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East-West Encounters at the Adolf-Heinz Beckerle Trial (1967–1968): How Holocaust Knowledge and Remembrance Went Global

In the decades since 1945, a large body of literature has addressed the legal pursuit of war crimes in the postwar era, pointing to the role of judicial proceedings in the documentation and remembrance of the Holocaust.¹ Nevertheless, narrating such efforts to prosecute war crimes was long hampered by competition between East and West.² Similarly, in countries that were to become Soviet allies, the transnational dimensions of local judicial proceedings were neglected.³ Without a doubt, research into the “second wave” of war crimes trials in West Germany has yielded major insights.⁴ However, this topic has mostly been addressed via the dual framework of West German efforts to confront the past *and* East/West German competition over the remembrance of the Nazi era.⁵

The present contribution complements the extant historiography by drawing on new pieces of knowledge and archival records generated at the intersection of

1 Norman J. W. Goda, ed., *Rethinking Holocaust Justice: Essays across Disciplines* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018); David Bankier and Dan Michman, eds., *Holocaust and Justice: Representation and Historiography of the Holocaust in Post-War Trials* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and Berghahn Books), 2010.

2 Francine Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg: A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

3 As noted in Gabriel N. Finder and Alexander V. Prusin, *Justice behind the Iron Curtain: Nazis on Trial in Communist Poland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

4 Annette Weinke, *Law, History and Justice: Debating German State Crimes in the Long Twentieth Century* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018); Devin O. Pendas, *The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, 1963–1965: Genocide, History, and the Limits of the Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Rebecca Wittmann, *Beyond Justice: The Auschwitz Trial* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

5 Annette Weinke, “Allierter Angriff auf die nationale Souveränität? Die Strafverfolgung von Kriegs- und NS-Verbrechen in der Bundesrepublik, der DDR, und Österreich,” in *Transnationale Vergangenheitspolitik. Der Umgang mit deutschen Kriegsverbrechern in Europa nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Norbert Frei (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006), 37–93.

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East European studies and Holocaust studies in the past two decades. More specifically, I propose to take a fresh look at the transnational dynamics underlying the prosecution of Nazi war criminals before local courts in the 1960s. At the center of the investigation lies the trial of Adolf-Heinz Beckerle at the District Court of Hesse in Frankfurt am Main (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG) in 1967–1968. During the Second World War, Beckerle was German Minister Plenipotentiary in Sofia. In that capacity, the former officer of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA, or brown shirts) worked with the Bulgarian authorities to negotiate the deportation of Jews from the Yugoslav and Greek territories that had been occupied by Bulgaria since spring 1941. Prosecutor Fritz Bauer, who had been named Attorney General of the State of Hesse (*Land Hessen*) in 1956, played a decisive role in bringing Beckerle to justice.⁶ Following several years of investigation, the former diplomat stood trial. However, the proceedings were suspended on account of Beckerle's medical condition shortly before Bauer's premature death in July 1968.

In this chapter, I consider the legal proceedings as a prism on how knowledge about the Holocaust formed during the Cold War – a knowledge that developed through the complex entanglement between national, regional, and international scales.⁷ In particular, a careful consideration of the investigative phase and the court hearings offers a novel narrative of legal pursuits, one that brings into focus the set of global connections between West Germany, the United States, Israel, Bulgaria, the USSR, Poland, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Austria, which were instrumental in the prosecution of Beckerle's war crimes. Situating this micro-event within its multiple national and transnational contexts, I draw on a wide range of archives: German (Hessian State Archives Darmstadt), Israeli (Yad Vashem), Bulgarian (Central State Archives; Archives of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), American (World Jewish Congress), Russian (Central Archive of the Federal Security Services of the Russian Federation), Polish (Institute of National Memory, Austrian (Austrian State Archives), and Yugoslav (Archives of the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade), as well as existing Bulgarian, German, and Yugoslav scholarship.

An examination of the Beckerle trial delivers several pieces of information about the trans-bloc and trans-national dimensions of judicial prosecution. First, it sheds new light on the diversity of Jewish justice mediators involved in the

6 Matthias Meusch, *Von der Diktatur zur Demokratie Fritz Bauer und die Aufarbeitung der NS-Verbrechen in Hessen (1956–1968)* (Wiesbaden: Historische Kommission für Nassau, 2001); Irmtrud Wojak, *Fritz Bauer 1903–1968. Eine Biographie* (München: Buxus Edition, 2016) [1st ed. 2009].

7 Annette Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland. Vergangenheitsbewältigung 1949–1969 oder eine deutsch-deutsche Beziehungsgeschichte im kalten Krieg* (Schöningh: Paderborn, 2002), 259–272.

quest for legal redress beyond Cold War boundaries. Until recently, the bulk of the studies of trials for war crimes centered on the role of legal actors – prosecutors, judges, defense attorneys, and the like – in the making of justice.⁸ Rendering the early stages of the prosecution more comprehensively, however, requires a consideration of the individuals and advocacy networks that helped to produce evidentiary material during the pretrial phase,⁹ which assisted the West German investigators in overcoming the obstacles posed by the FRG's absence of diplomatic relationships with such key Eastern European protagonists as Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. In our case study, these networks included Jewish organizations (the Institute for Jewish Affairs of the World Jewish Congress, in particular), local community leaders (in Israel and Bulgaria, among others), as well as associations of Holocaust survivors and institutions dedicated to the documentation and remembrance of the Holocaust (Yad Vashem, the International Auschwitz-Committee, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, etc.). Thus, this study of the Beckerle case contributes to the growing literature on Jewish agency in seeking redress for National Socialist (NS) war crimes.

Second, the chapter makes a more general argument about the East-West divide. This argument comes in three parts. Part one: there is little doubt that Cold War tribunals were arenas of political and ideological battles, where the retelling of the past was marshalled in the service of crafting a rival present. As will be shown, logics of competitive involvement encouraged the Bulgarian, Yugoslav, Polish, and Soviet authorities to support the West German investigation – at specific moments and to differing degrees. Additionally, the involvement of Jewish survivors from Southeastern Europe coincided with the intrusion into the German courtroom of bitter divisions, which brought Jews of different political persuasions into opposition, some of whom had settled in Israel, while others had remained in Bulgaria.

8 Donald Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial: War Crime Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Lawrence Douglas, *The Memory of Judgment: Making Law and History in the Trials of the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

9 Boaz Cohen, "Dr. Jacob Robinson, the Institute of Jewish Affairs and the Elusive Jewish Voice in Nuremberg," in *Holocaust and Justice*, ed. David Bankier and Dan Michman, 81–100; Laura Jockusch, "Justice at Nuremberg? Jewish Responses to Nazi War-Crime Trials in Allied-Occupied Germany," *Jewish Social Studies* 19, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 107–147; Katharina Stengel, "Mediators behind the Scenes: The World Jewish Congress and the International Auschwitz Committee during the Preparations for the First Auschwitz Trial in Frankfurt," in *Seeking Accountability for War Crimes in East and Central Europe: A People's Justice?*, ed. Eric Le Bourhis, Irina Tcherneva, and Vanessa Voisin (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2022), 320–349.

Part two: nevertheless, by moving away from a Eurocentric view of East-West dynamics centered on the idea of bipolar confrontation, intra-bloc cohesion, and seclusion between the blocs, the study of the Beckerle affair also underlines the often complex delimitation between East and West, democratic beliefs and authoritarian allegiances, and former associations with the Nazis and support for the Allies. In the decades since the end of the war, a number of former war protagonists have indeed switched sides, adopted new homelands, and built novel lives. As some of them travelled to the courtroom from the West and others from the East, it was occasionally difficult to ascertain who exemplified what and whether present ideological hostilities were not all the more intense since they were expected to mute past proximities. Symmetrically, East-East solidarities could not be taken for granted.

Part three: ultimately, our case study shows that there were moments when factors such as similar experiences of the war, shared generational belonging, and common professional identities could prevail over the ideological cleavages of the Cold War and allow for collaborative efforts to prosecute former war criminals. However, one may also concede that these cooperative undertakings – even if conceived by those people who took part in them as attempts to circumvent the East-West divide – did create channels through which the Cold War order was both subverted and sustained.

The Beckerle Trial in Context: The 1960s Moment – Germany's Second Wave of NS Trials

In West Germany during the 1950s, the dawn of the Cold War had put a premature end to the prosecution of war criminals, the denazification process, and discussions about individual and collective responsibility during the Nazi era.¹⁰ Meanwhile, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's policy of reintegrating former high-ranking National Socialists found a ready audience among a society eager for a return to normalcy. Several figures with a tarnished past advanced into the entourage of the chancellor, most prominently Hans Globke, a lawyer who had

¹⁰ Norbert Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); John Teshcke, *Hitler's Legacy: West Germany Confronts the Aftermath of the Third Reich* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999); *Coping with the Nazi Past: West German Debates on Nazism and Generational Conflicts, 1955–1975*, ed. Philipp Gassert and Allan E. Steinweis (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).

written a legal commentary on the anti-Jewish Nuremberg Laws.¹¹ Within such state institutions as the Foreign Office and the judicial system, a high level of continuity had prevailed.

Towards the end of the 1950s, several factors converged to reverse this trend. Following the 1955 signing of an amnesty agreement between Adenauer and Soviet authorities, a large number of German military men, who had been tried in the USSR in the wake of the Second World War, were released from captivity. Their return to the FRG conferred new visibility on “the murderers among us” (to paraphrase the title of a 1946 feature film by Wolfgang Staudte) and prompted several associations of former victims and survivors to advocate for this group to be prosecuted in Germany.¹² Meanwhile, the extensive media coverage of the Ulm *Einsatzkommando* trial – in which ten Gestapo and SS officers were convicted as accessories to mass murder for war crimes committed in Lithuania in 1941 – convinced the Justice Ministers of the West German states or provinces (*Länder*) to create an agency, established in December 1958, responsible for investigating Nazi war crimes. Headquartered in Ludwigsburg, the Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes (*Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen*) was expected to initiate new proceedings before the expiration of the West German statute of limitations on “base motive murder” – the only qualification that could be used to condemn Nazi war criminals.¹³ Although some might have envisioned this decision as a step towards closing the books on the judicial phase, the Central Office would play a prime role in bringing about new NS trials.¹⁴

Those who were determined to breathe new life into the prosecutions of Nazi war criminals could rely on the support of a small group of German lawyers. Among them was Fritz Bauer, a strong believer in the didactic mission of justice.¹⁵ After he was appointed Attorney General of the State of Hesse, Bauer actively committed the General Prosecutor’s Office to the investigation of war crimes. The Auschwitz trial (1963–1965) embodied his understanding of the law: in 183 days of

11 Daniel Rogers, “Restoring a German Career, 1945–1950: The Ambiguity of Being Hans Globke,” *German Studies Review* 31, no. 2 (2008): 303–324.

12 A case in point is that of Walter Gerhard Martin Sommer, an SS *Hauptscharführer* who served as a guard at the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald. He was retried by the Bayreuth district court in 1958, convicted for the murder of 25 detainees, and sentenced to life imprisonment. His trial received much press coverage in both Western and Eastern Europe.

13 Annette Weinke, *Eine Gesellschaft ermittelt gegen sich selbst. Die Geschichte der Zentralen Stelle Ludwigsburg 1958–2008* (Darmstadt: WGB, 2008).

14 The date for the statute of limitations was initially set to May 8, 1965.

15 Wojak, *Fritz Bauer*.

proceedings, 360 witnesses from 19 countries and several historians testified before the court, giving unprecedented resonance to the Nazi past in West Germany.¹⁶

The *Auswärtiges Amt* and the Final Solution in the Balkans

Early on, the Attorney General's priorities included examining the role of the German Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*, AA) during the Nazi era, as he witnessed the return to office of former high-ranking Nazi diplomats into the AA under the 1951 law on civil servants.¹⁷ In this respect, the Balkans presented a unique case. Whereas the SS had taken the lead in the Jewish deportations from Slovakia, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, in Southeast Europe the German Foreign Office had enjoyed a much broader prerogative. Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary were allies of the Reich, not occupied states. Discussions regarding the implementation of the "Final Solution" thus transited through official diplomatic channels.¹⁸ The Balkans also stood out in another respect: a number of former SA officers had been appointed as diplomatic representatives there.

At the central level, Martin Luther's Germany Division (*Abteilung Deutschland*) within the German Foreign Office – in particular Referat D III, headed by Franz Rademacher – played a pivotal role. Locally, two rival actors occupied center stage: the German legations *and* the advisors on Jewish affairs, whose prime allegiance often tilted towards the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, RSHA). In Bulgaria, unlike Romania, Minister Plenipotentiary Adolf-Heinz Beckerle faced no competition as there was no advisor on Jewish affairs, at least before SS *Obersturmführer* Theodor Dannecker was sent to Sofia on January 21, 1943.

In January 1941, Bulgaria, soon to become member of the Tripartite Pact (March 1), had enacted a piece of anti-Jewish legislation, the Law for the Protection of the Nation (ZZN). By the end of August 1942, a Commissariat for Jewish Affairs (KEV) was entrusted with the coordination of all anti-Jewish policies.

¹⁶ Pendas, *Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial*; Wittmann, *Beyond Justice*.

¹⁷ Hans-Jürgen Döscher, *Seilschaften: Die verdrängte Vergangenheit des Auswärtigen Amts* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 2005). On the involvement of Reich diplomats in the "Final Solution," see Eckart Conze et al., *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit: Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik* (Munich: Blessing, 2010); Christopher Browning, *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office: A Study of Referat D III of Abteilung Deutschland, 1940–43* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978).

¹⁸ Browning, *Final Solution*, 89, 109.

Meanwhile the expulsion of Jews “into the provinces or outside the kingdom” was considered a viable option in the August 29 decree.¹⁹ By October 9, Luther in Berlin instructed A.-H. Beckerle to extend an official proposal for deportation to the Bulgarian side. This was done on October 15. A month later, the Bulgarians gave their approval and requested assistance from a German advisor in the preparations for the deportations. The Foreign Office and the RSHA settled on Dannecker, who had illustrated himself in the deportation of Jews from France.

The son of a postman born in Frankfurt, Beckerle built his career on the back of a precocious membership in the Nazi party and the SA.²⁰ The opportunity to join the Foreign Office came in February 1941. By June of the same year, he arrived in Sofia as Minister Plenipotentiary, adding to the SA diplomats in Hungary, Romania, and Croatia. A strong believer in the Reich’s millenarian dream, Beckerle was arrested by the Soviets with other German diplomats in Sofia as they tried to escape to Turkey in September 1944. In 1951, he was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment by a Soviet military court on account of his role in the repression of Soviet partisans. Meanwhile, he had been judged *in absentia* by the District Court of Hesse as a Class 1 (Major Offenders) criminal. The 1955 German-Soviet amnesty agreement allowed him to return to Germany. In 1956, the Association for Victims of Nazism (*Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes*, VVN), a left-wing organization created in the aftermath of the war, filed a petition to try him for acts he committed when he served as the Frankfurt chief of police. After their petition was denied in April 1957,²¹ Attorney General Bauer decided to approach the case from another angle – the persecution of Jews in the Balkans.

Preliminary investigations against Beckerle commenced as early as 1956. The Frankfurt Prosecutor’s Office filed a request with the West German Foreign Office for the personal files of several former diplomats, including Fritz Gebhardt von Hahn, who had worked as a deputy to Franz Rademacher, the Jewish *Referat* within *Abteilung Deutschland*, and whose legal case was joined to that of Beckerle in December 1965.²² In the second half of the 1950s, a large body of records from the Political Archives (PA) of the AA, formerly American trophy archives, was trans-

19 Frederick Chary, *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution 1940–1944* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972); Nadège Ragaru, *Assignés à identités. Violence d’État et expériences minoritaires dans les Balkans post-ottomans* (Istanbul: ISIS, 2019).

20 Hessian State Archives Darmstadt (Hessisches Staatsarchiv Darmstadt, HStAd), Fond/Abteilung (Ab.) 631a, Inventory/Band (B.) 597, pp. 2–4.

21 Wojak, *Fritz Bauer*, 384–386.

22 Von Hahn was indicted for his role in the roundups in Thessaloniki (in the German occupation zone) and for the deportation of Jews from Bulgarian-held territories. Prosecutor Richter was assigned to the case.

ferred back to Bonn from the United States.²³ Drawing on these and other incriminating documents, an indictment against Beckerle was issued in September 1959.²⁴ He was charged as an accessory to the deportations of Jews from the Bulgarian-controlled territories. First state prosecutor Wilhelm Wentzke was assigned to investigate the case. Competent personnel, however, were sorely lacking in the office of the Attorney General, as it was also preparing for the Auschwitz trial (1963–1965) and assisting Israeli authorities on the Eichmann case.²⁵ An attempt to transfer the investigation to the newly created Ludwigsburg Office had failed. Prospects were looking rather dim when the discovery of a novel piece of evidence gave the investigation a new impetus: the former diplomat's personal diary, recovered from the political archives of the AA.²⁶

However, adhering to this linear narrative of the pretrial investigation would be misleading. For such an account fails to capture the extraordinary web of initiatives – West, East, and beyond – thanks to which the German investigators brought Beckerle to justice. I will now turn to the story of these transnational collaborative efforts.

Beyond the Cold War Divide: The Construction of a Legal Case – *East-West Prosecution Obstacles*

When the West German investigators took up the Beckerle case, they knew they could expect little help from the Eastern European countries where material and testimonial evidence of Beckerle's guilt were most likely to be found – Bulgaria, the USSR, and Yugoslavia. Following in the footsteps of the Soviet Union, Bulgaria had launched a media campaign calling to abolish the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes.²⁷ The daily press was replete with articles denouncing West German revanchism, imperialism, and threats to peace. At a bilateral level, however, Bulgaria's relations with the FRG were exempt from the bitter memories affecting German ties to Poland, East Germany, and Hungary. Twice over the course of a century, the Bulgarian state had sided with Germany in a war with the hope of achieving territorial goals. Additionally, during World War II, Bulgaria had been spared the extreme suffering experienced by other Slavic peoples in Europe.

²³ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, pp. 134–35.

²⁴ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, pp. 557–571.

²⁵ Pendas, *Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial*.

²⁶ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 618, p. 86.

²⁷ "Svetovnata obštestvenost e protiv sroka za давност," *Evrejski vesti*, November 9, 1964, 1.

In 1953, the two Cold War enemies exchanged official trade representatives. Shortly after the establishment of the Warsaw Pact (1955), the West German government further offered the Bulgarians the establishment of diplomatic relations.²⁸ For a short while, Soviet leaders seemed to favor a rapprochement between the FRG and the Eastern bloc. Bulgaria was a likely candidate as the country harbored neither anti-German *nor* anti-Soviet feelings. Yet, the strong reluctance of the East Germans to let socialist states normalize their relations with the FRG, on the one hand, and the West Germans' strict adherence to the Hallstein Doctrine, on the other, prevented this move. The existence of two German states, the recognition of the postwar borders, and the nuclear arms race remained divisive issues.

At the time of the Auschwitz trial, Attorney General Bauer had successfully reached out to the USSR, in part thanks to his longstanding credentials as a Social Democrat.²⁹ In the Beckerle case, the West Germans once again turned to the Soviet *Prokuratura* with the hope that they might obtain a copy of the verdict of the 1951 Beckerle trial and complementary data on the legal investigation.³⁰ Yet, whilst the indictment against Beckerle and von Hahn was being written, the line of communication between the Germans and the Soviets remained disturbingly silent. A few more weeks were needed before the precious document landed on their desk.

Tito's Yugoslavia offered an additional venue. A significant number of the Holocaust victims for whom Beckerle was investigated originated from Vardar Macedonia, a region that belonged to the Yugoslav kingdom prior to the war. In the wake of the Tito-Stalin split (1948),³¹ Yugoslavia sought new allies in the West and exchanged ambassadors with the FRG in 1951–1952.³² However, in the early 1960s,

28 Jordan Baev, "The Establishment of Bulgarian-West German Diplomatic Relations within the Coordinating Framework of the Warsaw Pact," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 3 (2016): 158–180.

29 Jasmin Söhner, "NS-Verbrechen ermitteln. Die Justizkooperation zwischen der Zentralen Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen und der Sowjetunion (1955–1973)" (PhD diss., Ruprecht Karl University of Heidelberg, 2022).

30 Central Archive of the Federal Security Services of the Russian Federation (Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Federal'nykh Sluzhb Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii, TsA FSB Rossii), H-20808, pp. 34–44, 98–117, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190309091821/http://istmat.info/node/21979>, accessed April 29, 2024.

31 Svetozar Rajak, *Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in the Early Cold War: Reconciliation, Comradeship, Confrontation, 1953–1957* (London: Routledge, 2010).

32 Thomas Brey, "Bonn und Belgrad. Die Beziehungen zwischen Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Jugoslawien seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg," *Osteuropa* 29 (1979): 632–644, here 633; Marc Christian Theurer, *Bonn-Belgrad-Ost-Berlin: Die Beziehungen der beiden deutschen Staaten zu Jugoslawien im Vergleich 1957–1968* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2007). The author wishes to thank Natalija Dimić for enriching her knowledge of Yugoslav-German relations.

Yugoslavia's recognition of East Germany (1957), the influence of Croat émigré organizations in West Germany, and Yugoslav demands for financial indemnification of the Yugoslav victims of Nazi repression brought the bilateral ties to a low point.³³ Diplomatic ties would not resume until January 1968.

Overall, in their search for incriminating evidence, the German investigators would need astuteness. Of utmost priority was the identification of individuals whose broad network of contacts could bridge the cleavages between East and West.

Holocaust Survivors as Mediators of Justice

As soon as the first echoes of Beckerle's investigation spread, a surprisingly dense web of contacts took shape in Europe and the United States. Central to these connections were Jewish organizations and Holocaust survivors. One of the earliest initiatives preserved in the archives features Hermann Langbein, the secretary general of the International Auschwitz Committee, who contacted the German Prosecutor's Office on December 28, 1958. Langbein drew the prosecutor's attention to several pieces of scholarly research he thought might be of use to the investigators (Gerald Reitlinger, Léon Poliakov and Joseph Wulf), as well as to the existence of an agreement pertaining to the deportation of "20,000 Jews, initially," which bore the signature of "the subordinate of Beckerle, SS-Hauptsturmführer Theodor Dannecker." He further warned of the risk that Beckerle might flee at the slightest opportunity.³⁴

By the summer of 1959, West German prosecutor Wentzke had identified two interlocutors in his effort to breach the Iron Curtain and reach out to Bulgaria: Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the Institute for Jewish Affairs (IFA) of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) in New York. Asking for assistance from Israel seemed all the more warranted given Attorney General Bauer's cooperation with the Israeli authorities on the Eichmann case. In addition, beginning in the mid-1950s, the director of the Research Department of Yad Vashem, Israel Halpern, had alerted the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the need of locating materials about Jewish history and the Holocaust in the countries where most of them lived prior to

³³ Zoran Janjetović, *Od Auschwitza do Brijuna. Pitanje odštete žrtvama nacizma u jugoslavensko-zapadnonjemačkim odnosima* (Zagreb: Srednija Europa, 2007).

³⁴ Austrian State Archives (Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, ÖSA), Nachlass Hermann Langbein, E/1797, p. 96. The author wishes to thank Katharina Stengel for sharing this document with her. On June 19, 1959, prosecutor Wentzke asked Langbein for further assistance in establishing the identity and number of victims from the Bulgarian-held territories. ÖSA, E/1797, pp. 98–99.

the war, i.e., Eastern Europe. Several members of the Israeli Legations behind the Iron Curtain were asked to collect and copy records for Yad Vashem.³⁵ Moreover, the substantial Bulgarian Aliyah to Israel in 1948–1949 increased the likelihood that evidence for the crimes might be found in the Jewish state.³⁶ On August 25, Wentzke contacted the head of the Yad Vashem archive, Józef Kermisz (Joseph Kermish), himself a Holocaust survivor.³⁷ The Israeli archivist informed the prosecutor that trials for anti-Jewish crimes had actually taken place in Bulgaria in the spring of 1945 and that Yad Vashem possessed a transcript of the court session protocols.³⁸ He also provided a list of records relevant to the case.³⁹

Already in summer 1959, Kermisz had directed the attention of the West German prosecutor to the former leader of the small Bulgarian Revisionist Zionist movement during the interwar period, Benjamin Arditi (1897–1981).⁴⁰ Upon leaving Bulgaria for Israel, Arditi had taken with him archival documents he used to offer a first reading of the Jewish fate in Bulgarian-held territories in 1952⁴¹ and a second one, sent as a manuscript to Yad Vashem in 1959.⁴² Prosecutor Wentzke contacted him to ascertain the fate of the Greek Jews deported from the Bulgarian harbor of Lom.⁴³ By way of an answer, Arditi offered a copy of his 1952 book, which sparked the prosecutor's interest.⁴⁴ In Arditi's account of the events, the German jurist saw evidence that in March 1943 no one in Bulgaria, much less a member of the German diplomatic corps, could ignore the fate awaiting the Jews expedited to the "Eastern provinces." Within a couple of months, a flurry of invitations was ex-

35 Boaz Cohen, "Setting the Agenda of Holocaust Research: Discord at Yad Vashem in the 1950s," in *Holocaust Historiography in Context*, ed. David Bankier and Dan Michman, 255–292, here 282. Cohen cites a report from 1955 according to which Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary all contributed files, books, museum displays, photographs, or films within the framework of this collection campaign.

36 Between October 25, 1948, and May 16, 1949, a total of 32,106 Bulgarian Jews departed for Israel. Cited in Bojka Vasileva, *Evreite v Bălgarija, 1944–1952* (Sofia: U.I. "Sv. Kliment Ohridski," 1992), 125.

37 Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), P. 37/17, pp. 8–9. Prosecutor Wentzke also asked the Association of Bulgarian Migrants (*Hitachduth Olei Bulgaria*) in Israel for information on "Jewish persecution during the Second World War in Bulgaria."

38 YVA, P. 37/F 17, p. 3.

39 YVA, P. 37/17, pp. 12, 18.

40 YVA, P. 37/17, pp. 6–7.

41 Benjamin Arditi, *Rolijata na Car Boris III pri izselvaneto na evreite ot Bălgarija* (Tel Aviv: Kooperativen pečat O. P., 1952).

42 YVA, P. 37/17, pp. 4–5.

43 YVA, P. 37/17, pp. 14–15.

44 Michael Molho and Joseph Nehama, *In Memoriam. Hommage aux victimes juives des nazis en Grèce* (Salonique: Imp. N. Nicolaidès, 1948).

tended to Arditi to make a statement in Frankfurt, including by Attorney General Bauer himself. Efforts to follow this lead, however, proved disappointing, especially since the Israeli parliamentarian failed to locate survivors and witnesses.⁴⁵

There remain, however, more narrative threads to this story. At the very time when he was in discussion with the German judiciary, Arditi maintained an epistolary relationship with the second major non-governmental actor involved in the early search for evidence in the Beckerle case – the Institute for Jewish Affairs of the WJC, then headed by Nehemiah Robison, a jurist and the brother of Jacob Robinson.⁴⁶ His organization put to use a breadth of contacts to assist German investigators in their work both during the early phase of the investigation against Beckerle (1959–1960) and during the initial forays into the past of Fritz Gerhardt von Hahn (from June 1963 until January 1964).⁴⁷

Robinson had begun to investigate Beckerle's criminal deeds before prosecutor Wentzke sought his assistance. In the summer of 1959, he turned to the Tel Aviv branch of the WJC, and, through it, to the Bulgarian and Greek associations of *olim*.⁴⁸ By October 15 of the same year, he was probing the willingness of the Bulgarian side to support the German prosecution: his letter to Bulgarian Chief Rabbi Hananel, however, was left unanswered.⁴⁹ On February 9, 1960, prosecutor Wentzke penned a missive to the American lawyer, highlighting the difficulties he faced in gaining access to sources in East European countries:

It is very likely that there exists in Bulgaria a number of people who, given their relationship of service or otherwise with the German embassy of the time in Sofia or with the government (i.e., the president of the Council of Ministers FILOFF, Ministry of the Interior GABROWSKI, Jewish Affairs Commissioner BELEFF) or for another reason had knowledge of the aforementioned events. I also find it likely that there are in Bulgaria a large number of documents of Bulgarian and German origin that are concerned with these deportations. In part, those who could serve as witnesses probably participated, as defendants or witnesses, in the war crimes trial (which took place in 1945 in Sofia) and some of the aforementioned documents were presented as proof in the course of this trial. [. . .] Given that my

⁴⁵ YVA, P. 37/203, p. 31.

⁴⁶ Michael R. Marrus, "A Jewish Lobby at Nuremberg: Jacob Robinson and the Institute of Jewish Affairs, 1945–1946," *Carodos Law Review* 27 (2006): 151–165.

⁴⁷ Robinson made the first move, addressing a letter to Wentzke in June 1963, after he learned that von Hahn was being investigated. Robinson's successor, Oscar Karbach, was solicited less by the German team, despite a renewal of contact on the eve of the trial in 1967.

⁴⁸ American Jewish Archives (AJA), World Jewish Congress (WJC) Records (New York Office), Manuscript collection no. 361 (MS-361), C187/10, Bulgaria, correspondence, Deportation of Jews, 1960–1968, Cincinnati, Ohio. Special thanks to Vanessa Voisin for making these documents available to the author.

⁴⁹ AJA, WJC, MS-361, C187/10 (unpaginated).

possibilities of finding these witnesses and documents are highly limited, I would be obliged, Mr. Robinson, if you might request the aforementioned information from the Jewish community of Sofia and, in particular, for them to name the witnesses and documents in question.⁵⁰

A quick glance at Robinson's correspondence reveals his unrelenting efforts to collect incriminating evidence in Israel (the WJC representation in Israel; the associations of migrants from Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Greece; the Section for Investigation of Nazi War Crimes of the Israeli police), West Germany (the United Restitution Organization, URO), and Bulgaria. On February 29, 1960, Robinson forwarded Wentzke's letter to the Central Consistory of the Bulgarian Jews.⁵¹ By March 17, having received no response, he once again turned to Chief Rabbi Hananel. This time, however, he reminded his interlocutor of the recent restoration of Bulgarian-American diplomatic relations and made it clear he had also contacted the Bulgarian embassy in Washington.⁵² The move paid off. On May 6, the Jewish Consistory sent "two photocopies of documents relating to the activity of A.-H. Beckerle, the German ambassador in Sofia during the fascist regime, that you may relay to the General Attorney of Hesse in Frankfurt," and a book entitled "Documents" with "text underlined by us with a red pencil on page 9."⁵³ Alas, the records sent by the Bulgarians were from the Nuremberg trial. Moreover, prosecutor Wentzke was already familiar with *Dokumenti*, an anthology of archival records compiled on the eve of the 1945 trial for anti-Jewish crimes. So much for the Bulgarian connection.

The Bulgarians were reluctant to support the West German investigation, and the Jewish community leaders felt uneasy. Following the creation of the state of Israel, only a tiny community of about 9,000 Jews had remained in Bulgaria. Their ability to put Jewish issues on the public agenda was limited; pressures to conform, politically and nationally, were rather high. Decisions affecting the community were centralized. In 1959, the Central Consistory of the Bulgarian Jews – hitherto a pivotal actor of Bulgarian Jewish life – and Chief Rabbi Hananel were marginalized through the creation of the Social, Cultural, and Educational Organization of Jews in the People's Republic of Bulgaria (OKPOE).⁵⁴

⁵⁰ AJA, WJC, MS-361, C187/10 (translated from German).

⁵¹ AJA, WJC, MS-361, C187/10.

⁵² AJA, WJC, MS-361, C187/10.

⁵³ The document reproduced on page 9 is a facsimile of a February 4, 1943, report by the Bulgarian commissar for Jewish affairs detailing the understanding reached between Beckerle and the Bulgarian Minister of the Interior concerning the deportation of Jews from Bulgarian-held territories.

⁵⁴ *Evrejski vesti*, 13, 416, July 21, 1959, 3.

There remained one last option – Yugoslavia. Here again, Robinson acted as a key mediator. In 1963, West German Prosecutor Richter was assigned the von Hahn case. He sought evidence regarding the Macedonian Jews deported to Treblinka in 1943. As Robinson made clear in a letter to the Tel Aviv WJC representative, diplomatic hurdles hindered this investigation too:

[. . .] the Public Prosecutor tells me that in view of the strained relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Yugoslavia, he does not expect any assistance from the Yugoslav authorities. Then, our only possibility of finding evidence is through our affiliated organizations in Yugoslavia and Greece and through your office in Israel because, as I mentioned, some of the survivors from Macedonia are residing there. I would ask you to contact the Irgun Olei Yugoslavia to find out whether they have on their rolls any names and addresses of survivors of Macedonia and possibly Thracia [sic]. If you are not successful, please issue a press release calling upon all survivors of these two regions to report to you. It might be possible that the Israel police have some documents relating to these two areas, but I am very doubtful of it. [. . .] Please communicate with the Irgun Olei Greece and try to obtain whatever information might be secured in this matter.⁵⁵

Robinson also took it upon himself to ask the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia, Albert Vajs, for his assistance. His attempt met with failure perhaps all the more so since Vajs was sick at the time and would die in April 1964. The head of the IJA, however, was not the kind of person to renounce an idea. Three months later, in announcing the publication of a scholarly volume by Macedonian historian Aleksandar Matkovski, Robinson took the opportunity to write to Vajs again.⁵⁶ Although he did not live to see the results of his efforts, his perseverance eventually bore fruit. On February 21, 1964, a copy of the *Tragedy of the Macedonian Jews* finally reached the IJA. It would take one more intercession, namely that of Zagreb-born American attorney Paul Neuberger, a specialist in questions of nationalized and “Aryanized” properties in Yugoslavia, before the Yugoslavs agreed to send expert witnesses before the Hessian court.⁵⁷

Private individuals and non-governmental institutions thus not only acted as advocates of justice for war crimes, they also aided in the collection of evidence. Offering an overview of these circulations will illuminate another way in which the Cold War divide was traversed.

⁵⁵ AJA, WJC, MS-361, C187/10.

⁵⁶ AJA, WJC, MS-361, C187/10.

⁵⁷ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, pp. 185–186.

Binding East and West: The Circulation of Evidence across Space and Time

The making of a trial might best be depicted as a maelstrom of journeys across space and time, uniting humans and non-humans in a strange merry-go-round. In our case study, these circuits involved people (investigators, defendants, witnesses, etc.) as well as things (original and certified copies of archival records, visual materials, maps, etc.) in what would ultimately become a worldwide investigation. This section of the chapter brings some of these movements to life and suggests a more complex reading of the ways in which symbolic and territorial divisions played out in the prosecution of Nazi criminals.

Prosecutor Richter gave a succinct account of the territorial scope of the investigation during a trip to communist Bulgaria in June 1968: “The investigations of the court started in 1958, 51 court sessions have already taken place, 70 witnesses were heard, and 8 requests for legal aid were carried out in foreign countries. This is an enormous amount of work.”⁵⁸ The list of foreign countries whose cooperation had been solicited knew no East-West divides. It comprised Austria, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Israel, Poland, the USSR, and Sweden, among others. Moreover, the June 1968 journey of the West German judicial team to communist Bulgaria was only one in a catalogue of missions abroad undertaken by the investigators over the course of a decade. Richter himself had already visited Bulgaria in the fall of 1967. Aside from the German justice officials, several private individuals and organizations were commissioned to conduct specific inquiries, or else crossed into Eastern Europe of their own volition to support the prosecution. In October 1964, for instance, the recently established *Bulletin of the Documentation Center of the Association of Jewish Victims of the Nazi Regime* in Vienna informed its readers:

The Documentation Center has sent an employee to Beograd at the invitation of the jugoslavian [sic] Ministry of Defense to look into the archives concerning the tragedy of the Jewish population of Yugoslavia. These documents have been checked for the first time and our operative was specially chosen to seek out documents proving the transport of 7,000 Jews from Skopje to Treblinka. These documents are most important for the trial of ADOLF HEINZ BECKERLE, the former NS ambassador in Bulgaria, who took an active part at the deportation of the Jews from Macedonia.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 619, pp. 37–45.

⁵⁹ Documentation Center of the Association of Jews Persecuted by the Nazi Regime (Dokumentationszentrum des Bundes jüdischer Verfolgter des Naziregimes), *Information Bulletin*, no. 2, October 1964, 4. The author wishes to thank Vanessa Voisin for sharing this document with the author.

Whether undertaken by private individuals or public officials, these transnational travels did not cease on the eve of the trial. In September 1967, the court had authorized the organization of a trip to Israel by members of the Prosecutor's Office in order to collect and record 12 Israeli witness statements.⁶⁰ No less impressive were the travels of the witnesses summoned by the court from Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Greece, Israel, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. Some of them were asked to take part in several German trials concomitantly.⁶¹ On a few occasions, the members of the court additionally agreed to move a session to hear the statements of witnesses, who were unable to come to Frankfurt. On January 9 and 10, 1968, for instance, a court session was held in Bayreuth to allow former *Judenreferat* Franz Rademacher to testify before the court, as he was held in pretrial detention.⁶²

Documents swirled around, as well, leading multiple social lives. We have only to recall the cultural biography of several historical pieces used by the prosecution. During the investigation, *In Memoriam* by the Rabbi of the Thessaloniki Jewish community, Michael Molho, was cited by several protagonists in West Germany, Greece, Israel, and the United States. Arditi's 1952 book appeared at least four times in the exchanges between the FRG, the USA, and Israel, with copies offered to the German team. *Dokumenti* (1945) led a more modest, though ultimately more effective, life, as long segments of the volume were translated into German and quoted in the indictment and in the speeches of the prosecutors. The contribution of Macedonian historian Aleksandar Matkovski (1962), although a relative latecomer to the discussion, flew from Yugoslavia to the US and the FRG, and served to confirm several aspects of the organization of the deportations from Macedonia. The protracted connection between the Germans and the Yugoslavs enabled one additional book shipment, a volume which drew on a selection of documents collected by the Yugoslav Commission on war crimes in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War (1952).⁶³

⁶⁰ In the meantime, five new names were added to the list of witnesses, including that of Józef Kermisz, and the trip had to be postponed to the end of April 1968. HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, p. 141.

⁶¹ On February 12, 1968, the court was informed that only one of the three witnesses from Poland scheduled to appear on that day could stand in the witness booth – Maria Świderska-Świeratowa, a survivor of Auschwitz who had been deported from Salonica – since the two others had already been requested to testify against Heinrich Bernhard Bonitz and Josef Joachim Windeck, two defendants at the third Frankfurt Auschwitz trial. HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, p. 158.

⁶² HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, p. 101.

⁶³ Zdenko Löwenthal, ed., *The Crimes of the Fascist Occupants and Their Collaborators against Jews in Yugoslavia* (Belgrade: Federation of Jewish Communities of the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, 1957) [1st ed. in Serbian, 1952].

Nevertheless, this account of the whirlwind of things and people conveyed by mail, train, or flight would be incomplete, were one to ignore the element of time travel. As was the case in most second wave trials for NS crimes, the German investigators borrowed from previous legal proceedings in the building of their argument: the Nuremberg trial, the Treblinka trial in Düsseldorf, the first and second Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt, the prosecutions of Dieter Wisliceny (1948), Franz Rademacher (1949), and Heinrich Baab (1950), as well as documents pertaining to the 1960 preliminary investigation against Max Merten and Arthur Meissner. In 1967–1968, the polyphonic voices of all these criminal cases entered the Frankfurt courtroom.

Making sense of the Beckerle trial, therefore, necessitates a consideration of the global circulation of incriminating evidence, defendant and witness statements, as well as juridical arguments, whose temporal range exceeds the 1956–1968 time-frame. This, in turn, requires us to recall the evolving map of Europe. Proximities and distances between allies and foes – old and new – underwent significant transformations during this period. Determining what stood for East and West, guilt and innocence, the ability or failure to prosecute war crimes – all this may be trickier than expected.

Two examples of superimposed movements in time (1944–1945 vs. 1968), in space (East vs. West), and in the given roles (defendants vs. witnesses) will illustrate the point. In Frankfurt, one of the major achievements of the German prosecution team was to bring several members of the former German Legation in Sofia to court. Apart from Beckerle, however, they all appeared as witnesses, not as defendants. Most of them had stood trial earlier. However, they had been sentenced by Soviet military courts whose legitimacy was nil in the eyes of Western observers. Former German consul in Sofia, Roland Gottlieb, and former technical assistant to Beckerle, Heinrich Biermann, were among the individuals who had been found guilty in Eastern Europe and stood free and self-confident as they addressed the judges in Frankfurt in 1968.⁶⁴ Even more important to our argument is the case of two Bulgarians, former defendants in Bulgaria (1945), who were summoned as witnesses by the Hessian judges (1968). Elucidating the reshuffling of positions and speeches, their situation opens a window onto how Cold War disputes made their way into the courtroom. Their shifting parts also underscore the fluid definitions of East and West. More broadly, the examination of the collaboration between the West German legal professionals and the Bulgarians will show how difficult it may be to associate one geopolitical bloc with the search for truth and the other with a mere attempt at manipulating history.

⁶⁴ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, pp. 126–133, 209–212.

“Cold War” Disputes in the Courtroom – East, West: Uncertain Boundaries

Once co-nationals, our two characters appeared in West Germany as nationals of two countries diversely situated along the Iron Curtain. Let us trace the non-linear trajectories whereby the West German courtroom was turned into an arena where national and ideological battles were waged, and issues of guilt and innocence became blurred.

In 1945, Slavčo Zagorov and Pejo Draganov Peev stood trial before the Bulgarian People's Courts – exceptional jurisdictions set up in the fall of 1944 to prosecute war crimes *and* purge the former “bourgeois” elite – with Chamber 7 of the People's Courts specifically dedicated to the prosecution of anti-Jewish crimes.⁶⁵ The Germanophile Bulgarian ambassador to the Reich in Berlin from 1942 until the end of the war, Slavčo Zagorov cautiously decided to remain in Germany after the September 9, 1944, regime change. Sentenced to death *in absentia* in Sofia (January 1945),⁶⁶ he would soon embark on a brilliant career path as a professor at Stanford University (1950–1954) and the University of Vienna (after 1955).

A lawyer appointed the mayor of his hometown, Pejo Draganov Peev joined the Bulgarian Commissariat for Jewish Affairs (KEV) – the all-powerful institution in charge of anti-Jewish policies – shortly after its creation in 1942. On February 15, 1943, he was commissioned to Skopje to help prepare the roundups and the internment of Macedonia's Jews, and became commander of the Skopje temporary detention camp (used prior to the deportation of Jews to Poland).⁶⁷ Acquitted by the Bulgarian People's Court in April 1945 (he maintained before the judges that he had submitted his resignation, disagreeing with the policies being implemented in Macedonia), he remained in Bulgaria thereafter.⁶⁸

By the time they came to the German courtroom, Bulgarian-born former diplomat Zagorov had acquired Austrian citizenship, while ex-KEV official Peev was still a Bulgarian national. As one travelled to the court from the West and the other from the East, little remained of their once shared pro-Nazi political beliefs.

65 Nadège Ragaru, “The Prosecution of Anti-Jewish Crimes in Bulgaria: Fashioning a Master Narrative of the Second World War (1944–1945),” *East European Politics and Society* 33, no. 4 (2019): 941–975.

66 Central State Archives of Bulgaria (Centralen dържавен Arhiv, CDA) in Sofia, Fond (F) 1449, inventory (op.) 1, archival unit (ae.) 1, pp. 10–16.

67 CDA, F 1449, op. 1, ae. 193, pp. 111–123, 164, 166–168.

68 CDA, F 1449, op. 1, ae. 179, pp. 17–111; Nadège Ragaru, “Figure de l'accusé en témoin de l'accusation: les circulations internationales des poursuites judiciaires des crimes de la Shoah en Bulgarie,” *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah*, no. 214 (2021): 121–148.

Certainly, both converged on one basis: their insistence on Germany's responsibility in the persecution of Jews in the occupied territories. Beyond this one common feature, they used the witness stand to circulate sharply differing visions of Bulgarian wartime history and, thereby, take part in the historical controversies that divided communists in Bulgaria and Bulgarian anti-communists living in exile. Zagorov's account to the judges is particularly striking:

The members of the cabinet to which I belonged were sentenced to death by a Soviet court and executed after 1944 upon the conclusion of the agreement with the Reich over the passage of German troops (through Bulgaria on their way to Greece and Yugoslavia).⁶⁹ I am the only survivor [. . .].

The law against the Jews was inspired by the Germans against the will of the people and the government.⁷⁰ [. . .]

The king played the leading role in the resistance. [. . .]

Before I took up my duties in Berlin, Boris [the Bulgarian king] gave me important instructions in the farewell party. He was the real leader in foreign policy. The king gave me two arguments.

1. Military reasons:

One cannot hand over soldiers and officers – the Jews were also in the army.⁷¹

2. Political reasons:

The people are one hundred percent against extradition. The 20 Bulgarian divisions must remain operational, which is not guaranteed if the Jews are removed from the army. [. . .]

The new Bulgarian Jews were not as important to us as the Bulgarian Jews, because they were not Bulgarian soldiers. [. . .]⁷²

By the end of Zagorov's testimony, a clear picture of the events had emerged – albeit a quite surprising one, given its loose ties to historical factuality. Zagorov, for instance, credited King Boris III – and himself indirectly – for the non-deportation of the near totality of the Bulgarian Jewish community, an estimated

69 The jurisdiction was Bulgarian, not Soviet. However, the sentencing for chambers 1 and 2 was negotiated between Stalin, Georgi Dimitrov, and the secretary of the Central Committee of the Worker's Party ahead of the hearings.

70 The Law for the Defense of the Nation (ZZN) was not initiated against the will of the government. The text was prepared by the Bulgarian government. It was publicly debated in parliament, adopted by the Bulgarian deputies in December 1940, signed by King Boris III, and enacted on January 23, 1941.

71 The sentence is misleading, to say the least. In January 1941, forced labor was imposed upon the Jews, who were initially conscripted into a specific branch of the army, the *Stroitelni vojski*. In August 1941, Jewish members of the forced labor battalions were transferred to the Ministry of Public Works, forbidden to wear uniforms, and supervised by non-Jewish commanders, with forced labor becoming an explicit part of the persecutions of Jews.

72 HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, pp. 129–133.

48,000 persons.⁷³ Obviously, his appraisal of the monarchy was addressed as much to the West German court as it was to the Bulgarian audience in the courtroom and beyond.

Peev's name as a possible witness for the prosecution had been proposed by the Bulgarian authorities, as their West German colleagues looked for a person who could attest to the involvement of Nazis with the Bulgarian-led camp of Skopje in Macedonia and the transportation of Jews from Skopje to Treblinka. The former camp commander did perform this role: he insisted that "Belev and a German Commissar on Jewish affairs (his name is not known to me) visited the camp and beat the Jews" and that "a German watch commando took over the transport."⁷⁴ As expected, his testimony made no reference to the king as a possible "rescuer of the Bulgarian Jews."

The image of the Frankfurt legal proceedings that gradually crystallizes from a consideration of these testimonies defies simple assessment. Let us sum up our findings up to this point. Prior to the trial, a network of mostly private actors situated at both ends of the Cold War divide used their knowledge and contact networks to aid the prosecution in its investigative work – regardless of their political persuasions. During the court hearings, "East" and "West" donned several faces. Deciphering who was a "fascist" and who was "not" became a challenging endeavor. Yet, the fact that the East-West boundaries should appear as less stable and legible than is commonly assumed does not mean that Cold War infighting was absent from the courtroom. These sites of discord, however, may belie our expectations: contrasting Bulgarian and West German diplomatic agendas did contribute to the shaping of the Beckerle trial. Yet, Bulgaria's decision to collaborate with the West Germans also lifts a veil on an under-estimated facet of the East-West competition, namely the disputes amongst the Bulgarian communists, the Bulgarian anti-communists in exile, and the Bulgarian Jews in Israel. The final sections of this chapter are dedicated precisely to the role of multilayered trans-bloc contentions in the shaping of the Beckerle trial (and that of professional and personal solidarities in bridging divisions).

73 On the conflicting assessments of the fate of the Bulgarian Jews and Jews living in Bulgarian-occupied territories, see Nadège Ragaru, *Bulgaria, the Jews, and the Holocaust: On the Origins of a Heroic Narrative* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2023).

74 HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, pp. 205–212.

German and Bulgarian Responsibilities for Deportation: A Zero-Sum Game

By the terms of logic alone, the Beckerle case was bound to resemble a zero-sum game. There seemed to be an inversely proportional relationship between the responsibility imparted to the Nazis and to the Bulgarians in the deportations of Jews from the Bulgarian-held Yugoslav and Greek territories. During World War II, Bulgaria – captured by Raul Hilberg’s description as that of a “half-ally, half-satellite”⁷⁵ – although a member of the Tripartite Pact, did not declare war on the USSR. In exchange for allowing the Wehrmacht to cross its territory on its way to Greece and Yugoslavia in the spring of 1941, the country was granted custody of most of Vardar Macedonia and the Pirot area of Serbia (in Yugoslavia), as well as Thrace and Eastern Macedonia (in northern Greece). That the incorporation of these territories was not confirmed by any international agreement did not prevent the Bulgarians from exercising civil and military authority over them, dispatching Bulgarian personnel, introducing Bulgarian legislation, and adopting the lev as official currency.

In discussions over the implementation of the “Final Solution,” several lines of communication sprang up, connecting the *Auswärtiges Amt* and the RHSA to the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, the prime minister, and the king. As Minister Plenipotentiary of the Reich in Sofia, Beckerle acted as an intermediary between the Bulgarian and German institutions, forwarding German requests to the Bulgarian authorities and authoring several reports on the progress of the negotiations. As the date for devising concrete plans neared, two other figures took center stage: *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Theodor Dannecker, Eichmann’s special envoy who worked closely with the head of the Bulgarian Commissariat for Jewish Affairs, Aleksandăr Belev, after January 21, 1943; and Adolf Hoffmann, who was appointed police attaché in early March 1943.

To assess Beckerle’s precise extent of guilt, the German judges needed to determine whether the roundups of the Jews had been imposed by an almighty protector upon its weak ally, or whether they had been freely agreed upon between two partners whose leaders converged – at least to a degree – in their under-

⁷⁵ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 2006) [1st ed. 1961]; István Deák uses the notion of “politically independent allies” to depict Finland, Italy, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Croatia, and Bulgaria, “all of which had their own heads of state, ministries, diplomacy, armies, police, and national administrations.” See István Deák, *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution during World War II* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015), 7.

standing of the ultimate goal of anti-Jewish policies. This, in turn, required that the prosecutors and court members evaluate the level of custody the Bulgarians had exercised over the occupied territories. Beckerle himself was keenly aware of this challenge. In his defense, he never failed to remind the audience that “the new territories were fully incorporated” into Bulgaria⁷⁶ and that “the German troops in Bulgaria did not have the strength of a division. They could not exert any pressure on Bulgaria.”⁷⁷ Beckerle also argued that he was innocent, for he had used his connection to the king, in his words “a clever and influential figure,” to bring about the “saving of the Bulgarian Jews.”⁷⁸

The Multiple Logics Underpinning Collaboration and Competition

German legal professionals may not have been fully cognizant of the fact that their dilemmas echoed the key bone of contention in discussions about the past in Bulgaria and Israel,⁷⁹ as well as among Bulgarian anti-communist *exilés*, that is Bulgaria’s wartime policies towards Jews and the role of the king in these policies.⁸⁰ As a fact – alongside several discussions between high-ranking Soviet, Polish, and Bulgarian decision-makers in 1965⁸¹ – this configuration may explain the belated decision (June 1966) of the Bulgarians to reach out to the West German Prosecutor’s Office in Hesse and offer to “pinpoint new pieces of evidence.”⁸² The German prosecutor Richter was as astonished as he was hopeful: a couple of days later, he replied that he needed a certified copy of the Dannecker-Belev agree-

⁷⁶ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, p. 114.

⁷⁷ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, p. 126.

⁷⁸ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 597, p. 139.

⁷⁹ Frederick Chary, “Boris III, Tsar of the Bulgarians,” in *Balkan Strongmen: Dictators and Authoritarian Rulers of Southeast Europe*, ed. Bernd Fischer (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008), 119–139.

⁸⁰ In 1964 former Bulgarian Queen Giovanna, who had sought refuge in Spain, published her memoirs: Ioanna, Queen of Bulgaria, *Memorie* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1964).

⁸¹ In September 1965, exchanges took place between representatives of the Soviet General Procuracy, the Polish Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (GKBZNwP) and the Bulgarian military procuracy, see the Institute of National Memory (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN) in Warsaw file: IPN BU, 3058/84. The author wishes to thank Ania Szczepańska for sharing these documents with them, as well as Paul Gradwohl and Piotr Malachiński for their insights on these files.

⁸² HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 612, p. 12.

ment concerning the deportation of 20,000 Jews from the occupied territories, witnesses who could authenticate the document⁸³ and the originals of several archival records cited in the indictment – including the February 4, 1943, report by Commissioner for Jewish Affairs Belev, where Beckerle's name was explicitly cited. Additionally, the German judiciary hoped to benefit from Bulgaria's assistance in locating Jewish survivors.⁸⁴

The complex trail of events that followed these initial contacts reveals the many contradictory threads woven together in the fabric of the Cold War. One episode will illustrate this point: the journey of West and East German jurists to Bulgaria in June 1968.⁸⁵ The expedition aimed to collect witness testimonies; obtain incriminating material from the Bulgarian archives; and, upon a request by the Bulgarians, find a historian to ensure that their definition of judicial *and* historical truth would be heard in the Hessian court.⁸⁶ What we know from the trip of justice officials Richter, Bauer, and Koch; defense counsels of the accused, Geis and Schallast; and East German assistant to Friedrich-Karl Kaul (an East German lawyer who had made a name for himself during the Auschwitz trial and represented the interests of a Holocaust survivor from Greece in a civil claim) Joachim Noack to Bulgaria between June 20 and June 26, 1968, comes from a report co-authored by West German justice professionals in January 1969 to prove the points scored by the FRG in its relation to the East Germans on that occasion.

An examination of this report actually reveals the intertwining between attempts at turning the trial into a political stage, the building of interpersonal trust, efforts to negotiate reciprocal benefits, and close surveillance by the intelligence apparatus. Moreover, in this triangular game, that East-East solidarities should prevail could not be taken for granted. For their German guests, the Bulgarian hosts organized high-ranking meetings – the president of the Sofia district court, the chief of the Sofia Prosecutor's Office, and the president of the Special Court on legal assistance – suggesting the significance they attached to a visit that may have been seen as a first step towards formalizing bilateral judicial collaboration between the two states. There was, however, no mutual legal assistance agreement between Bulgaria and the FRG, on the one hand, and the FRG and the GDR, on the other. Therefore, all protagonists had to deploy extraordinary skills in meeting the demands of the Eastern and Western judicial players. With great

⁸³ The certified copy was indeed delivered. However, the Sofia *Prokuratura* did not provide the original document to the Germans, despite the latter's repeated requests: HStAD, Ab. 631a, p. 612.

⁸⁴ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 612, p. 1129, 1130.

⁸⁵ For a different take on this trip, see Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern*, 280–283.

⁸⁶ HStAD, Ab. 631a, B. 619, p. 37–45.

creativity, in several dinners and sidelong discussions, solutions were actually found to most of the Cold War conundrums.

Nevertheless, the East-West binary was not the only game in town. For the West German prosecutors, the Bulgarian judicial professionals and the Jewish communal leaders all hoped that Beckerle and von Hahn would be sentenced – a position that the West German defense attorneys obviously did not share. To some extent, professional solidarities as well as personal affinities offset ideological differences. Additionally, the good relationship between prosecutor Wentzke and the Bulgarian journalist who had mediated bilateral contacts, Isidor Solomonov, facilitated the handling of political discords. One might have expected the Bulgarians and the East German representative to display a sense of proximity based on their shared belonging to the Eastern bloc. This proximity failed to materialize. Ultimately, as the foreign guests were invited to visit the renowned historical site of the Rila monastery, the presence in the Bulgarian car of an unnamed journalist, perhaps an agent of the communist State Security, went nearly unnoticed . . .

Conclusion

The outcome of the proceedings was a disappointment to all those Bulgarians who had pleaded for a collaboration with the West Germans. For medical reasons, A.-H. Beckerle's trial was suspended, never to be restarted; the former diplomat would die in his bed in 1976.

This chapter chose to adopt an extremely narrow focus – that of the prosecution of two defendants in the state of Hesse in the 1960s – in order to cast a prism on wider social and political processes of Holocaust remembrance during the Cold War, and on the production and migration of knowledge about the destruction of European Jews. Considering the events from an observation post based in Frankfurt has allowed us to embrace a vast range of transnational connections that exceeded the scope of the competition between the Federal Republic and the Democratic Republic by far, suggesting the existence of sometimes porous boundaries between state and non-state actors.

Rather than a linear account of multiple actors converging around the need for former high-ranking Nazi officials to receive punishment, the trial had emerged as the endpoint of competing logics of involvement and interests. The courtroom has thus offered an angle onto Cold War-era remembrance of the Holocaust that neither precludes nor eschews conflict, but brings into relief the social logics through which the many confrontations were mediated and played out. Some divisions were professionally defined and were exacerbated by poor interpersonal re-

lationships; others extended intra-Bulgarian political contention; still others related to the broader framework of the Cold War, implicating the United States, Israel, the USSR, Poland, and Yugoslavia to varying extents. It is this palimpsest-like configuration that gave the Beckerle-von Hahn trial its unique form and incorporated multiple temporalities (including the events themselves, their successive legal examinations, and the waves of testimonial recollections) into a handful of months in the tribunal.

In the final balance, one cannot but wonder at the unrelenting commitment, the thorough patience, and the tenacious attention of these networks of individuals who, regardless of their differing personal backgrounds, wartime experiences, and political beliefs, worked towards compiling documentary evidence and bringing the perpetrators to justice. These polyphonic claims for legal redress form an intrinsic part of the story of the Cold War – an era when there were those, in East and West, who shared a vision of human agency as at once humble and promethean.

