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Fighting Nazis and Confronting the Past: The German Democratic Republic and the National Committee against Nazis in the United States

The end of the Second World War and the division of Germany between the victorious allies brought back to their homeland Germans who had left the Third Reich. The German Democratic Republic (GDR), which was created in 1949 in the Soviet occupation zone, was founded by a group of German Communists, who had spent the war years fighting the National Socialist dictatorship, many of whom were persecuted because of their Jewish descent.¹ Some were liberated from concentration camps, others returned from exile in South or North America, Palestine, East Asia, and the Soviet Union. These people, who came to form the future East German leadership, wanted to create a new society and to establish a new German state that would be constructed on the principles of Marxism-Leninism, peace-seeking, and anti-fascism. The German Democratic Republic formulated a unique understanding of the historical development of the German Nation. By doing so, the new state rejected the National Socialist past and fashioned itself as the political ideological opposite of both the Third Reich and of the Federal Republic in the West. The postwar social, historical, and political conditions forced the Federal Republic and the GDR to confront German guilt and responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism and to face the moral outcomes of the Holocaust. With the destruction of Jewish communities across Europe in the Holocaust, the end of the war, and the establishment of the two German states, a new era in German-Jewish relations had begun that was overshadowed by the horrors of the past.

“Coming to terms with the past” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) is a key concept in German postwar historiography. The eminence of this term in scholarship has long pervaded debates on German national identity.² In contemporary Germany, the term is associated mostly with commitment to the welfare of Holocaust survivors and the State of Israel. The rise of far-right political parties and movements,

1 For a historical and biographical overview of leading German-Jewish communists in GDR politics, see: Karin Hartewig, *Zurückgekehrt. Die Geschichte der jüdischen Kommunisten in der DDR* (Köln: Böhlau, 2000).

2 Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).

and the increasing number of antisemitic attacks in Germany, especially following the Hamas Attack on Israel in October 2023 and the war in Gaza have led to an ongoing reexamination of the German culture of “coming to terms with the past.” Most of the attention has been given to disturbing tendencies in eastern German states that were once part of the former GDR before German unification, where the popularity of the Eurosceptic and radical AfD (Alternative to Germany) political party is much higher than in western parts of the Federal Republic, as seen in the elections for the European Parliament in June 2024.³ More than three decades since German reunification, scholars from a wide range of disciplines have provided distinct interpretations of the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, relying on different methodologies as well as focusing on various aspects such as legal processes against Nazis, reparation for the victims of Nazism, or memory cultures. Notwithstanding their contributions to historical research, I find that the dominant discourse builds mostly on West German experiences.⁴

This paper concentrates on one aspect of what I identify as a key element of coming to terms with the National Socialist past in the GDR, namely the political preoccupation of East Germany with the Holocaust in its fight against Nazi criminals. At the peak of an international campaign waged by the GDR government against Nazi culprits during the 1960s, East German officials contacted Jewish public figures, organizations, and political movements in Israel, the United States, Western Europe, and Eastern Europe. The article focuses on the contacts that were created between GDR officials and the National Committee against Nazis in the USA based in Chicago and with its leader, Rabbi Samuel Burr Yampol. This is only one example of such contacts that demonstrates, first, the East German dip-

3 For the results of the 2024 elections for the European Parliament in Germany by federal states, see: Europawahlergebnisse 2024 in Deutschland, Verbindungsbüro, Europäisches Parlament, published June 13, 2024 <https://berlin.europarl.europa.eu/home/pagecontent/grid/main/aktuelles/europawahlergebnisse-2024-in-deutschland.html>, accessed June 30, 2024.

4 Two prominent examples that cover different definitions, aspects, and manifestations of “coming to terms with the past” in Germany are: Thorsten Eitz and Stötzel Georg, *Wörterbuch der “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”. Die NS-Vergangenheit im öffentlichen Sprachgebrauch* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2007); Torben Fischer and Matthias N. Lorenz, eds., *Lexikon der “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” in Deutschland. Debatten- und Diskursgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus nach 1945* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015). See also: Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (München: Beck, 1996); Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Legenden, Lügen, Vorurteile: Ein Wörterbuch zur Zeitgeschichte* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1992), 197. Christa Hoffmann defines three central dimensions of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: juridical, political, and historical, see Hoffmann, *Stunden Null? Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland 1945 und 1989* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1992), 26.

lomatic efforts in non-socialist states; second, the GDR's concern for its self-image as a fighter against Nazis among Jewish audiences; and third, the East German interest in opening a new page in German-Jewish relations.

This research challenges the idea that by hiding behind its anti-fascist rhetoric the GDR failed to confront the National Socialist past. The encounters with Jewish communities forced the GDR to face its national responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich and to develop a different kind of German-Jewish relationship from that in the Federal Republic. The GDR strove to find common ideological ground for political cooperation with the victims of the Holocaust, and at the same time tried to find diplomatic ways to evade its hostility towards the State of Israel. This article claims that in order to settle the inherited paradox in its version of coming to terms with the past, the GDR applied anti-fascist rhetoric and chose a Marxist-Leninist line of ideological argumentation when turning to Jewish audiences. This distinct form of addressing the Nazi past characterized the GDR politics from the very beginning: neglecting and officially ignoring it, on the one hand, and constantly dealing with it, on the other one. I do not deny the fact that unique experiences in the two German states concerning the indoctrination of the Nazi past resulted in distinctive political trends in different parts of unified Germany. One of my purposes in this paper, however, is to provide historical evidence for the East German variety of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which questions the common assumption among scholars regarding the absence of a coming to terms with the past in the German Democratic Republic.

The significant challenges encountered by both the Federal Republic and the GDR in dealing with the National Socialist past are reflected in their varying approaches towards the State of Israel. The Federal Republic signed a reparations agreement (*Wiedergutmachungsabkommen*) for Holocaust survivors in 1952,⁵ and established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1965. Parallel negotiations between the GDR and Israel concerning the *Wiedergutmachungsabkommen* failed. At the time, the GDR government claimed that it had paid its debts to the countries that were affected by the German occupation, as stated in the Potsdam Agreement of 1945. The agreement was signed between the victorious allies of the Second World War and determined the reparations to be paid from Germany to countries that were attacked by Nazi Germany – first and foremost the Soviet Union. The GDR had argued, furthermore, that Israel was not one of the countries entitled to receive compensations, as it had not yet been founded during the war. After subsequent geopolitical developments in the Middle East, specifically following the

5 See: Peter Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland. Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur in Politik und Justiz* (Munich: Beck 2007).

Six-Day War of 1967, the GDR adopted a more radical approach toward Israel, one that was directed and dictated by the Soviet Union as part of its Cold War politics. The GDR supported the Palestinian cause in the Arab-Israeli conflict, a fact that did not make it easy for Israel to find common ground with East Germany. This explains the premise among scholars who argue that the GDR's antagonism towards Israel was driven purely by deep rooted institutional antisemitism. For example, historians Michael Wolffsohn and Jeffrey Herf focus on the anti-Zionist character of the GDR's foreign policy and examine the influence of Cold War politics on its position towards Israel. Both reject any other consideration behind the GDR's anti-Israeli position and interpret every critique of Israel by the GDR as fundamentally antisemitic. Wolffsohn borrows the term "useful idiots" in reference to the Jewish East German politicians and public figures, who let themselves be exploited by the GDR government to justify its antisemitic acts.⁶ Similarly, Herf dedicates one of his recent works to the role of the Arab-Israel wars in sharpening the antisemitic tone of the GDR's international politics.⁷

An alternative historical explanation of historian Angelika Timm provides a more nuanced view on GDR-Israeli relations and justifies the politics of the GDR towards Israel and the Jews as an implementation of anti-fascist ideology. Considering the difficulties, differences, and political tensions between the two states, Timm defines GDR-Israel relations as *Nichtbeziehung* (non-relations).⁸ Indeed, a closer look into the politics of the GDR and GDR-Jewish relations, which were entangled with GDR-Israel relations, reveals a complex set of behaviors that highlight different political considerations taken by the GDR leadership. On the one hand, the GDR refused to develop diplomatic relations with the State of Israel, on the other hand, it encouraged its official delegates to approach Israelis and Jewish communities around the world. Given these "non-relations" with Israel, the establishment of contacts with Jewish individuals and organizations enabled an immediate discussion with representatives of the Jewish (and Israeli) people without having to establish a direct dialogue with the Israeli government. I see this strategy as a way for the GDR to justify its label as an anti-fascist state, express sympathy to the Jewish victims of the Nazis, attack the West, and remain loyal to the politics of the Soviet Union. The following examination of the relations between

6 Michael Wolffsohn, *Die Deutschland-Akte: Juden und Deutschen in Ost und West: Tatsachen und Legenden* (Munich: Ed. Ferenczy bei Bruckmann, 1995): 14.

7 Jeffrey Herf, *Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West German Far Left, 1967–1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

8 Angelika Timm, *Hammer, Zirkel, Davidstern. Das gestörte Verhältnis der DDR zu Zionismus und Staat Israel* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1997), 19; Angelika Timm, "The Burdened Relationship between the GDR and the State of Israel," *Israel Studies* 2, no. 1 (1997): 44.

the GDR and the National Committee against Nazis in the USA touches on topics such as continuity and discontinuity, guilt and responsibility, as well as antisemitism in East German foreign policy and the relations between the GDR, Jews, and Israel. My purpose is to offer both a new understanding of East German political behavior and a new historical perspective on the development of German-Jewish relations after the Second World War.

Hand in Hand: Diplomacy and Propaganda

East German diplomatic activities were utilized in the GDR's contest with the Federal Republic for international political acceptance. Both states saw themselves as representatives of the German people and had to find allies in different parts of the world in order to justify their eligibility. The investment in efforts to establish diplomatic relations with members of the Soviet Bloc, the Arab World, Africa, and communist countries in East Asia did not prevent endeavors to negotiate with potential partners in the West. The GDR government used the anti-fascist background of leading East German politicians and their experience prior to 1945 in order to distinguish itself from the Federal Republic. Here the GDR detected a vulnerable point of West Germany: many former employees in the juridical and political systems, diplomacy and military of the Third Reich, returned to their old positions after 1945 and developed successful careers in the Federal Republic.⁹ Therefore, in order to reveal "the true face" of the liberal democratic Federal Republic, the GDR launched an international campaign against West Germany. Nevertheless, alongside this campaign, the GDR leadership also had to acknowledge the need to integrate former members of the Nazi party into East German society.¹⁰ One solution was the establishment of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD), which served as the political home of former members of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) and officers of the Wehrmacht. As recent research has shown, em-

⁹ Regarding former Nazis in the West German public sector, see Norbert Frei, ed., *Hitlers Eliten nach 1945* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003).

¹⁰ A prominent example of the early response to the "Nazi problem" in the Soviet occupation zone is a statement of future president of the GDR, Wilhelm Pieck, given in an interview with the official newspaper of the German Communist Party, *Deutsche Volkszeitung*, in 1946: "[they] need to be provided with the opportunity to engage in the anti-fascist democratic struggle, and thus to free themselves from the shame of having been a members of the Nazi party and to regain trust among the anti-fascists," see "Die nichtaktiven Nazis," *Deutsche Volkszeitung*, February 6, 1946.

bracing former Nazis who accepted the new anti-fascist worldview allowed people with a Nazi background to develop a political career in the GDR.¹¹

Diplomatic activities at state and non-state levels played an essential role in East German international propaganda efforts, and vice versa. An inherent part of these efforts was the image-building of East Germany as the better and sole representative of the German people. The GDR labeled itself as an anti-fascist state and identified West German politics as reflective of the same values of the recent past: fascism, militarism, and antisemitism. East German leadership assumed the role of chief prosecutor of the Federal Republic and, beginning in the late 1940s throughout the 1960s, ran a campaign against the integration of former Nazis in West German public life. The 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and other legal proceedings against Nazis represented the significance of the moral and juridical accounting for Nazi crimes, as well as the international interest and involvement in the hunt for Nazis at the time. The GDR used the global attention these trials received and became one of the leading actors behind the international campaign against National Socialists. During this time and as part of its international campaign against Nazis in West Germany, the GDR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, apart from its official diplomacy, began maintaining semi-diplomatic contacts with Jewish organizations, which were themselves dedicated to uncovering and hunting former Nazis and war criminals.¹² The Ministry promoted the establishment of contacts and relationships with anti-fascist Jewish organizations in the United States, Israel, and other West European countries, which became a unique target audience for its propaganda and political activities. Official organizations, such as the Committee for the German Unification (*Ausschuss für deutsche Einheit*), or the *National front*, which was an alliance of different political parties, published dozens of books and pamphlets listing Nazis and war criminals that were still politically and socially active in the Federal Republic.¹³ These publications basically demonstrated and proved the failure of the Federal Republic in carrying out the denazification process,

11 For an overview of recent research on the West and East German ministries and authorities and their confrontation with the National Socialist past, see Frank Bösch, Martin Sabrow, and Andreas Wirsching, eds., *Die zentralen deutschen Behörden und der Nationalsozialismus. Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung* (Munich-Berlin: Institut für Zeitgeschichte; Potsdam: Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, 2016).

12 See Philip Alexander Matthes, "David und Goliath. Der Anerkennungslobbyismus der DDR in den USA von 1964 bis 1974," in *Umworbener Klassenfeind: Das Verhältnis der DDR zu den USA*, ed. Uta A. Balbier (Berlin: Links, 2006), 47.

13 For some examples, see: Otto Bräutigam, ed., *Aus dem Tagebuch eines Judenmörders. Weitere Dokumente über die Durchsetzung des Bonner Staatsapparates mit Verbrechern gegen die Menschlichkeit* ([East] Berlin: Ausschuss für deutsche Einheit, 1956); *Das Terrorgesicht des Bonner Unrechtsstaates. Weitere 44 Bonner Richter als Nazihenker entlarvt* (Berlin: Ausschuss für deutsche

which was determined and executed by the allies immediately after the war. The most prominent publication was the *Braunbuch* (Brown Book), first published in 1965 after years of preparation,¹⁴ which then became one of the main components of East German propaganda abroad. In order to reach as wide a readership as possible, the *Braunbuch* was distributed in different languages, including English, French, and Spanish. It won world-wide attention, placing the GDR at the front of the fight against Nazis who had escaped punishment in the Federal Republic. East German diplomats across the globe played a significant role in distributing the *Braunbuch* in their host countries.¹⁵ The Peace Commission (*Friedensrat*), an East German public organization promoting world peace and co-existence, was responsible for creating mailing lists of persons and organizations to which the *Braunbuch* should be sent. These lists show the attention that Jewish organizations in Western countries had received: the *Friedensrat* reached out to such organizations as the French Movement against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples (*Mouvement contre le Racisme et pour l'Amitié entre les Peuples*, MRAP), the Italian-Jewish journal *Ebrei d'Europa*, the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs (ELF), and the American Association for Jewish Education and the National Committee of the Defenders of Peace in Israel. It also contacted scholars such as German-born sociologist Amitai Etzioni, then at Stanford University, and Jewish community leaders such as Jacob Majus from the National Committee of the Defenders of Peace in Israel and Chicago native Rabbi Samuel Burr Yampol, head of the National Committee to Combat Nazism.¹⁶

The GDR and the National Committee against Nazism

The leadership of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the ruling party in the GDR, saw the American Jewish community as a political group and as a political instrument

Einheit, 1957); . . . wieder am Hebel der Macht. Militaristen, Revanchisten, führende Nazis beherrschen den Bonner Staat (Berlin: Ausschuss für deutsche Einheit, 1960).

14 See: *Braunbuch: Kriegs- und Naziverbrecher in der Bundesrepublik. Staat, Wirtschaft, Armee, Verwaltung, Justiz, Wissenschaft* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1965).

15 Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office (Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amt, PA AA), M C1573/76, "Arbeit mit dem Braunbuch," October 28, 1965.

16 German Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv, BArch), DZ 9/2295, "Braunbuch – Versand," 1965–1966.

with which it could influence the US government.¹⁷ The relationships developed with American-Jewish communities were therefore intended not only to legitimize the GDR diplomatically, but also to bolster the narrative among the American general public and its political elites of East Germany as a moral anti-fascist state.¹⁸ Without ignoring the antisemitic subtext of the perception of American Jews as a mere political lobby that could be exploited by the GDR, I argue that the East German approach went beyond such pragmatic considerations. While East German politicians and diplomats (some of whom were of Jewish descent) primarily engaged in this relationship because of their need for international political recognition, other reasons played a role as well, in particular a sincere commitment to combatting fascism and to uncovering unpunished Nazi criminals. I would also suggest that this commitment served as an important component of the East German version of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, namely joining hands with Jewish communities around the world for the higher cause of fighting Nazism.

My research shows that one of the central figures in this fight in the United States during the 1950s and the 1960s was Rabbi Menachem Burr Yampol, head of the Chicago-based National Committee against Nazis in the USA. Yampol was born in 1899 in Berdiansk, Tsarist Russia, and moved to the United States in 1917. He served as rabbi in different congregations in California, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania.¹⁹ Around 1940 he moved to Chicago, where he worked for the Hebrew Theological College and became a leading figure in the local Jewish community.²⁰ Yampol's political positioning and mission for civil engagement led to a years-long relationship between his National Committee and the GDR. For almost a decade, GDR officials were in personal contact with Yampol and supported his organization.

Different historical sources reveal fascinating sides of Yampol's political engagements. In an article collection on the political and social position of the American-Jewish press, the American-Jewish communist activist and publisher of the communist *Morgn Frayhayt*, Paul Novick, defined Yampol as "an important figure

¹⁷ The political power of Jewish communities in the United States allowed the GDR to use antisemitic prejudices, for example, when referring to "American capital," see Philip Alexander Matthes, *Puppet Regime vs. Lead Nation, Der lange Weg zur Anerkennung der DDR durch die USA* (Bonn: Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn, 2010), 155.

¹⁸ Matthes, *Puppet Regime*, 153.

¹⁹ See John Simons, ed., *Who's Who in American Jewry*, vol. 3 (1938–1939) (New York: National News Association, 1938), 1161.

²⁰ Yampol's short biography was published in an article of the newspaper of the Chicago Jewish community, see: "Telshe-Chicago Branch to Honor Rabbi S. Burr Yampol Dec. 15," *The Sentinel*, December 5, 1986, p. 29.

in the Zionist movement and among the rabbis of Chicago.”²¹ In her monograph on Americans who fought against the presence of former Nazis in the United States, the American writer and scholar Rochelle G. Saidel quotes the known Nazi hunter and journalist, Charles R. Allen, Jr. who worked closely with Yampol in the National Committee: “He [Yampol] devoted the balance of his life to seeking justice for Nazi war criminals in the United States.”²² Saidel continues by citing Allen’s comment on the political views of Yampol and other members of the National Committee, some of whom were communists “but not everyone – for example, Yampol and myself.”²³ Yampol’s political activities were also documented by different branches of the American government and administration, for instance, as an exhibit in a report titled “Communist Political Subversion” of the Committee on Un-American Activities of the House of Representatives.²⁴ An FBI report from 1969 titled “Characterization of Subversive, Racial, Klan, White Hate, and Militant Black Organizations. Internal Security – Communist” mentions the National Committee as one of these “tagged” organizations. According to the relevant sections on the National Committee, ran the report, “Rabbi Yampol is anticommunist but would accept aid from communists if it would serve his purpose.”²⁵

Yampol’s National Committee against Nazis in the USA was rebranded several times. Originally it was founded for a more specific reason and was initially called the Anti-Heusinger Committee. At the time, it aimed at preventing the nomination of Adolf Heusinger, a former lieutenant of the Wehrmacht and later a general of the West German army, as Chairman of the NATO Military Committee.²⁶ The work of the Anti-Heusinger Committee, such as the organization of public rallies and memorial events for the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, was described in a report by USA/

²¹ Paul Novick, *Jews in the U.S.A. and the Role of the Jewish Press* (New York: Morning Freiheit, 1962), 29.

²² Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Outraged Conscience: Seekers of Justice for Nazi War Criminals in America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 63.

²³ Saidel, *The Outraged Conscience*, 63.

²⁴ *Communist Political Subversion: The Campaign to Destroy the Security Programs of the United States Government* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1957).

²⁵ Department of Justice, “Characterization of Subversive, Racial, Klan, White Hate, and Militant Black Organizations. Internal Security – Communist,” September 19, 1969, Ernie Lazar FOIA Collection, FOIA: SAC Letter 69 50 re Characterizations of Subversive Orgs, https://archive.org/details/foia_SAC_Letter_69-50_re_Characterizations_of_Subversive_Orgs, accessed September 9, 2022.

²⁶ For the activities of the Anti-Heusinger Committee, see reports from the “Inside the Jewish Community” section of the journal *Jewish Currents*: “Chicago Anti-Heusinger Comm.,” *Jewish Currents* 15, no. 6 (1961): 36; “Voices Rise Against Heusinger,” *Jewish Currents* 15, no. 7 (1961): 33; “Call for Heusinger’s Removal,” *Jewish Currents* 15, no. 11 (1961): 24.

Canada Department of the East German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁷ In this report, Yampol is quoted comparing Heusinger to Adolf Eichmann by saying: “In Israel, Eichmann, who has not committed less crimes against humanity than Heusinger, was found guilty, and here in my land this murderer gets [. . .] a high position in NATO.”²⁸ In the early 1960s, the Soviet Union and its allies tried to stop Heusinger’s nomination, accusing him of committing war crimes during the Second World War. Yampol soon expanded this personal campaign against Heusinger into a more general fight against war criminals and former Nazis living in the United States, as well as against the Statute of Limitations for Nazi war crimes in the Federal Republic, which threatened to leave many Nazi criminals unpunished.²⁹ As we will see later, his public work helped Yampol to establish a name for himself as a dominant figure in Chicago’s Jewish community and anti-Nazi circles in the United States. In one of its pamphlets, presumably from the mid-1960s, members are described as “Americans of various backgrounds, traditions and experiences, representing various national groups. We have formed a National Committee against Nazi War Criminals and Nazism in America.”³⁰ The committee’s chief aim was “to work with any and all individuals and groups to bring about the extradition of these criminals so they stand trial in those countries where their crimes were committed.”³¹ The strategy planned for carrying out and achieving its goals was to “give names, places of residence and expose the nature of their crimes. In this way, we hope to arouse the conscience of the American people in all walks of life. We hope that the recipients of this message will bring information to the attention of their neighbors, labor

27 PA AA, M C1571/70, “Information,” April 19, 1962.

28 PA AA, M C1571/70, “Information,” April 19, 1962.

29 For the juridical and social aspects of the Statute of Limitations in the Federal Republic, see: Martin Clausnitzer, “The Statute of Limitations for Murder in the Federal Republic of Germany,” *The International Comparative Law Quarterly* 29, no. 2/3 (1980): 473–479; Robert A. Monson, “The West German Statute of Limitations on Murder: A Political, Legal, and Historical Exposition,” *American Journal of Comparative Law* 30, no. 3 (1982): 605–626; Caroline Sharples, “In Pursuit of Justice: Debating the Statute of Limitations for Nazi War Crimes in Britain and West Germany during the 1960s,” *Holocaust Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014): 81–108; *Zur Verjährung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen. Dokumentation der parlamentarischen Bewältigung des Problems* (Bonn: Deutscher Bundestag, 1980); Andreas Eichmüller, “Die Strafverfolgung von NS-Verbrechen durch westdeutsche Justizbehörden seit 1945. Eine Zahlenbilanz,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 4 (2008): 621–640.

30 *Nazi War Criminals Exposed*, issued by the National Committee against Nazi Criminals and Nazism, no date. The document is available on the website of the CIA’s library, document no. 519b7f9c993294098d5137b2, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/519b7f9c993294098d5137b2>, accessed September 30, 2022.

31 *Nazi War Criminals Exposed*.

unions, fraternal societies, churches and synagogues and particularly to the attention of senators and congressmen.”³²

The correspondence between the GDR and Yampol underlines how important these contacts were for the East Germans in gaining credibility in the United States. The GDR's contacts with Yampol and the National Committee began as early as the beginning of the 1960s. It was Yampol's request from late 1962 to receive archival documents on former Nazi criminals that opened a yearlong relationship between his committee and the GDR's *Friedensrat*.³³ In the following months and years, members of the *Friedensrat* supported Yampol's committee and initiated the delivery of historical documents, which were supposed to help with his investigations of Nazis, who then lived in the United States. Formally, the *Friedensrat* was not a governmental organization of the GDR. However, even though it was supposed to work independently of the government, the archival documentation shows that these close and personal relationships with Yampol were directed, monitored, and oriented by the heads of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Reports written by different departments of the foreign ministry describe the suggested strategies towards Yampol. They expose, on the one hand, the immediate political interests of East Germany and the political benefits of the GDR in its cooperation with Yampol, on the other. The GDR was eager to help Yampol achieve his own important mission, which was first and foremost “the cleansing of the American soil from Nazi murderers.”³⁴ A letter written by the USA/Canada Department of the foreign ministry to the International Relations Department of the Central Committee of the SED (*Zentralkomitee der SED*) provides evidence of these political interests behind building cooperation with Yampol and his committee. In order to “inform the members and supporters of the committee about the GDR and its politics,” Mr. Urban of the foreign ministry asks for “short biographies of leading officers and generals in our *Volksarmee* [People's Army] (especially with details about their anti-fascist resistance activities), as well as statistics (especially in comparison to West Germany) about the democratic and anti-fascist character of the officer cadre of the *Volksarmee*; and also facts about the social background (professional development) would be an asset.”³⁵ The department saw emphasizing the anti-fascist credentials of leading East German army officers in comparison to their West German colleagues as essential to gaining trust among Yampol and the co-founders of the National Committee. These kinds of

³² *Nazi War Criminals Exposed*.

³³ See PA AA, M C1571/70, Letter from Yampol to Leo Regener, October 3, 1962.

³⁴ PA AA, M C1571/70, “Information,” April 19, 1962.

³⁵ PA AA, M C1571/70, Letter of the Fifth Non-European Department of the foreign ministry to the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Central Committee, April 1, 1962.

professional discussions about Yampol and his committee, as well as subsequent actions on the part of the ministry and the *Friedensrat* towards them, reveal the pragmatism behind the GDR's official façade surrounding the fighters against fascism and Nazism.

As an organization that aimed to change both the local and overseas (specifically West German) policies against former Nazis, the National Committee intended to extend its activities beyond local Jewish circles and turn to general American audiences. This way, Yampol and his team believed, they could influence members of Congress, who could, in turn, force the Federal Republic to change the Statute of Limitations on murder. The East German foreign ministry perceived this as an opportunity to push and distribute the GDR's political program in its talks with the committee. Correspondence of the USA/Canada Department of the foreign ministry from early 1963 regarding contacts with Jewish organizations in the United States highlights the importance of future contacts with Yampol. The department saw in these contacts an opportunity for "stressing the different character of the two German states,"³⁶ meaning showing the East German commitment to the fight against Nazis, whereas in the Federal Republic former Nazis held public positions. Practically, the foreign ministry determined that the *Friedensrat* and its members "should express their sympathy towards the actions of the committee [. . .] by offering relevant historical material."³⁷

Building mutual trust between Rabbi Yampol and the East Germans started to bear fruit. The two sides continued negotiating and exchanging important material. Yampol arranged lists of organizations and individuals that could find interest in GDR publications (such as the *Braunbuch*), while the GDR provided further documented information about Nazi criminals. To show his respect and gratitude, Yampol visited the GDR twice: in 1964 as an official guest of the GDR government on the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary for the GDR's establishment and in 1966 during his trip to different European countries. His 1964 visit was organized by the *Friedensrat* and coordinated with the East German Jewish community. His visit included a meeting with the Jewish community in East Berlin and with Chief Rabbi Martin Riesenburger, a tour of the Jewish cemetery in Berlin-Mitte to see the gravestone of Moses Mendelssohn, and a Shabbat prayer at the synagogue. In Potsdam, he visited Cecilienhof Palace, where the Potsdam Agreement was signed. Before his departure to Warsaw, Yampol traveled to the former Sachsenhausen concentration

³⁶ PA AA, M C1571/70, "Information über Kontakte zu jüdischen Kreisen in den USA," January 16, 1963.

³⁷ PA AA, M C1571/70, "Informationsblatt der 5. Außereuropäische Abteilung," November 27, 1962.

camp.³⁸ A similar cultural program was presented for his visit in 1966, including a conversation with Helmut Aris, the president of the Jewish communities in the GDR, and with deputy foreign minister Georg Stibi.³⁹ The purpose of these visits was clear: to receive relevant information for the National Committee on Nazis in the Federal Republic. The foreign ministry planned his visit by considering Yampol's major task: "to bring to justice Nazi and war criminals, especially those who committed crimes against the Jewish people."⁴⁰ Moreover, East German diplomats knew about Yampol's "connections" and wanted to make sure that these "are to be used in order to make public the information about [West Germany's Federal President Heinrich] Lübke⁴¹ as a Nazi war criminal, among Jews in the US."⁴² The USA/Canada Department of the East German Ministry of Foreign Affairs prepared topics for discussion with Yampol prior to his visit. For instance: his hosts could ask him about his impressions of his trip to the GDR; they could stress the impact of Nazi and war criminals in different parts of public life in the Federal Republic; and could highlight West German support in the Vietnam War.⁴³ A later report of the foreign ministry shows that the meetings with Yampol were relatively successful and that he and delegates of the *Friedensrat* talked about strengthening the work with "influential persons" and agreed on continuing the exchange of information.⁴⁴

For Yampol, these visits were important first of all because they allowed him to pursue his search for incriminating material on Nazis who resided in the United States. Visiting the GDR was also an emotional experience for him, as he had the chance to explore Jewish life in East Germany in person and to learn about the social and economic situation of German Jews living in the GDR. In a letter to Kurt Hälker from the *Friedensrat*, Yampol writes:

38 PA AA, M C1571/70, Programm für den Aufenthalt von Rabbi S. Burr Yampol, Vorsitzender des Komitees gegen Nazi-Verbrecher und Nazismus in America, zum 15. Jahrestag der Republik vom 2. bis 9. Oktober 1964, n.d.

39 PA AA, M C1571/70, Programm für den Aufenthalt Rabbiner Yampols, USA, in der Zeit vom 15. bis etwa 23. Juni 1966, n.d.

40 PA AA, M C1571/70.

41 Heinrich Lübke was a West German Christian Democrat politician. In 1959, he was elected President of the Federal Republic of Germany. The GDR accused Lübke of being a war criminal, see: *Aufstieg und Fall des Heinrich Lübke. Die Geschichte einer Karriere* (Berlin: Nationale Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, 1969).

42 PA AA, M C1571/70, Programm für den Aufenthalt Rabbiner Yampols, USA, in der Zeit vom 15. bis etwa 23. Juni 1966, n.d.

43 PA AA, M C1571/70, Information in Vorbereitung eines Gesprächs mit Rabbiner Burr S. Yampol (USA) am Donnerstag, dem 23. Juni 1966 um 11.30 Uhr, June 22, 1966.

44 PA AA, M C1571/70, Bericht über den Besuch Rabbi S. Burr Yampol vom 21. bis 23. Juni 1966, n.d.

James Boswell wrote once: 'We cannot tell the precise moment when friendship is formed. As in filling a vessel drop by drop, there is at last a drop which makes it run over. So in a series of acts of kindness there is, at last, one which makes the heart run over.'⁴⁵ The friendship of your *Friedensrat* in general, and especially yours and Renate's [Kurt Hälker's wife], was so great and heartfelt that my heart was overflowed. I will always remember this wonderful week that I spent with you in Berlin.⁴⁶

Yampol attached to his letter some newspaper articles on his visit and continued sketching his future plans for collaborative work with the GDR.

The 1960s, which were the peak of the close relations with Yampol, also embodied a diplomatic challenge for the GDR, as many Western countries still refused to acknowledge it and establish official diplomatic contacts with the East German government. The United State and the GDR established official diplomatic relations only in 1974. This precious occasion to invite and host an American guest in the GDR was a special opportunity to talk directly to the American people (and the American-Jewish community), promote the GDR's anti-Nazi agenda, and try to influence public opinion on the GDR regime. And in fact, after returning to Chicago, Yampol shared his thoughts and experiences from his visit in East Berlin with his community.⁴⁷ In different interviews he gave for East German television and radio, he expressed his positive impression of the GDR's commitment to hunting Nazis, its support to the local Jewish community, and his satisfaction that the GDR government had passed a law against the Statute of Limitations for Nazi crimes.⁴⁸

The Israeli Obstacle

Alongside his official mission and the negotiations about receiving materials from East German archives, Yampol always kept referring to and asking his East German counterparts about Jewish life in post-1945 Germany, about the GDR's refusal to pay reparation to Holocaust survivors living in Israel, and generally about the hostility between these two nations. His pro-Zionist approach led to growing tensions between him and his counterparts in the GDR. The GDR's reaction to Yam-

⁴⁵ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Knopf, 1992 [1791]).

⁴⁶ See: PA AA, M C1571/70, Yampol's letter to Leo Hälker, October 25, 1964.

⁴⁷ "Rabbi Yampol Reports," *The Sentinel*, November 5, 1964, p. 19; "Rabbi Yampol Tells of Visit to East Europe," *The Sentinel*, September 1, 1966, p. 22.

⁴⁸ See PA AA, M C1571/70, "Bericht über den Aufenthalt von Rabbi S. Burr Yampol, von 3. bis. 8 Oktober 1964"; A Letter from Yampol to Kurt Hälker, March 31, 1966.

pol's "double mission" – his Nazi hunt, on the one hand, and his focus on the Jewish/Israeli political topics, on the other hand – was twofold and contradictory. Kurt Hälker, then a senior official of the *Friedensrat*, was disappointed with Yampol. Hälker believed that the rabbi's commitment to the persecution of Nazi criminals did not originate from his sympathy towards Socialism (or more specifically towards the GDR), but rather from his Jewish faith.⁴⁹ Inside the foreign ministry, however, the same "allegations" were perceived positively. According to the USA/Canada Department, Yampol's religious orientation and commitment were an advantage in his mission to carry out a Nazi hunt, as he did his job with "eagerness, energy and consistency."⁵⁰

In contrast to Hälker and the statements of the foreign ministry's officials, the GDR government in its response to Yampol's questions and "Jewish interests" showed a unified position. Under the title "material for a response letter to Yampol," we find their replies to Yampol's queries concerning the *Wiedergutmachung* or about diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. In this draft, East Germany repeated its argument that it fulfilled its obligations to the Potsdam Agreements and the refusal to negotiate with Israel. In terms of reparations to Holocaust survivors, the document claimed that "with the Potsdam Agreements all of Germany's debts were divided into two. The representation commitments of the then Soviet occupation zone – the current GDR – were limited to payment only to the Soviet Union and Poland, territories that undoubtedly suffered the most from the fascist aggression. [. . .] Other countries have to turn to West Germany."⁵¹ In this vein, the GDR explained why Israel cannot be part of a reparations agreement as such. It claimed that according to international law the reparations agreements signed between the Federal Republic and Israel "have nothing to do with reparations for the Second World War [. . .] because Israel did not take part in the fight against Hitler's Germany."⁵² Therefore any reparations for Israel must take place only on a "moral-political level," and to ensure that "German imperialism will never have the chance to carry out such crimes against the Jewish people or against any other peoples."⁵³ This was a clear message against the West German-Israeli agreements, because they included the deployment of military assistance and funding for building the Israeli army. In terms of its own care for Holocaust survivors, the GDR claimed it stood by its obligation to what it defined as "inner" *Wiedergutmachung*, meaning repara-

49 See Matthes, *Puppet Regime*, 155–156. See also: BArch, DY 30/IV A2/20/608, Report on Yampol's visit, October 8, 1964.

50 PA AA, M C1571/70, "Bericht über den Aufenthalt von Yampol 3–8.10.1964," n.d.

51 PA AA, M C1571/70, "Material für einen Antwortsbrief," n.d., presumably from end of 1965.

52 PA AA, M C1571/70, "Material für einen Antwortsbrief."

53 PA AA, M C1571/70, "Material für einen Antwortsbrief."

tions for victims of fascism who are living in the GDR, according to GDR law. For example, victims and their families were paid higher pensions and received different privileges in obtaining apartments, health care, higher education, and more. The document ends with information that should be communicated to Yampol about Jewish citizens in the GDR, such as: copies of the Jewish community's newspaper, a copy of an interview with Helmut Aris, the president of the Jewish communities in the GDR given to the *New York Herald Tribune*, and facts about the financial state support received by the Jewish community in Karl-Marx-Stadt (today Chemnitz) for renovating the local synagogue.⁵⁴

The same arguments are mentioned on other occasions when Yampol showed interest and curiosity about GDR policies towards the Jews, for example, asking whether the GDR would be ready to absorb Jewish immigrants from West Germany. In his answer to Yampol, the GDR Minister of Church Affairs, Hans Seigewasser, repeated the known GDR commitment to the Potsdam Agreements. By doing so, Seigewasser confirmed his government's seriousness in accepting and carrying out international treaties. Seigewasser added in his answer, written in the name of the East German government, that unlike in the Federal Republic, in the GDR there was no place for "the barbaric isms of the German past, racism, anti-Semitism and chauvinism" and therefore West German Jews were of course invited to immigrate to the GDR.⁵⁵ Yampol reacted positively to this commitment, seeing it as an important act on the part of the GDR that would be respected and recognized in the United States.⁵⁶

By looking at future developments of his relationship with the GDR, we can see a shift in Yampol's conviction in those arguments. A change in their cooperation occurred in the second half of the 1960s. Alongside his continuous concern about the physical and financial condition of the East German Jewish community, Yampol also expressed his discontent with SED and state leader Walter Ulbricht's visit to the United Arab Republic and with GDR support of what Yampol called "Israel's enemies." Yampol was also concerned with the rise of antisemitism in the Soviet Union and demanded immediate explanations from GDR government representatives.⁵⁷ Albert Norden, an official in the SED and a senior political figure in the GDR responsible for propaganda, was the one who was chosen to respond to Yampol's allegations. I would suggest that Norden was not chosen

54 PA AA, M C1571/70, "Material für einen Antwortsbrief."

55 PA AA, M C1571/70, Letter from Hans Seigewasser to Yampol, November 24, 1964.

56 See PA AA, M C1571/70, "Bericht über den Aufenthalt von Rabbi S. Burr Yampol, von 3. bis. 8 Oktober 1964"; Letter from Yampol to Kurt Hälker, March 31, 1966.

57 PA AA, M C1571/70, "Auszug aus einem Brief des Rabbiners Yampol vom 5.3.1965 an Gen. Hälker, Friedensrat", n.d.; Letter from Yampol to Kurt Hälker, August 31, 1967.

unintentionally. He himself was of Jewish origin and is known in the historical literature as “the Rabbi’s son in the Politburo.”⁵⁸ In his response, Norden justified Ulbricht’s visit and claimed that Western press coverage of the visit “was influenced by different political circles that planned to slander the GDR and to defame the historical truth, that the GDR exterminated fascism and racist ideology from their roots.”⁵⁹ He continued, claiming that “the people who are behind these campaigns are those forces in West Germany that criticize the humanist politics of the GDR.”⁶⁰ According to Norden, GDR diplomacy was based on anti-fascists traditions and therefore Ulbricht’s visit took place on the basis of these principles and had pure diplomatic and political reasons that did not contradict the GDR’s friendly relations with “Israeli anti-fascists.”⁶¹ The GDR did not accept the decisions of the Israeli government, and he asked how Israel could cooperate with former Nazis in its war in the Sinai. Norden repeated the GDR commitment to reparations for its *own* Jewish citizens. He also did not forget to stress his criticism of the West German-Israeli cooperation as another excuse for why the GDR chose not to negotiate with Israel. In addition, as proof that the GDR treated its Jewish citizens well, Norden rightfully pointed out that the GDR passed laws for the benefit of the victims of fascism living in East Germany, which made Jewish citizens eligible as well as “other anti-fascists.” Similar to Norden, many people of Jewish origin were in high positions in the GDR leadership.⁶²

In a letter to Hälker, Yampol expressed his discomfort with Norden’s criticism of Israel as well as with the GDR’s hostility to the Jewish state. At the time, following the Six-Day War, Norden had also initiated a declaration of East German Jewish citizens against Israeli “aggression” in the Middle East.⁶³ Yampol criticized the East German government and picked Norden as the main target of his allegations. He asked:

How can Professor Norden, or the humanist Walter Ulbricht, call that [the Israeli policies in the Middle East] aggression? [. . .] Professor Norden, although the son of a rabbi, is not a member of the Jewish community, and I can imagine that other Jewish citizens who gave

58 See Albert Norden’s biography: Norbert Podewin, *Der Rabbinersohn im Politbüro: Albert Norden – Stationen eines ungewöhnlichen Lebens* (Berlin: Edition Ost, 2003).

59 PA AA, M C1571/70, “Auszugsweise Abschrift eines Briefes des Genossen Albert Norden an den amerikanischen Rabbiner Yampol, der dem Genossen Norden nach der Reise des Staatsratsvorsitzenden Genossen Walter Ulbricht, in die VAR ausführlich geschrieben hatte,” December 8, 1965.

60 PA AA, M C1571/70, “Auszugsweise Abschrift eines Briefes.

61 PA AA, M C1571/70, “Auszugsweise Abschrift eines Briefes.

62 PA AA, M C1571/70, “Auszugsweise Abschrift eines Briefes.

63 See “Erklärung jüdischer Bürger der DDR,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 9, 1967, 2.

their signature for this explanation, like Professor Norden, are not members of the community. As I see it, the Jewish community of Berlin and of the GDR does not condemn Israel.⁶⁴

From this time onward, the relationship between Yampol and the GDR began to deteriorate. Besides his disappointment with the GDR's anti-Israeli position and his inability to comprehend how an anti-fascist state could be so hostile towards the Jewish state, Yampol also believed that the GDR had not fulfilled its promise to provide the requested material on Nazi criminals and to deliver this material to West Germany. He asked: "what is it worth if you keep the documents in East Berlin and the war criminals are set free in West Germany?"⁶⁵

Yampol's Hopes and West German Skepticism

During the 1960s, the West German embassy in Washington, DC, was worried about the growing protests of Jewish organizations against the Federal Republic and the Statute of Limitations. Dozens of protest letters were sent to then German Foreign Minister, Gerhard Schröder, by members of the New York-based Committee against Nazism and Antisemitism.⁶⁶ The embassy in Washington blamed the GDR government and the East German organization *Gesellschaft Neue Heimat* (New Homeland Society),⁶⁷ for coordinating and supporting these activities.⁶⁸ Observing the GDR's relationship with Yampol from the West German side reveals more about Yampol's personality and political tactics behind his encounters with the Germans. The first indications of the West German inspection of Yampol's activities can be found in correspondence from 1968 between Yampol and Karl H. Knapstein, the West German ambassador in Washington. The correspondence deals with questions regarding the Federal Republic's position on the Statute of Limitations and Yampol's search for material on former Nazis in East and West German archives. In the following exchange of letters inside the West German foreign ministry, Knapstein referred to Yampol as "the head of the far-left 'Na-

⁶⁴ PA AA, M C1571/70, Letter from Yampol to Kurt Hälker, August 31, 1967.

⁶⁵ PA AA, M C1571/70, Letter from Yampol to Kurt Hälker, April 3, 1968.

⁶⁶ For a selection of such letters, see: PA AA, B 83, no. 381.

⁶⁷ *Gesellschaft Neue Heimat* was founded in 1964 to "maintain the relationship with German-speaking minorities abroad," see: Ingrid Muth, *Die DDR-Außenpolitik 1949–1972: Inhalte, Strukturen, Mechanismen* (Berlin: Links, 2000).

⁶⁸ PA AA, B 83, no. 381, "SBZ-Propaganda in den Vereinigten Staaten," March 12, 1965, with attachment of a call published by the *Gesellschaft Neue Heimat*, n.d.

tional Committee to Combat Nazis.”⁶⁹ The West German General Consulate in Yampol’s hometown of Chicago was also in contact with the socially and politically engaged rabbi and followed his difficulties in his search for incriminating material on war criminals in both Germanies. Talks between Yampol and West German diplomats took place parallel to those he had with the East Germans. As we can see, both the Federal Republic and the GDR were aware of Yampol’s political objectives and his plans. In contrast to the relatively friendly attitude of the East German Ministry for Foreign Affairs and of the *Friedensrat* of the GDR, the West German side was much more hesitant towards Yampol. For instance, in an answer from the office of the Federal Minister of Justice at the foreign ministry about a letter Yampol sent to the embassy in Washington concerning his negotiations with the GDR, it was stated that under no circumstance should Yampol be notified about the direct negotiations between the GDR and the Federal Republic. The Federal Ministry of Justice suggested informing Yampol only that “the Soviet zone’s claims that the authorities of the Federal Republic denied accepting archival material from the Soviet zone on tracing Nazi crimes, or the claim that this material was forged, are wrong. [. . .] Moreover, the attempts of the West German justice system to receive the available archival documentation from the Soviet occupation zone and East Berlin on unknown cases were unsuccessful.”⁷⁰ The West German ministry suggested therefore that if Mr. Yampol thought he could change this “Soviet zone’s” attitude on the matter, he was more than welcome to try to do so.⁷¹

Later, in order to learn more about Yampol’s public work, West German diplomats spoke with different members of the Jewish community in Chicago about whether Yampol held any official role in its organizations. The results are surprising. The West Germans were informed that Yampol “has almost no meaning, and that according to these Jews he has no representative role, and they hardly know anything about his existence, and moreover, they rejected his extreme left political positions.”⁷² Statements in the name of anonymous members of the Jewish community claiming that Yampol was unknown in local Jewish circles were convenient to

69 PA AA, BRD, B 83, no. 381, “Ermittlung von Kriegsverbrecher,” Brief aus der deutschen Botschaft in Washington an das Auswärtigen Amt in Bonn, March 11, 1968.

70 See PA AA, B 83, no. 381, “Ermittlung von Kriegsverbrechern,” May 22, 1968.

71 See PA AA, B 83, no. 381, “Ermittlung von Kriegsverbrechern.”

72 PA AA, B 83, no. 381, “National Committee to Combat Nazism,” Letter of the General Consulate in Chicago, June 6, 1969; “Verjährung von NS-Verbrechen,” Letter of Department V4 of the foreign ministry to the Federal Minister of Justice and to the head of the chancellery, August 8, 1969.

West German political strategy, but they were wrong. As I have shown earlier in the presentation of his negotiations with the GDR, Yampol played an important role in the Jewish community in Chicago and took part in many activities that were published in the local media. For instance, in 1962 *The Sentinel*, the newspaper of the Jewish community in Chicago, discussed Yampol's contribution to the fight against Nazis and antisemitism as part of his work in the National Committee.⁷³ The same newspaper honored him on his birthday a year later.⁷⁴ Moreover, the Telshe-Chicago Yeshiva honored Rabbi Yampol with the annual "Ohaiv Torah" award, "which is presented each year to a prominent member of the Chicago Jewish community of outstanding Service to Torah."⁷⁵ *The Sentinel's* report included a short biography of Yampol mentioning his activities as chairman of the National Committee, adding that "in this connection [he] was invited to be the guest of the German Democratic Republic."⁷⁶ It would seem that even a simple rabbi from Chicago could catch the attention of both German foreign ministries. Yampol, aware of his actions' implications or not, revealed the political, ideological, and propagandistic tensions between the GDR and the Federal Republic.

Conclusion

The relationship between the official GDR and Rabbi Yampol had begun with great hopes and ended with great disappointments. I see the story of Rabbi Yampol and the GDR as typical of the paradoxical and contradictory behavior of the German Democratic Republic when dealing with the National Socialist past. The self-positioning in the front lines of the battle against former Nazis and expressions of sympathy towards the Jewish victims of the Holocaust could not go together with other geopolitical interests. The chance to set the moral tone and to stand by with genuine support for the Jewish people was held back by Soviet Cold War policy and East German domestic political interests. These tensions and contradictions created a different approach to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* from that of the Federal Republic.

73 See "Committee against Nazis, Racism, To Hold Meeting," *The Sentinel*, October 25, 1962, p. 33.

74 See "Honor Rabbi Yampol on His 65th Birthday," *The Sentinel*, October 24, 1963, p. 25.

75 "Telsche-Chicago Branch to Honor Rabbi S. Burr Yampol Dec. 15," *The Sentinel*, December 5, 1968, p. 29.

76 *The Sentinel*, December 5, 1968, p. 29.

In this paper, I dealt with the seemingly unconventional relationship between the German Democratic Republic and Rabbi Samuel Burr Yampol as a case study of other contacts between the GDR and American Jews, Jewish communities and political organizations worldwide, as well as the greater discourse surrounding the “Coming to Terms with the National Socialist Past” in the GDR. An examination of the GDR’s position towards American-Jewish figures and organizations as reflected in the archival sources reveals some of the characteristic features of GDR foreign policy in a nutshell: first, the aspiration to gain political recognition outside the Soviet Bloc; second, the occurrence of these contacts both during and as part of the contest with the Federal Republic for legitimacy and international political acceptance; and third, the permanent need to prove the anti-fascist character of the GDR, hence its stated struggle against fascism, Nazism, and capitalism by tracking down former Nazi criminals in the Federal Republic. The GDR’s complicated confrontation with its past was embodied in its relationship with Jewish personalities and organizations, demonstrating political, ideological, and moral tensions. The contacts with Yampol as well as other public figures on the Jewish scene point to conflicts arising from a serious GDR preoccupation with the Holocaust. They show how important the involvement with German history and its outcomes were both personally for GDR politicians as well as for the GDR regime in general. In a broader diplomatic context, these types of relationships with Jewish organizations constitute an East German attempt to reach out to the Jewish people by overlapping the non-existing official diplomatic interstate relations with Israel. A future project will deal exclusively with these contacts with organizations from the United States, Israel, and Western Europe, first, in order to explore the transnational cooperation between this network of organizations and, second, to provide a deeper understanding of the GDR’s historical indoctrination. The historical Marxist-Leninist / socialist / communist ideological structure and the following complicated (or insufficient) confrontation with the National Socialist past affected the GDR’s political actions on the international arena. The state’s leaders refused to take responsibility for the crimes of the German people during the Third Reich, did not acknowledge the existence of Israel, and refused to pay reparations to Holocaust survivors. At the same time, they stood at the front of an international campaign against Nazi criminals and invested great effort in exposing Nazi war criminals and in fighting fascism and neo-Nazism.

Can the GDR be still considered as not taking responsibility for the Nazi past? To absolve the East Germans of all responsibility for their actions by claiming that they were under Soviet control would be too easy. The combination of anti-fascism, Soviet influence, and the singularity of German history created in the GDR a unique historical and political playground, which needs to be further explored. The relationship with Yampol shows that the GDR saw great importance in bringing Nazis to justice and in revealing the truth about the “brown” past of

many West German public figures. Even if the approach taken toward this goal was distorted, one should not underestimate the East German contribution to the fight against former Nazis. As the political situation in the Federal Republic today shows, the confrontation of “the first socialist state of workers and farmers on German soil” with its own past, despite its initial denial of this past, portrays a fascinating picture of postwar German society.