazism: German Polychromy?

The screenplay had proposed two figures of Germanness: the first was found in the features of Captain Kurt, a bon vivant Nazi officer of unthinking, almost careless obedience. Indifferently cruel toward the Jews, he is not insensible to his friend Walter's melancholy. During the first discussion of

101 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 20.

102 Ibid., l. 14–15.

103 Ibid., l. 51.

the script in the Artistic Council on January 6, 1958, Wagenstein had used a pastel scheme to portray this character, drawing on his own memories:

This film will for the first time depict Germans in formally unoccupied territories.¹⁰⁴ Kurt is not that fascist German army officer who tears people from their homes and shoots them—he will even go so far as “to carefully hand a child into the wagon,” and he is very loyal toward the Jews. He belongs to the type of German officer that procures a woman for Walter or does a few favors for him; because it is forbidden to keep medications in camp, he throws them out, etc. The Germans in Bulgaria used to go to Ashinger [a restaurant in Sofia] with women of easy virtue (*damički*) who only knew a few words in German; they jealously maintained their personal hygiene, brushed their teeth, and shaved every morning, etc.¹⁰⁵

This characterization is far from the outrageous visions of the Wehrmacht usually proposed in Bulgarian film. The second image of Germanness is embodied by Walter, a slender young man with soft blond locks and a leisurely gait. Structured around this binary, the film's plot follows Kurt's progression toward actions that his refusal of reflexivity makes inevitable, and opposes him to the transformation that Walter undergoes as a result of love.

On January 5, 1959, Ginev caustically condemned the construction of the two German characters: “Either they're overly good, or they're excessively naive, or else the whole thing is a joke. It seems to me that neither one, nor the other, nor the third can be true. We know the Hitlerites; we know how cynical, capricious, and brutal they were, and how they acted to allow such things to flourish in their garden. So my first note in this regard is about the general atmosphere that emerges from this fascist camp, which is really very strange.”¹⁰⁶ Here bubbles up the propensity for Bulgarian Cinematography officials to trace a line of continuity between “German” and “Nazi,” ready to impute to the German people in its entirety (East *and* West) responsibility for Nazi crimes.

From the point of view of DEFA's leadership, this was precisely the line that could not be crossed. How to align with a verdict that yoked (East) German identity to the East German state project? In *Zvezdi/Sterne*, they saw a film of combat, in the conflict that opposed them to West Germany. Against a West Germany accused of having promptly turned the page of Nazism, East Germany claimed a capacity to embody a German moral conscience. In the immediate postwar period, support for a legal reckoning

104 It should be noted that this is the only mention, in these terms, of the wartime position of Bulgaria during the debates.

105 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 93.

106 Ibid., l. 11.

of Nazi war crimes was constitutive of East German identity.¹⁰⁷ From the mid-1950s, the press continuously condemned the presence of former high-ranking Nazi officials in the inner circle of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. The Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*), or Stasi, did not hesitate to procure the support of Polish intelligence services in order to prove the involvement of high-ranking West German officials and military officers in Nazi crimes.¹⁰⁸ For director Kolhaase, the plot of *Zvezdi/Sterne* was notable in introducing an analogy between the passivity of the early 1930s, at the birth of Nazism, and the present inertia in the face of West German revanchism: “Today, West Germany is undergoing a phenomenon of restoration, particularly through the postmortem rehabilitation of all the fascist criminals of the era. This restoration is also being carried out through cinematic means. There are dozens of films that have no other purpose than to demonstrate that [fascism] was not so bad after all. We must fight against this political rehabilitation of fascism by all means possible. And we think that this film offers one such weapon.”¹⁰⁹

The insistence on this battle was not devoid of tactical considerations: because Bulgarian attacks targeted the understanding of the past, East German comrades responded by situating the film in a present horizon, that of a struggle for world peace—for they knew that, if sanctioned by the USSR, it could not be publicly disowned by their counterparts. It was by proclaiming Kurt’s obvious current-day relevance that Kolhaase defended the character:

This film has above all been shot with a gaze toward the future, not toward the past. . . . We nonetheless believe that there is no rehabilitation, here, of the two main German characters—Kurt and Walter. Kurt, this joyful, unscrupulous bon vivant, a criminal, is today making his happy return in West Germany. Such people are still held to be “good guys.” They are organized into various associations and await the repetition of what they failed [to achieve] the first time. The unveiling of this type of man, not only before the German audience but for all peoples, is associated with a warning: do not let yourself believe in this kind of modern mask.¹¹⁰

The condemnation of West German “fascism” nonetheless had another dimension: it involved an intimate, painful introspection. Thus, it was from a position of concern—the events of June 1953 were not far off—that Kolhaase broached the question of political regression in East Germany:

107 Fulbrook, *German National Identity*, 28–35.

108 Weinke, “Der Kampf um die Akten,” 564–77.

109 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 44.

110 Ibid., l. 45.

As for Walter. I believe that the most important fact in the image of Walter is that he, too, is recognized as guilty in this film. . . . And if today there are people like Kurt in Germany—I am speaking above all about West Germany, *but this is a common national problem here*—there are also Walters who are hostile to it, who are good people, who feel ill at the notion of what is brewing, but who don't do anything in response. And we must show them the question of the past so that they can understand that silence is a crime.¹¹¹

The very nature of East German exceptionality was at stake: to what moment in the past could this difference in German ways of being be traced? How could historical continuity be maintained if it excluded the Nazi era? Placing a fragment of history in parentheses, as a foil, did raise the double problem of filiation and affiliation. Emerging from a fault line in linear German history, weren't East Germans risking being relegated to the margins of the national narrative? In *Zvezdi/Sterne*, references to classical German culture proliferate—a culture that the Jews condemned to extermination shared with their executioners: to thank Walter for having brought a doctor into the camp, Ruth's father gives him a book by Heinrich Heine. The pre-Nazi philosopher also makes his way into the conversations between the two young people, united at least in part by the world of letters. The centrality of Walter's character, in the eyes of the East German filmmakers, can undoubtedly be understood in this light: it is up to him to prove the possibility of a historical bifurcation. The catharsis he experiences is what authorizes, at once, a rootedness in the German past and an unbinding. This helps to explain the intense dispute that staked conservatives Radevski and Ginev against Wolf, while the painter Nikola Mirčev tried to occupy a mediating position:

- Radevski: That Walter, we're wondering if he's hostile to Hitler?
 Mirčev: Why would he be pro-Hitler! Can we say that all Germans are pro-Hitler?
 Ginev: We're not talking about the German people. . . . It seems to me that all this anti-Hitlerism isn't represented in the way that not only we, but all of Europe, know it; that this Kurt, described with all his qualities, is an image stitched together from the very same white threads that we can see in dozens of places, that this Walter neither can nor should in any way exist.
 . . .
 Mirčev: But should an artistic production be so beholden to the realistic?
 Ginev: It's a question of true things as artistic representations of reality.
 Radevski: This is the question: is reality reflected rightfully?

111 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 45.

- Wolf: I would have liked to ask you, when dealing with such central, such crucial remarks, not to proceed so abstractly, but rather to refer to examples from the film. On the topic of Walter, allow me to make a remark *to the extent that we do, in spite of everything, have something in common with the German people and with German fascism, and we thought about that when we made the film*. If some claim that Kurt is not the prototype of the fascist officer, that may only be a claim, but it has not been proven. . . .
- Ginev: I feel that we could debate this question for a long time. I don't think that Walter never could have existed. I think that *in this pro-Hitler atmosphere, in this pro-Hitler milieu, he could not have existed in this way*.
- Wolf: *Why is that?*
- Ginev: He would have had another fate.
- Wolf: *Why?*
- Ginev: Because neither Kurt, his captain, nor the Bulgarian fascist police would have allowed such a flower to grow.
- Wolf: *In that case, there would be no German Democratic Republic today. No! I don't share your opinion. I think that in the former fascist army, there were Walters.*¹¹²

Wolf drew on his esteemed past in order to defend this position: "I lived through the war and fascism. For four years, I was in the Soviet army, and during those four years, day after day I accomplished work that put me in contact with the most different representatives of the fascist army. I can't let one statement only remain, and I can't let it be said that the fascists that we see [in the film] rather resemble soldiers and officers from World War I."¹¹³ Yet, the balancing act remained tense. All the more, given that the double operation of insertion into the *longue durée* and rupture on the short-term basis took place by borrowing from the visual and narrative codes of inter-war cinema. In Babelsberg, on December 31, 1958, one of the participants praised "the bold sentimentalism" of *Zvezdi/Sterne*. He might also have underlined that the film was part of a genre, sacrificial melodrama, popularized by the UFA. In many respects, Wolf's film participated in an all-German cinematic history. In the reading it offered of the persecution of the Jews, the work nonetheless overflowed its edges.

112 Ibid., l. 42–43.

113 Ibid., l. 48.

Jewish Fates, in a Minor Key

During the 1945 anti-Jewish crime trials in Bulgaria, there was a palpable tension between rendering Jewish experiences of war singular or shared. Fifteen years later, the pattern was repeated. Approached by the leadership of Bulgarian Cinematography as an antifascist drama, *Zvezdi/Sterne* was not supposed to single out the specificity of Jewish fates, but rather to make of them the instrument of condemnation of Nazi cruelty; Jewish victims were shown in a merely illustrative way. Viewed as a reflection on the “tragedy of the Jews and the responsibility of the Germans,” as Kolhaaase said,¹¹⁴ the filming acquired a very different scope: the movie illuminated a specific Jewish destiny. Wagenstein was the only Bulgarian participant in the Artistic Council to attempt to reconcile these two perspectives, by making crimes against Jews the very quintessence of fascism:

In our film, fascism is not expressed through the character of Kurt alone. Fascism is also expressed through these 8,000 Greek Jews sent to Osvien-cim [Oświęcim, Auschwitz]; out of that group, only one woman returned to Greece, sent to a brothel. This is fascism. If during the war people like Walter could not change the course of events, any more than our Walter manages to stop the train, [it is because] they realized far too late that the train had to be stopped before it started. Because it is not enough to want something not to happen; you have to do something so that it does not happen.¹¹⁵

The Bulgarian officials did not agree to this statement. In the first place, their criticism targeted the way the “Jewish masses” were featured in the movie—that is, the absence of Communist activists among them, and the

114 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 130, l. 96.

115 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ae. 130, l. 53. In so doing, Wagenstein, who was familiar with the East German context, may well have borrowed a rhetorical device employed by members of the East German cultural elites, as they drew on the framework of antifascism in order to disseminate information about the Holocaust and mold its remembrance within the GDR. In a remarkable essay, Stefan Stach has convincingly argued that in the late 1950s and the 1960s, memories of antifascism did not necessarily compete with frameworks that stressed the destruction of Jews. Nor could the reference to the Holocaust be seen first and foremost as a ploy to denounce the revival of fascism in West Germany. Instead, the predominance of the narratives of antifascism and (West) German failure to break with the Nazi past offered many East German artists a venue to broach the question of Jewish annihilation. Stach’s study of several documents and diaries about the plight of Polish Jews during the war, translated from Polish into German, serves to make this point. Stach, “Jewish Diaries,” 273–301.

fact that their portrayal as victims failed to abide by one of the tenets of anti-fascism: that all characters, Jewish or non-Jewish, should be seen as combatants with a fighting spirit. Beginning with the April 1958 meeting, the vice director of Bulgarian Cinematography, Ginev, spoke out against the “overly stereotypical representation of the Jewish camp.”¹¹⁶ In January 1959, he clarified his accusation by deploring the absence of Communists among the rounded-up Jews. The words of journalist Nikola Aleksiev were even more explicit: “Why was it necessary to show Greek Jews here when in our antifascist struggle we have so many heroic images of Jews—Communists and antifascists—of whom any antifascist movement could be proud? These luminous images of antifascist Jews did not come out of nowhere; they are deeply linked to all the work that our party accomplished in this segment of the Bulgarian population too.”¹¹⁷

Critic Emil Petrov attempted to mitigate the seriousness of this failure: “What does resistance to fascism and Hitlerism amount to in this film? On the one hand, the resistance of a group of Jews, who are leaving for a concentration camp; on the other, the Bulgarian line of resistance, the line of active Communist fighters, revolutionaries, opposing fascism. . . . It would be a normative demand to insist absolutely in this concrete production that there be representatives of the Communists among the group of Jews. The Communist point of view is present in the film, and this is sufficient.”¹¹⁸

In May 1959, the journalist Nešo Davidov, son of the lawyer David Ieroham, who had been president of the Central Consistory of Jews in Bulgaria until 1952, once more lingered over the portrayal of Jewish victims deprived of (Communist) agency, in one of those didactic reviews familiar to socialist readers:

If we discount Ruth for the moment, no prominent image emerges from the Jewish masses. . . . The mother, the elderly people, the children—they are all reduced to a crowd of people, beaten down, stripped of individual traits, who have lost all their capacity to manifest human dignity, rumbling resigned and submissive like cattle to the slaughterhouse. . . . The viewer is appalled. He longs to see a sign of resistance, however tenuous it may be, in these people. Even a man condemned to death, when he is led to the guillotine, has a momentary recoil, does he not? But these people, they go on, they go on.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 60–77.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., l. 15.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., l. 25–26.

¹¹⁹ Nešo Davidov, “S dălboka čovečnost i čuvstvo za mjarka,” *Kinoizkustvo*, May 1959, 7–15 (here, 11–12).

The critic contrasts a disarmed and powerless Jewish community to the exemplary Jewish Communists. His pen then slides toward the anecdote of a lived experience in 1943 in Somovit, in an internment camp for Bulgarian Jews deemed “seditious,” where internees had decided to reserve the best food rations “for the young and healthy,” who had the best chance to survive. “This story is true and, I believe, heroic,” Davidov writes.¹²⁰ The triple displacement from non-Bulgarian Jews to Bulgarian Jews, from supposed passivity to collective action, from fiction to reality, is of a piece with the canonical narrative that the publication of the book *Jews Fallen in Antifascist Struggle* had recently consecrated.¹²¹

One point in the journalist’s review nevertheless catches the reader’s eye: if the opposition between valiant Communists and Jews deprived of agency bears the mark of socialism, the image of the “cattle ready for slaughter” was hardly limited to the Eastern bloc. Let us continue studying his piece, which warrants further consideration. Davidov regrets that Ruth fails to offer a counterpoint to Jewish passivity:

She might have and should have filled the void in the Jewish group. She is young, she is smart. In her, the desire to live cannot be easily extinguished. . . . We understand her, and we even believe that, if a possibility presented itself, her active position would grow into a fight. That is why we quickly come to love her. But then come the long walks and conversations with Walter. In a melodramatic and theatrical tone, she speaks of the people, those people of the future who will be good, of crickets, of stars. . . . And that is it. . . . All she does in the film is to reinforce the sense of tragic inevitability that awaits the entire Greek Jewish group.¹²²

Did the choice of a young woman to symbolize Jewish suffering predispose the film to delineate the themes of fatalism and powerlessness? What spatiotemporal horizons would we need to encompass in order to account for the movie authors’ narrative choices? To answer this question, the borders of Bulgaria may prove too narrow.

Jewish Passivity: A Question of Gender?

A brief foray into debates on the choice of the actress to play Ruth can begin to lift the veil over these issues. The Bulgarian and East German crews delivered their own visions of the role of the Jewish teacher, as well as of gender

120 Ibid., 13.

121 *Evrei zaginali v antifašiskata borba*.

122 Davidov, “S dälboka čovečnost,” 12–13.

identities. In 1957, at the Karlovy Vary festival, Wolf had noticed a young Israeli actress, Haya Harareet, who had appeared in the Italian film *La donna del giorno* (Woman of the year; Francesco Maselli, 1956). Debated in the Artistic Council in April 1958, his proposal to hire Harareet to play Ruth had received the qualified support of Šaraliev, another director and member of the council: “As an actress, I like Haya Harareet, but for me the character of Ruth is not only associated with moral purity, but also external purity. I imagined Ruth as a very beautiful, very charming young woman, not necessarily very young. Yet here, I don’t have the sense that I’m seeing a charming young woman. It’s possible that, later, under the proper light, her face makes a different impression and certain defects are concealed and attenuated. I, however, would not be against a good and significantly more beautiful actress.”¹²³

Wolf’s dry reply: “The question of beauty, particularly for a woman, is obviously a question of taste. I find Haya Harareet beautiful, on the inside as well as on the outside.”¹²⁴

Wagenstein continued, in a tone not devoid of misogyny: “It’s difficult to find a woman who’s at once very beautiful and very smart.”¹²⁵

Rereading these lines provides a useful reminder: many an interpretation verges on overinterpretation, especially as it attributes a reflexiveness to actors that might be foreign to them. We should bear in mind, nonetheless, the image of a young woman of virginal purity: we will find our way back to this metaphor. When she was invited to join the East German–Bulgarian production, the Israeli actress was negotiating a contract with Hollywood that would soon bring her glory, together with Charlton Heston, in William Wyler’s *Ben-Hur* (1959). Casting thus had to be quickly resumed and extended to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the USSR—a challenge summarized by Ganev: “We have to have in mind that, from a strictly mechanical and arithmetical point of view, Ruth doesn’t have a very important role in terms of the reel: for that reason, we must choose a very brilliant actress who will remain in the mind of the viewer and will make her influence over Walter be perceived as a subtext.”¹²⁶ The hope of convincing Tatiana Samoilova, the protagonist of the sumptuous *Letyat zhuravli* (The cranes are flying; Mikhail Kalatozov, USSR, 1957), which won the Palme

123 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 74.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 CDA, F 404, op. 3, ac. 21, l. 170.



Figure 2.3. Ruth (Saša Krušarska) in a deportation convoy (*Zvezdi/Sterne*). Source: *Zvezdi/Sterne*, Konrad Wolf, 1959 © Lotte Michailowa.

D'Or at Cannes in May 1958, to accept the role quickly dissipated. Saša Krušarska thus became a fallback (figure 2.3).¹²⁷

What role was Krušarska to assume? In the film, Ruth appears in fourteen out of sixty-nine scenes (*kartini*), mostly at Walter's side. The love that arises between them is constructed less as a tool of conversion than of inverted identity: the German second lieutenant undergoes a kind of rebirth (figure 2.4). Whereas at the end of the first promenade, the young soldier reclines as he listens to Ruth, whose ample bust stands out against the white clouds of evening, over the course of their encounters he learns to stand up, both physically and metaphorically.¹²⁸ The young teacher, for her part, marches toward an acceptance of her fatal destiny. She makes an autonomous decision at only two occasions: when she flags down the lieutenant from the fenced-in camp courtyard so that he might fetch a doctor to assist in a difficult birth; and when she tries to distract children terrified by the pregnant woman's cries by organizing a teaching session in the camp. Apart from that,

127 Warmly received in Cannes, Saša Krušarska would soon marry Rangel Vălčanov, "director's consultant" in *Zvezdi/Sterne*. She later moved to Italy, where she abandoned acting as a career.

128 Pinkert, "Tender Males," 193–210.

Ruth is acted upon by others: it is Captain Kurt who, to cheer Walter up, brings her into the bistro where he is drinking heavily. She is also escorted back to the camp after each long walk, her nocturnal absences leading to a suspicion among the other internees that she might be peddling her beauty to survive. In love as in death, she will be sought out and fetched; one might write, paraphrasing the journalist Davidov, “She goes on, she goes on.”

The camera choices reinforce this sense of a character who is a repository for external intentions, primarily via the overlay image effects. As the cries of the newborn ring out, a gushing waterfall from the depths of the forest covers Ruth’s angelic, immobile, and radiant face. In an even more dramatic fashion, when the deportation convoys leave the station, the young woman is filmed in a close-up behind bars, gazing in expectation, though she knows it to be in vain. Over her face scroll the lyrics for “S’brent/Undzer shtetl brent.”¹²⁹ Were the director and cinematographer aware of the associations that they had created by opting for such an inscription?

As Daniela Berghahn has noted, “The chief function of women in the films’ narrative economy was to heighten the trope of self-sacrifice around which the fascist genre is structured.”¹³⁰ Until the 1960s, there were few East German films recounted from a female perspective. Yet, should the film’s narrative scheme be traced to this legacy alone? Adopting a comparative perspective suggests a supplementary hypothesis: in the films of the 1950s and 1960s, women regularly serve as allegories for Jewish suffering.¹³¹ Several months after *Zvezdi/Sterne, Deveti Krug* (The ninth circle; Yugoslavia, 1960) reached screens in Yugoslavia, a project of France Štiglic whose plot bears remarkable similarities to *Zvezdi/Sterne. Deveti Krug* is a bildungsroman at the end of which a young, non-Jewish Croat, Ivo, decides to oppose the anti-Jewish persecutions.¹³² After a sham marriage to a young Jewish woman, Ivo slowly grows attached to the woman—also named Ruth—whom he has married against his will, and exchanges his adolescent trappings for the courage of a grown man. He will go to the length of sneaking

129 The passage appears in white text, thus recalling the annotations chalked onto the convoys: It’s burning! Brothers! Oh, it’s burning! / If you want to save our shtetl / Fetch buckets, put out the fire! / Put it out with your own blood / Show that you can! / Don’t stay put like that / Don’t let this happen / Our shtetl is burning / It’s burning, burning, burning.

130 Berghahn, “Resistance of the Heart,” 167.

131 Lewis, *Women in European Holocaust Films*.

132 On March 27, 2014, Nevena Daković, from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Belgrade, proposed a discussion on the work shown at the Paris Holocaust Memorial (Mémorial de la Shoah).



Figure 2.4. The meeting between Ruth and Walter, the German second lieutenant, across the barbed wire fence of an internment camp (*Sterne/Zvezdi*). Source: *Sterne/Zvezdi*, Konrad Wolf, 1959 © Lotte Michailowa.

into the extermination camp where his beloved is being held; yet, battered by the experience of the concentration camp, she cannot find the force to flee. Once more, women serve as a foil to men whom they accompany in the development of a political conscience; Jewishness is represented with feminine features, sweet and condemned. The main difference between Walter and Ivo is that Ivo, refusing to abandon the woman he loves, dies as he tries to help her regain freedom.

Five years later, in Czechoslovakia, these gendered stereotypes would unfold in a filial mode in *Obchod na korze* (The shop on Main Street, 1965), a film by the directors Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos. The screenplay, written by Ladislav Grosman, tells of the Aryanization of Jewish properties and roundups of Jews in a small town in Slovakia. The breathtakingly beautiful work was awarded the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1965. Jewish suffering, here, takes on the features of Rozália Lautmannová (the great Polish actress, Ida Kamińska), an old woman whose deafness seems to symbolize the refusal of Jews to heed the warning signs. Once again, it is a Christian, the carpenter Tono Brtko, who, named manager of Aryanized

Jewish dry goods, grows attached to this woman, who could be his mother, and becomes aware of the horror of the anti-Jewish persecutions. The denouement is tragic: wishing to prevent Rozália from being discovered by the police, Tono inadvertently causes her death and commits suicide, breaking one of the prohibitions of “socialist realism” (the film was released in 1965, a liberal parenthesis that will not outlast the repression of the Prague Spring).¹³³

Zvezdi/Sterne is thus not alone in connecting gender stereotypes (female passivity) and cultural stereotypes (Jewish passivity). One final piece can be added to this file of internationally circulating symbols of Jewish suffering: not content to feminize passivity, the film envelops the Jewish martyr with a Christian covering. This choice—surprising for Jewish Communist artists—borrowed from an emerging repertoire that transcended the borders of the Cold War.

Christian Signs for Jewish Suffering? A Transnational Symbolic Repertoire

In *Zvezdi/Sterne*, Ruth wears a dark dress; her hair is most often hidden under a black scarf that outlines a delicate oval around her face. Bergmann, the director of photography, chose to illuminate her face with an intense white light, such that her features are erased behind a deep, dark gaze, reminiscent of the saints of Byzantine iconography. The three-quarter-angle shots, with her face stretched skyward, suggest all the same pictorial references with a religious connotation: Ruth radiates a saintly clarity. Even more explicitly, Christian symbols frame the emergence of her love for the German lieutenant. Their first promenade has them wander alongside a cemetery, as we learn that the Jewish baby born in the camp has not survived. Moreover, the encounter, which seals their secret connection, takes place under the protective shadow of a church, refuge of their hopes. Between two shots of the heavenly canopy and the star on Ruth’s chest, the lovers draw close in a fleeting kiss, before resuming their walk toward the church. The camera follows them, a tender couple beneath a massive Orthodox cross.

On January 5, 1959, the display of this symbol aroused an intense reaction from director Váľjo Radev.¹³⁴ A richly oblique dialogue ensued between Petrov, whose father, the Communist lawyer Nisim Mevorah, had converted

133 The censors, however, insisted that a final scene be added, during which Tono and Rozália, bathing in an atmosphere of glimmering unreality, would fade into the distance, dancing, accompanied by fanfare music.

134 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 130, l. 36.

to Protestantism; Molhov, a Jewish screenwriter, author, and critic; and Mirčev, whose wife was the Jewish actress Lisa Leon:

- Petrov: I have to say that symbols are so heavily marked in some moments, which perhaps in the design did not assume a symbolic character, but now begin to sound symbolic. For instance, during the promenade of the two main characters, when they are approaching the church. That image of the cross that the two characters—the man and the woman—approach, and the fact that this is at a very important moment, without text, suggest perhaps more things than the authors of the film had intended them to; it's closer to a line—you clearly see which one I mean—that is not desirable at the moment. . . .
- Molhov: . . . The cross to a certain extent unites two people who already love each other—the cross isn't the most appropriate symbol, neither for the situation, nor for what we would like to say about these two people.
- Mirčev: Surely a five-pointed star should have been put here!
- Molhov: This won't do, this cross is not appropriate.¹³⁵

None of the speakers mentioned the displaced nature of representing a Jewish tragedy by means of Christian symbols. They only related their discomfort regarding the use of religious symbols to socialism's general distrust of confessional markers. Neither did they anchor their remarks in a personal trajectory. Could such avoidance have been the result of a time when making Jewish identity explicit was not a welcome avenue?¹³⁶ Wolf's

135 Ibid., I. 18, I. 22.

136 Although Bulgaria never faced anything close to the anti-Semitic campaign of late Stalinism in the Soviet Union, the early 1950s were a period of fear and uncertainty there too. Bulgaria's Jews learned to carefully parse what they could say to different people, in different places, at different times. Any hint of Jewishness or interest in the wartime predicament of the Jews could only be discussed in a safe and trustworthy environment. By the end of the decade, such cautions had still not been forgotten, despite the relative easing of the regime. Some observers, including an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript, have suggested that Jewish identities were of minor import to Bulgaria's Jews in those years, and only acquired significance several decades later. In this respect, it may be worth recalling that in the fall of 1944, Valeri Petrov coauthored with illustrator Marko Behar a short theater play designed to popularize the achievements of the People's Court. Petrov was the son of renowned Communist jurist Nisim Mevorah, who had converted to Christianity in the late 1930s. The play delineated several "types" of criminals and victims—and Jews were one of the categories the two authors singled out. Several drawings

reaction was equally unexpected: in his concluding statement, the filmmaker conceded the inopportune nature of the metaphorical choice, no more. On January 16, 1959, listing the modifications envisioned by the German party, Wilkening returned to this point: “In the double exposure shots before the church, we will try to manipulate the angle to distance the cross from the church, or, at least, to fade it out so that it doesn’t emerge so distinctly.”¹³⁷ For the contemporary viewer, the *sfumato* effect is very inconclusive.

Recurring use of Christian iconography to depict anti-Jewish persecutions was, at the time, not limited to Bulgarians and East Germans. In a remarkable article, Stuart Liebmann has traced the emergence of visualizations of the Holocaust in the immediate postwar period.¹³⁸ Comparing documentaries and fictional films made in the East *and* the West, the historian notes the recurrence of Christian motifs in works made by mostly Jewish filmmakers, producers, and screenwriters. Such a semiological register was perhaps meant to facilitate a broad public’s identification with Jewish suffering by proposing a supposedly universal reference. It might also have been meant to counter the risks of anti-Semitic responses to allusions to the Holocaust in Poland, the USSR, and even the United States. Historian Sylvie Lindeperg mentions, in this sense, “the symbolic combat between the two crosses, Nazi and Christian, which erased the Jews from the memory of deportation” and underlines “the inability to represent deportation according to a secular symbolic system.”¹³⁹ Fifteen years later, the power of evoking Christian symbols seemed to succeed in triumphing over Cold War divisions as well as Eastern European atheism campaigns.

At first blush, it might seem a counterintuitive exercise to trace the footsteps of *Zvezdi/Sterne*, since this very object of study appears to demonstrate par excellence the existence of an “Eastern bloc”—only to trouble any serene vision of the latter. By analyzing the making of the movie, however, we have uncovered the bitter labors that governed the creation of intersecting (though hardly unified) understandings of the recent past. From the outset, Wolf’s work invited a challenge to any reading of film history solely in the terms of the cultural Cold War or the confrontation between East and West Germany. The discussions in the closed space of the Bulgarian–East German Artistic Council have offered a prism onto the resurgence of lived

were explicitly dedicated to Jewish suffering. As noted in chapter 1, however, emphasis on unique Jewish war experience came to be downplayed with the dawn of the Cold War. Such avoidance in public does not mean that Bulgaria’s Jews forgot their memory of anti-Jewish policies. See Petrov and Behar, *Naroden săd*.

137 CDA, F 404, op. 4, ac. 128, l. 337.

138 Liebmann, “Les premiers films sur la Shoah,” 145–82.

139 Lindeperg, *Clio de 5 à 7*.

experiences and a montage of a narrative chiseled by the present of the late 1950s. Conceptions of war, fascism, anti-Jewish violence, national identities, and socialism were all at play. Examining these exchanges underlines, in topographical relief, the fact that contemporary resonances of World War II were a result of Bulgarian and East German cultural elites seeking ways to affirm continuity with the national past, all while overseeing a rupture with the bourgeois order. Finally, as we have seen, bilateral cooperation was striated by spatial coordinates that were not confined to the East-West divide.

It is often said that a text is the result of its contexts, both of writing and of reading. The developments above suggest a visual variation of this maxim: the images cannot be viewed outside the words through which they were produced and spoken; even in an authoritarian regime, the cinematic object cannot be reduced to a compilation of commands. The film has been seen in its multiple identities, despite—or perhaps as a result of—the efforts deployed by its authors and censors to confine its possible meanings. This statement is in line with the path followed throughout this book: retracing the genesis of a dominant narrative regarding the events of World War II in Bulgaria after 1944. Nonetheless, we must think of this path as a ragged one, frayed, like those fractal objects that, viewed from up close, lay bare their irregularities—and that only distance can smooth.

For those with a taste for paradox, one might add that Wolf's work was the only film on anti-Jewish persecutions (co)directed under Bulgarian socialism, precisely because it was not conceived as such by Bulgaria's cultural officials. For Bulgarian artists, defending the work also enabled a call for greater autonomy for the artistic field following the ideological crack-down of 1958. After the Cannes Festival, another film was proposed to the sight and memory of spectators—notable because it had offered Bulgarian Cinematography its highest mark of international recognition.

After 1959, far from being forgotten, as Bulgarian screenwriter Wagenstein has suggested,¹⁴⁰ *Zvezdi/Sterne* would go on to lead multiple lives. In 1979, for instance, the coproduction was projected in the presence of Wolf and Wagenstein at the General Assembly of the United Nations.¹⁴¹ After the fall of communism, the drama would become the quintessential film released at the annual commemorations of the events of March 1943 in Bulgaria and abroad, though it was not always possible to determine which part of the past was being recalled to collective memory. Wagenstein's commitment to the recognition of Bulgarian responsibility for the deportations nonetheless allowed these reels to be associated, gradually, to the memory of Jewish destructions.

140 Vagenštajn, *Predi kraja na sveta*, 261.

141 Vagenštajn, *Tri scenarija*, 11.

With *Zvezdi/Sterne*, we have captured a moment in time, gleaned a few months from the more obvious interest of the 1960s in the events relating to the destruction of the European Jews. In the following chapter, rather than isolating a slice of time and space, we will embark on the traces of a strange visual object—its tribulations, its successive reshapings, the various identities to which it was assigned. These will dictate the extent of the territories to cross and the temporal coordinates of the inquiry. What kind of material is under our purview? A film reel, its editing process unfinished. What did it record? The deportations from the Greek territories under Bulgarian occupation.