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Fox, Thomas C. *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: Jewish-Communist Writers in East Germany*

Camden House, 2022. viii + 201 pp. $99.

This study contains perceptive and sensitive readings of six key East German Jewish writers: Anna Seghers, Stefan Heym, Stephan Hermlin, Peter Edel, Fred Wander, and Jurek Becker. The central question for the author is why Jewish writers would have wanted to return to Germany, particularly East Germany, after the Holocaust. After all, some of these writers were not even from the eastern part of Germany originally and were not there at the end of World War Two. Anna Seghers, for instance, was in Mexico, while Stefan Heym was a U.S. citizen and member of the U.S. army, who fought against the Nazis. Stephan Hermlin, who had briefly flirted with Zionism and gone to Palestine, managed to survive the war in Switzerland. Peter Edel, the most orthodox Marxist in the group, was in the Mauthausen concentration camp (Austria) at the end of World War Two, while Fred Wander was in the Buchenwald concentration camp (along with Elie Wiesel) when it was liberated by the U.S. army in 1945. Jurek Becker, meanwhile, was originally a Polish Jew and not even a German. He survived both the Łódź ghetto and the Ravensbrück concentration camp, where his mother and sister perished. His father Max, who managed to survive Auschwitz, found the boy after the war, and it was Max who decided that he and his son would settle in East Germany. After all, he suggested, the German antisemites had lost the war, but the Polish ones had not (151). Jurek Becker went on to write arguably the most important East German literature about the Holocaust and its aftermath: *Jakob der Lügner* (1969), *Der Boxer* (1976), and *Bronsteins Kinder* (1986).

The chapters on Stefan Heym and Stephan Hermlin are paradigmatic for the entire book because they show the psychoanalytic way in which Fox tends to read these authors. Fox convincingly demonstrates that both authors internalized and helped to perpetuate stereotypes about Jews. Hermlin imagined a "'female' passivity of the Jews" that contrasted with an "overdetermined masculinity of the Nazis;" in his writing about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, he reversed such gendered depictions, with Jews becoming more "masculine" (105). Heym also purveyed stereotypes about Jews, but his approach tended to be more positive and confrontational.

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Heym, in most cases, "adopts and then adapts the Nazi stereotype of the Jew as a revolutionary" (68), writes Fox. Whereas Hermlin imagines Jews as weak, Heym imagines them in an overwhelmingly positive fashion as stronger, more interesting, and sexier. The two writers hence differ from each other in interesting ways, but both deal in stereotypes.

These readings are strongly influenced by Julia Hell's 1997 book *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychology, History, and the Literature of East Germany*. In many of the chapters Fox cites Hell in her psychoanalytic, Lacanian, and generally condemnatory reading of early East German literature. Sometimes this becomes a bit excessive – for instance in the chapter on Anna Seghers, in which Fox demonstrates exhaustively that Seghers did indeed address Jews, antisemitism, and the Holocaust in her work, only to conclude by quoting Hell that "Anna Seghers chose to remain silent, indeed even to participate in the marginalization of the Holocaust" (63). This is a rather strange assertion to make with regard to a writer whose story "Der Ausflug der toten Mädchen," as Fox demonstrates, is one of the most eloquent and powerful attempts to come to terms with Nazism, antisemitism, and the Holocaust in German literature. The chapters on Heym and Hermlin are also heavily influenced by Hell and what she perceives as literary inadequacies and problems. The chapter on Jurek Becker remains more sympathetic, while ultimately still suggesting, along with Sander Gilman, that Becker remained naive about the potential antisemitism of East German society and politics (as if West Germany or other places were blissfully free of antisemitism, 175).

While Fox's readings of these authors and their works are sensitive and insightful, he, along with Hell, has little patience with their communist sympathies and their decision to live in East Germany. At the end of the book, he cites (West) German-Jewish historian Michael Wolffsohn's argument that "Jews who remained in East Germany [were] 'useful idiots'" and even "'alibi Jews'" (185). It should be noted that Wolfssohn's parents survived Nazism in Palestine and later chose to return to West Germany, not East Germany. Fox buttresses his citation of Wolffsohn with mild disagreement: "Those are damning judgments, and to my mind ultimately too harsh, but it is indeed hard to deny the usefulness of these authors for a regime obsessively seeking recognition in the world" (185). Despite their literary accomplishments, these authors, Fox believes, "provided [...] a hint of credibility to" East Germany generally and its criticism of Zionism and the state of Israel specifically.

In matters like this it is difficult for a *post facto* observer or chronicler not to judge or condemn the figures he or she is writing about, and not to imply that he or she knows what would have been the correct approach for a German-speaking Jew in the historical circumstances of 1945. As we know, hindsight is golden. Although he does not openly come out and say so, Fox seems to believe that these

writers would have done the morally correct thing had they gone to Palestine, West Germany, or the United States. Instead, they stubbornly chose to throw their lot in with international communism "in the house of the hangman" (i. e., East Germany – this is the title of the introduction). Of course, if they had not done so, they would not have written the works they did, which – at a minimum – certainly hold up positively with West German works about the Holocaust written during the same period. This is a paradox that Fox does not address: if indeed these writers all made the wrong choice and backed the wrong (communist) horse, why is it that it was to a large extent they who "made enduring contributions to German-Jewish writing after the Holocaust, writing that enriches German, and in some cases, world literature" (186)? This is perhaps a specific version of the even larger and equally vexing question as to why the German communist dictatorship managed to produce such excellent literature at all.

The basic fact remains, however, that these writers went to and remained in East Germany – even though they had the choice not to do so – because they actually believed in communism and were convinced that fascism and Nazism were byproducts of capitalism. I am guessing that Fox does not believe this – although he does not state this explicitly. All of these writers had diverse approaches to their Jewishness, which make for fascinating study; but all of them were secular and many saw Judaism primarily as a religion, not as a race or ethnicity. No doubt other German-speaking Jews had different approaches to their Jewishness. But it is probably not helpful for us, decades later, to tell them all that they were wrong and imply that we are right.