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**The World Jewish Congress  
and the End of the German Democratic Republic**

*Michael Wolffsohn*

First Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture

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### Greetings

*H. E. Jürgen Ruhfus*  
*Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany*  
*to the United States of America*

### Introduction

*Hartmut Lehmann*

## **The World Jewish Congress and the End of the German Democratic Republic**

*Michael Wolffsohn*

Edited by Prof. Dr. Hartmut Lehmann,  
Dr. Manfred F. Boemeke, and Janine Micunek

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## Preface

The German Association of Foundations for the Support of Research (*Stifterverband für die deutsche Wissenschaft*) has awarded the German Historical Institute a grant for a public lecture series to commemorate the interests and achievements of Alois Mertes, one of the most resourceful German diplomats and politicians from the 1950s through the 1980s. Given once a year, the Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture deals with those themes to which Dr. Mertes devoted his political life:

- the German question in the context of German-American relations, particularly the history of and prospect for the dialogue between American Jews and Germans;
- Central America and South America as topics of the European-North American dialogue;
- European integration and the Atlantic Alliance,
- the ethics of war prevention, with special consideration of the views of the churches in both the United States and Germany.

Alois Mertes was born in 1921 and drafted into the army immediately after leaving the *Gymnasium* in 1940. After the war, he studied law, history, and Romance languages in Bonn and Paris, wrote a dissertation on "Frankreichs Stellungnahme zur deutschen Revolution im Jahre 1948" (The Position of France vis-à-vis the German Revolution of 1848), and, in 1951, was awarded a Ph.D. in history. The following year, the young legal expert and historian embarked upon his first career, that of a diplomat. Over the years, he held positions in Marseilles, Paris, Moscow, and, of course, in Bonn. From 1968 to 1969, he was a member of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. Dr. Mertes was fluent in French and English; he also knew Russian, Spanish, and Italian.

A member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) since 1961, Alois Mertes began his second career, that of a politician, in 1972. He joined the administration of Rhineland-Palatinate (then headed by Helmut Kohl) and was elected to the *Bundestag* in the same year. It is not possible to mention here all the debates in which he was involved, all the decisions he influenced, and all the positions he held over the next decade. It is not too much to say, however, that the *Bundestag* member from District 153 (that is, Prüm in the

Eifel) soon became, and remained until his early death in 1985, *the* most important foreign-policy expert of the CDU. When Helmut Kohl became Chancellor in 1982, it was only logical, therefore, that he appointed Alois Mertes *Staatsminister im Auswärtigen Amt*.

Alois Mertes' third career, finally, was closely related to the themes mentioned above. Since the 1970s, he was perhaps the most prominent German Catholic politician who was concerned about questions involving the ethics of war prevention; who attempted to link security policies with disarmament; and who actively participated in the dialogue between Christians and Jews, and particularly between American Jews and Germans, about the burdens of the past and the hopes for a better future.

Michael Wolffsohn, the first speaker in the Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture Series, is one generation younger than Alois Mertes. He was born in 1947 in Tel Aviv, has lived in Germany since 1954, and performed his military service in Israel during the crucial years 1967–1970. Professor Wolffsohn studied history, political science, and economics in Berlin, Tel Aviv, and New York. He received his Ph.D. in 1975 and the *Habilitation* in 1980. In 1981, at age thirty-four, he was appointed to the chair in Modern History and International Relations at the University of the *Bundeswehr* in Munich, a post he has now held for ten years.

Michael Wolffsohn is known to the general public by his contributions to debates on television, his radio lectures, and his numerous newspaper articles. More importantly, he is the author of many scholarly essays and fifteen books, among them best sellers such as *Israel Politik, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft* (published in 1984, now in the third edition; first U.S. edition in 1987); *Ewige Schuld? 40 Jahre deutsch-jüdisch-israelische Beziehungen* (published in 1988, now in its fourth edition; first U.S. edition in 1991); *Keine Angst vor Deutschland* (first edition published in 1990, third edition in 1991; first U.S. edition also in 1991); and *Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland* (published in 1991).

We are very grateful that Professor Wolffsohn has accepted our invitation to deliver the First Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture.

Hartmut Lehmann  
Washington, D.C.  
October 1991

## Greetings

*H. E. Jürgen Ruhfus*

It is with great pleasure that I address and attend the First Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. Today's lecture, which will be followed by additional lectures in the years to come, is not only an important academic event. By addressing itself to the legacy of Alois Mertes, it stands for German-American friendship and a firm and irrevocable integration of Germany into the Western world and its political culture.

Alois Mertes was a rare combination of diplomat, politician, and intellectual. Those three pillars reinforced each other and made him one of the most remarkable personalities in postwar German foreign policy. He not only shaped German foreign policy but also penetrated it analytically.

The idea of the Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture is to follow his path of intellectual clarity and moral and political commitment. I therefore can think of no better subject with which to open this lecture series than the one we are about to hear "The World Jewish Congress and the End of the German Democratic Republic."

Ever since the Federal Republic of Germany came into being, the American-German and German-Jewish relationship has not only been a question of strategy, political orientation, and expedience but also one of basic values. Alois Mertes had a thorough understanding of this central fact of postwar German foreign policy, and he acted accordingly.

The unification of Germany and the political revolutions in Eastern Europe have shown that it was both morally right and politically wise not to deviate from this line. In the future, the united Germany will remain firmly committed to transatlantic friendship, European integration, a close relationship with Israel, and a German-Jewish dialogue. I am very glad and satisfied that the Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture at the German Historical Institute permits us to reflect upon and reinforce this orientation at this historical crossroad.

In conclusion, let me thank those who made this lecture series possible: the *Stifterverband der deutschen Wissenschaft* for granting the financial support, Professor Lehmann and the German Historical Institute in Washington for providing the setting, and Professor Wolffsohn for agreeing to deliver today's lecture.



## **Introduction**

*Hartmut Lehmann*

Since the late nineteenth century, historians of all fields have agreed upon at least two issues: first, that they must base their conclusions on the careful collection, critical analysis, and circumspect interpretation of all source material pertaining to the story they want to tell; and second, that they have to relate their conclusions to previous historical writing in order to demonstrate which of their results are new. Both convictions, both professional standards, cause specific problems. As the historical discipline grows in an impressive way, and as the number of new publications, both in the form of books and as articles in historical journals, abounds, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep pace with and take note of the results of recent research. Consequently, more and more time must be spent screening and reviewing recent work by colleagues. Only after that goal has been achieved may, or should, new questions be formulated; only then may one's own arguments be related to the body of insight encompassed by modern historical scholarship.

The demand that research be based on the careful collection, critical analysis, and circumspect interpretation of all available source material poses equally difficult problems. Sometimes valuable records have been lost or destroyed. Even when this is not the case, access to important source material may be restricted or closed. In the field of contemporary history, access to archival sources presents a special challenge. In the archives of many countries, a so-called thirty years rule is enforced. As a result, official documents originated within the past thirty years are not open for research—except, of course, those documents deliberately released by governments to prove or disprove certain political arguments. In the field of German-American relations, intensive research has been most recently conducted on events of the 1950s because the files of this era are just now being opened for research. But historians are not yet engaged in describing and analyzing the developments of the 1980s, even though many scholars are interested in them and wish, just as the wider public does, to find out more about them. One should add that the thirty years rule does not always imply free, unrestricted access to all documents older

than thirty years. As many examples have proven, some records remain closed for forty years, some even longer, partly because militarily sensitive files are slower to be declassified, partly because access is denied due to overriding economic or political considerations, and partly because of stipulations in a will governing the use of certain personal papers.

As a consequence of the thirty years rule and other restrictions, a wide gap usually exists between what we know as current events and those topics that are presently being seriously researched by historians. There are some remarkable exceptions to this rule, however. For good reasons, the thirty years rule was widely ignored after the defeat of the Third Reich, allowing Nazi files to be used not only by courts dealing with Nazi criminals but also by historians attempting to explain the rise and fall of Hitler and his followers. It is in a similar, though not identical, manner that highly interesting documents of the recent German past became available for research immediately after the collapse of the Communist regime in East Germany and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although German authorities did not grant general access to all documents of the former German Democratic Republic in 1989 and 1990, some materials classified by the SED nevertheless surfaced and were made public. In several cases, historians used the time of transition from Krenz to Modrow to de Mazière to gain access to restricted materials. They could thus analyze the events of the 1980s soon after they had occurred. A case in point is Michael Wolffsohn's account of "The World Jewish Congress and the End of the German Democratic Republic," which he presented on 28 May 1991 at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., as the First Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture.

There can be no doubt that studies based on material disclosing the background of recent developments hold a special significance. They bridge the gap between historical scholarship and matters of interest to a politically educated public. But works of this kind are also subject to special critical examination. With regard to Professor Wolffsohn's analysis presented here, three questions could be posed:

1. What is the relationship between the content of the documents that Professor Wolffsohn was able to consult and that provided the basis for his analysis, and other records of the German Democratic Republic that may deal with the same or similar events but that were not available to him? Such papers, like, for example, the personal files of Erich Honecker, may contain vital elements not recorded in

the materials he used. These elements may strengthen his arguments or modify them.

2. In what way and to what degree would Professor Wolffsohn's story have to be supplemented or changed if he had been able to gain access to those materials of the World Jewish Congress which cover the same events as the ones reconstructed on the basis of the East German documents?

3. Is it possible that some of the arguments that Professor Wolffsohn found in the G.D.R. documents were formulated for internal purposes? If so, which tactical considerations were used and by whom?

Future research will have to look more closely into these matters. For historians attempting to provide a comprehensive account of the relationship between the East German government and the World Jewish Congress in the 1980s, or those trying to describe such topics as the relationship between the German Democratic Republic and Israel, Michael Wolffsohn's account may serve as a guideline, and his arguments will constitute a point of departure. By delving more deeply into this particular episode of the recent past, he makes us aware of some of the discrepancies that exist between popular reports by journalists and the actual background of events. Finally, Professor Wolffsohn's analysis links the past experience of the Jewish people with political lessons that he has derived from his experience as an Israeli citizen. In this sense, his lecture upholds the spirit of Alois Mertes, the trained historian who served as a diplomat and who, as a politician, was most active in promoting international understanding.

I was born in Israel. I live in Germany. I love Germany, Israel, and America. I served in the Israeli army and teach at the University of the German Armed Forces. What would be more natural than to do research on contemporary German-American-Jewish themes, themes to which the late Alois Mertes was so devoted? It would have been a great honor for me to give any Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture. To give the first one is an extraordinary honor. I can only blush and say, Thank you.

## **The World Jewish Congress and the End of the German Democratic Republic**

*Michael Wolffsohn*

Prime Minister Begin's broadside criticism of us Germans is superficial and unfair. While understandable in view of the fate of the Jewish people, such outbursts of emotional bitterness in the end only help the enemies of Israel and the West. To thus deprecate a willingness to make reparation and to work towards reconciliation that has been demonstrated over decades can only produce a hardening of attitudes rather than the required reflection.

Chancellor Schmidt's first statements following his return from Saudi Arabia necessarily irritated Israelis, as they were unclear and unbalanced in terms of international policy. Unambiguous solidarity with Israel's vital interests belongs to the ethics and dignity of German foreign policy. The self regard of the German people demands this solidarity and forbids the acceptance of the "collective guilt" thesis. In addition, without a strong Israel in secure borders, the Near and Middle East would surely succumb to the tug of pro-Soviet forces, among these the PLO leadership. But close association with Israel does not in any way imply irrational agreement with the narrow viewpoints of responsible politicians in Jerusalem. Prime Minister Begin must understand that for us, too, the security of the Gulf region and a solution of the Palestinian questions on terms acceptable to President Sadat represent political obligations and preconditions for a lasting peace.

Despite Germany's sympathy for the problems and the legal point of view of refugees, as long as the PLO does not irrevocably recognize Israel's right to exist and is not prepared to make territorial concessions, Bonn cannot accept it as a respectable partner for negotiations. The nine million Germans driven out of their former homelands in the East have formally renounced force and revenge. Non-violence is a binding principle

of German foreign policy. We have the right and the duty to demand the acceptance of non-violence by the PLO.

The delivery of military equipment to Saudi Arabia must be seen as part of an overall Western conception that the Gulf region must provide for its own defense, but this requires consultation with the United States, as Europe, Israel, and its Arab neighbors all depend on American deterrence. In addition to strategy in the East-West conflict, the topic of a cooperative Middle East strategy of the alliance—in order to prevent Europe and America from drifting apart—belongs on the agenda of the NATO Council meeting in Rome. Israel must not be threatened by German, French, British or American arms. This is a question of policy rather than weapons, which, as lifeless objects, know neither nationality nor moral responsibility.

*Excerpt from a speech by Dr. Alois Mertes  
Bonn, May 4, 1981*

For those in Germany who, for reasons of ethics as well as the overall interest of the West, stand loyal to Israel's vital interests, the present direction of Israeli-American relations is a depressing development. I do not in any way regard myself as a judge of Israel's foreign or defense policy, but as a responsible German politician who must both recognize and take a clear stand with regard to the objective results of Israeli policy within the overall context of East-West relations and vital Western interests in the Near and Middle East. Credibility demands clarity.

*Excerpt of a letter from Dr. Alois Mertes  
to Israeli Ambassador Yitzchak Ben-Ari  
Bonn, December 12, 1981*

America was discovered in 1492, the Jews in 1985—at least as far as the late German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.) was concerned. Before 1985, the Jews were considered just another group persecuted by the Nazis, like the Communists. Though obviously absurd, this was the official East German view. And Jews or the Jewish State? The latter was seen as the "spearhead of U.S. imperialism, capitalism, and colonialism" in the Middle East, as a "brutal aggressor" and occupier, "like the Wehrmacht." The former were the lackeys of the latter. Thus it is no wonder that the G.D.R. refused even to consider moral or financial restitution for the Holocaust. West Germany had made reparations to Israel since 1952, but the G.D.R. had done its best to bury its Nazi past.

Why, then, the sudden discovery of the Jews and Israel by East German political leaders in 1985? There were two reasons. The first was economic, the second political. Since the early 1980s, the G.D.R. had been virtually bankrupt. In search of economic assistance from the West, especially from the United States, Erich Honecker and his colleagues hoped that Washington would grant them most-favored-nation status. Second, the G.D.R. was seeking to gain additional legitimacy. Honecker wished to be received officially at the White House, which would have been the climax of his political career and the culmination of his efforts to gain acceptance of the East German state.

Moreover, 1985 was the year of the Bitburg controversy. The visit of Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Ronald Reagan to a cemetery that included among its graves those of former SS-officers had aroused emotional discussions about the allegedly insufficient efforts by the Bonn government to cope with Germany's Nazi past. For the first time, West Germany seemed to be on the defensive. It was in this context that the G.D.R. believed it could muster Jewish support as an instrument for its own ends. Such is the background of the following drama.<sup>1</sup>

The place: the Foreign Ministry of the German Democratic Republic in East Berlin; the date: November 30, 1989, exactly three weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall; dramatis personae: an odd couple, Oskar Fischer, the former and present East German foreign minister, and Dr. Maram Stern, since 1987 a plenipotentiary of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) for contact with the German Democratic Republic.<sup>2</sup>

A third man joined the confidential discussion between Fischer and Stern: the chief officer of the U.S. Desk in the East German

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information, see my books, *Keine Angst vor Deutschland* (3d ed., Erlangen: Straube, 1991; 1st ed. 1990), Chapter XII (to be published in the United States by Praeger in 1992); *Ewige Schuld? 40 Jahre deutsch-jüdisch-israelische Beziehungen* (4th ed., Munich/Zurich: Piper, 1991; 1st ed. 1988), Chapter 11/7 (to be published in the United States by Columbia University Press in early 1992).

<sup>2</sup> For quotations from and summaries of this meeting, see the file of the German Democratic Republic, Ministry for Foreign Affairs (hereinafter referred to as G.D.R., MfAA), Israel, Internationale Beziehungen auf dem Gebiet Kirche und Religion, 1980–1989, ZR 5889/90.

Foreign Ministry, Dr. Herbert Barth. His presence explains nearly everything. The G.D.R. was again seeking a dialogue with American Jews as a way of obtaining access to the United States government. A similar attempt had been made as early as 1985, but the major American-Jewish organizations had consistently rebuffed the blandishments of the leaders of the Socialist Unity party (SED). For example, as Ted Elenoff, the president of the American Jewish Committee, had responded to the repeated and insistent approaches by SED officials: "Rabbis, prayer books and shawls, and religious support for Jews in the G.D.R., yes. Political support for the G.D.R. as a state, no." Elenoff had usually dealt with the state secretary of the so-called Office for Church Issues, Klaus Gysi, the father of Gregor Gysi, the current chairman of the SED's successor organization, the Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS).

What was it that brought Stern to East Berlin on November 30, 1989? Was it the intention of the licensed orthopedic surgeon to sever the friendship between the World Jewish Congress and the G.D.R. that had emerged after 1988? Quite the contrary. At a time when the old East German leadership was being given the cold shoulder nearly everywhere in the West, this particular friendship was being confirmed and renewed.

In my most recent book, *Keine Angst vor Deutschland* (No Fear of Germany), I have discussed the political background of this relationship. It is now possible to document the planning of the East German policy in some detail. In a project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, my research assistant, Christian Striefler, and I found relevant documents in the archives of the Foreign Ministry of the former G.D.R. In addition, Andreas Bönnte of Bavarian Television conducted research and interviewed a number of the participants in November and December 1990.

The World Jewish Congress, under the leadership of its president, Edgar Bronfman, was the only American-Jewish organization willing to maintain contacts with the G.D.R. In the fall of 1988, Honecker awarded Bronfman the Friendship Star of the People in Gold, the highest decoration of the German Democratic Republic. As far as the East German leaders were concerned, the honor was well deserved, for on October 17, 1988, Bronfman had made a remarkable statement. According to the Foreign Ministry memorandum of their conversation, Bronfman had told Honecker that "he was aware that the Hitler Fascists had subjected the majority of German

Communists to the same sufferings as the Jews."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, according to the same document, Bronfman had agreed with Honecker that it would be better if Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, rather than Prime Minister Yitzchak Shamir, were to win the forthcoming general elections in Israel. Honecker, friend and protector of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), would hardly appear to have been the proper confidant for the private views of the president of the World Jewish Congress on Israel's domestic politics. Still, Bronfman remained true to the G.D.R. to the very end. Stern, in his meeting with Fischer on November 30, 1989, "conveyed best regards from President Bronfman as well as General Secretary Singer and expressed their satisfaction with Oskar Fischer's reappointment as foreign minister." "The WJC," he added, "is and will remain a friend of the G.D.R."<sup>4</sup>

The uninitiated reader rubs his eyes and scans the passage again, thinking he has misunderstood. But there is no mistake. The astonishment remains, considering the fact that for years the G.D.R. had rendered not only political but also financial and military assistance to the PLO.

Another document of the East German Foreign Ministry shows that the infamous terrorist Abu Daud, who had supposedly been shot and killed in Warsaw in July 1981, was, in fact, very much alive and happened to be a frequent and welcome guest of the so-called Solidarity Committee in East Berlin. Daud had been one of the key figures in the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics in Munich. While "residing at the PLO embassy," Daud met with "Comrade Wolfgang Krause." The SED Central Committee and the Foreign Ministry were, of course, aware of these contacts.

In an interview on November 28, 1990, with Andreas Bönnte for the Bavarian network television program "Report," Krause maintained that he had last talked with Daud at a reception given by the PLO in East Berlin at the end of November or beginning of December 1989, at a time when Hans Modrow had assumed the

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of this conversation, see G.D.R., MfAA, Israel, Internationale Organisationen, 1983–1988, ZR 5896/90.

<sup>4</sup> See G.D.R., Mf&A, NMO (Middle East Desk), PLO, Sektion 2, ZR 1896/86.



leadership of the G.D.R. Before that, Krause told Bönnte, he had met Daud only once, in Libya. According to Krause, these meetings, although "all only at cocktail parties," had given him a "bad conscience." In response, Bönnte confronted Krause with a Foreign Ministry document indicating that Daud had visited Krause in his office in 1984, and not at a cocktail party. Visibly shaken, Krause made a stumbling attempt to explain the matter, insisting that the content of their conversation held no significance. Nevertheless, there is nothing insignificant about the fact that an official of the G.D.R. had welcomed the presumably dead terrorist. It is equally significant, moreover, that Krause did not dispute the accuracy of the embarrassing document.

Krause also told Bönnte that he had maintained contacts with the PLO since 1970. During this time, he had met with Georges Habash, Nauf Havatmah, and Achmed Jibril (considered responsible for the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988), and, naturally, also with Yassir Arafat. In November 1989, Krause conferred with the executive committee of the PLO in Tunis. This meeting and Arafat's visits to the G.D.R. had all been reported in the press. When asked about his present activities in solidarity with the Palestinian people, Krause claimed that he was helping to support "a hundred students and eighty skilled workers." Krause's statement may or may not have been true, but it is interesting to note that the East Germans used to label as "students" those PLO guerrillas brought to the G.D.R. for military training.

In a "Report" interview in November 1990, Stern insisted that Honecker and Fischer had assured him repeatedly that there had been "no contacts for more than eight years" with the PLO and "no training of PLO terrorists." Stern admitted that he was "personally very disappointed" to learn that the two East German leaders had so blatantly lied to him. Had Stern failed to notice that the PLO had maintained an embassy in East Berlin since 1973? Had he missed President Reagan's public statement in 1986, charging the East German government with directing the activities of Libyan terrorists? Anyone who bothered to read *Neues Deutschland*, the official mouthpiece of the SED, was informed in no uncertain terms as to the sympathies of the G.D.R. regarding the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. For years, East Germany's National People's Army had been suspected of being involved in the military training

of PLO guerrillas. This suspicion was confirmed in 1990 by the minister for disarmament and defense, Rainer Eppelmann, who finally ordered an end to this policy.

If its publicly proclaimed and consistently practiced policy of "solidarity with Palestine" allowed the G.D.R. to become the friend of Israel's enemy, why, then, did the World Jewish Congress announce its friendship with the East German regime in November 1989? Stern explained the position of his organization to Fischer as follows: "The question of [German] unification was not on the agenda. The WJC would do everything in its power to prevent it. The lessons of history still applied. Although it was difficult to take such a position in public, President Bronfman would exert his influence in this direction in the U.S. and elsewhere." On November 30, 1989, Stern emphasized his belief that, "despite pronouncements to the contrary, the State Department did not take a favorable view toward reunification." "In any case," he added, "the WJC will do everything possible to strengthen the G.D.R. politically and economically."

As late as February and March 1990, the new SED/PDS leader, Gregor Gysi, was still grasping at this straw. He stated that the Jews in particular should have an interest in preserving the two German states, and he appealed to the WJC for financial investments to uphold the independence of the G.D.R. It would be hard to accuse Gysi of anti-Semitism (if for no other reason than his Jewish background), but his implication of a connection between the Jews and high finance is more than merely embarrassing. The assumption of this prominent Leftist harks back to the classical right-wing, anti-Semitic rhetoric about the "Jewish Golden International." (Even the Protestant pastor, Heinrich Albertz, in a recent book, still connected American Jews automatically with Wall Street.)

The SED/PDS cynically counted on the short memory of the Jews. East Germany's support of the PLO, its decades-long campaign of denouncing Israel, its refusal to accept any responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi era—all this should be forgotten and forgiven? "To the contrary," Stern insisted in his recent interview in "Report." The World Jewish Congress "wanted at any price an admission of guilt on the part of the G.D.R." for the Holocaust. This was exactly what Prime Minister Modrow finally provided in a letter to Bronfman in early February 1989. But why so late? As Stern explained in November 1990, the SED supposedly had to get the

text of the declaration approved by all its coalition partners first, and the Christmas and New Year's break had delayed the process. An entirely different conclusion, however, suggests itself from a communication of December 20, 1989, by the East German deputy foreign minister, Heinz-Dieter Winter, to the president of the Board of Jewish Communities in the G.D.R., Siegmund Rotstein.<sup>5</sup> It reveals that a draft statement of Modrow's declaration had been sent to Stern, presumably as early as the beginning of December. Stern in the meantime had "expressed his personal agreement with the formulation. ... A proper occasion [for its publication] remains to be agreed upon." Thus, Modrow's foreign-policy experts were merely waiting for a favorable occasion to issue the declaration, not for its approval in principle.

There are more unanswered questions. Why, for example, was East Germany's admission of guilt addressed to the World Jewish Congress and not to the Jewish State, with which the G.D.R. had just opened negotiations in Copenhagen? Why this particular friendship? Did the memorandum of the former East German Foreign Ministry distort the content of the conversation between Fischer and Stern?

I gave a copy of the document to James O. Jackson, the Bonn correspondent for *Time* magazine. At the end of November 1990, its New York staff consulted the WJC's managing director, Elan Steinberg, as to the accuracy of the facts presented in the memorandum. Steinberg replied by claiming that the entire account was nonsense and that the credibility of such documents was minimal. The position described was hardly that of the World Jewish Congress, he argued, and he observed that this was certainly not the first instance in which the East German State Security Agency (Stasi) had lied. And what was Stern's reaction? For his part, he told Andreas Bönnte that the memorandum contained statements that had indeed been made during the conversation and others that had not been made. On the whole, however, he did not dispute the basic accuracy of the document.

Once again, the notes taken by the East German Foreign Ministry appear to be credible in substance. Moreover, their accuracy is not at all surprising, since memoranda such as the one under discussion

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<sup>5</sup> Winter to Rotstein, December 20, 1989, G.D.R., MfAA, ZR 5889/90.

were intended for internal use only, and the decision makers of the Foreign Ministry would hardly have wished to deceive themselves by incorrect accounts. Besides, in October 1988, Stern's boss, Bronfman, had already expressed his full satisfaction with the recent policy of the G.D.R. by declaring that it was reassuring that East Germany had "assumed responsibility for the past" and had "done everything to help the survivors of the Holocaust living within its territory."

From Stasi sources, Bönnte discovered that between January 1 and November 9, 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall), approximately 360 anti-Semitic incidents were registered—but not publicly reported—in the G.D.R. The implicit assumption was that such activities, openly reported after the fall of the Wall, were imported from the "neo-Fascist Federal Republic." As the Central Committee of the SED had proclaimed to the world in June 1988, "The Jewish citizens had found their true home" in the German Democratic Republic.

We also invited the World Jewish Congress to comment on the conversation between Bronfman and Honecker. The WJC categorically denied that Bronfman had equated the National Socialist genocide of the Jews with the persecution of the Communists by "Hitler Fascists." Such an equation, we were told, was "absurd." It is absurd indeed, and the response of the WJC is encouraging. Moreover, the WJC stated that the protocol "in no way reflects the content and the course of the conversation." However, in this context, it needs to be pointed out that WJC headquarters had taken the exact same position with regard to the memorandum of the conversation between Stern and Fischer, and that Stern himself had confirmed, except for some details, the basic accuracy of the document.

Apart from the infamous equation of the Holocaust and the persecution of the Communists, Bronfman's unpublished declarations differed little from his public comments. The G.D.R., he maintained, was considering accepting "symbolic responsibility"—that is, neither political nor financial responsibility—for "the acts committed by its people during the Holocaust." It was for "moral reasons" that the G.D.R. had changed its position on this historical issue. Moreover, according to *Newsweek* of October 31, 1988, Bronfman maintained that, "from a Jewish point of view there is no reason" for the United States to deny the G.D.R. most-favored-nation status. As Bronfman told journalists in October 1988, he could see nothing that might preclude a visit by Honecker to the

United States. It is possible that Bronfman was equating his private interest with Jewish interests in general. During his visit to the G.D.R., he had discussed possible business relations between East Germany and his own Seagram company with the minister for foreign trade, Gerhard Beil.

It may well be that some of the formulations in the memorandum of the talk between Bronfman and Honecker represent examples of wishful thinking on the part of East German officials. But even this unfortunately does not alter its substance. In October 1988, Bronfman publicly stated that he was deeply impressed by this new Germany. On the other hand, the chief official spokesman of the organized Jewish community in West Germany, Heinz Galinski, observed: "The statements made by Bronfman after his visit with Honecker were full of excessive flattery, and I found them personally aggravating."

There are further indications of the basic accuracy of the Foreign Ministry memorandum. For example, published lists of campaign contributions show that Bronfman was among the most generous supporters of Shimon Peres and the Israeli Labor party in 1988.

One of the worries that plagued Stern in November 1989 was the threat of a "sellout of the G.D.R. to the F.R.G.," and he warned that joint ventures "must be approached with reservation." The G.D.R., he recommended, ought to maintain close contact with the West German Christian Democratic politician Lothar Späth, who, according to Stern, was less committed to reunification than Chancellor Kohl. Stern had asked Fischer for indications of how the WJC could help the G.D.R. In this connection, Stern mentioned that he had heard, for example, that the G.D.R. had awarded Siemens a contract to modernize its telephone system. He inquired as to why a company from another country, such as ITT, had not been given the job. Fischer said that he would look into the matter. However, in his interview with "Report" in November 1990, Stern categorically denied having discussed the telephone contract with Fischer. While Stern's change of opinion signified his newfound distance toward the policies of what was by then the former G.D.R., it should be pointed out again that Stern did not contest the basic credibility of the document.

What else did Fischer and Stern discuss? The memorandum continues: "Oskar Fischer described current developments in the G.D.R. He assumed that the G.D.R. would remain a socialist state,

that there would be no reunification, and that the process of reform would be irreversible." "The G.D.R.," Fischer went on, "is interested in gaining support. ... The trust-building contacts between the G.D.R. and the WJC are of fundamental importance. Their continuation is in the interests of the G.D.R." Moreover, Fischer claimed, "at the same time, the G.D.R. recognizes its moral obligation to continue its talks with the Jewish Claims Conference."

It was precisely this moral obligation with regard to the reparations issue which the G.D.R. had continually and in principle disputed from 1949 to 1988. Even the verbal assurances of 1988 had not resulted in any action until after the fall of the Wall. The SED had persistently asserted that with the establishment of socialism, the G.D.R. had permanently eradicated the roots of fascism. After the Wall had come down, Fischer seemed inconsolable. "Unfortunately," he remarked, the negotiations over reparations had made "no progress," and "now the G.D.R. has no money." Of course, the East German leaders could have faced up to the reparations question just a bit earlier. Since January 1951, the claims of Israel and the Jewish Claims Conference (JCC) had been on the table. Back then, East Berlin might have easily turned to the World Jewish Congress for assistance. Its president at the time, Nahum Goldmann, was also the coordinator of the claims conference representing the Jewish Diaspora. But, as Fischer reassuringly put it: "The offer of material payment still remains open." And Stern was sympathetic, replying that "neither Bronfman nor Singer expect monetary payment at present. This would in most be damaging, as it could encourage anti-Semitism in the G.D.R." The good Germans of the SED/PDS have told us time and time again that there was no such thing as anti-Semitism in the G.D.R. before the opening of the Wall. If we respect and accept this "convincing" argument, we might just as well take it one step further. According to this logic, Israel and the JCC should have never asked for any reparations.

By which route did the G.D.R. arrive at admitting overall German responsibility for the Holocaust? For Stern and Bronfman, it appears to have been via the high road: It was "not for legal but for moral reasons," Bronfman told Honecker on October 17, 1988, that the G.D.R. should provide "symbolic help for underprivileged former Jewish victims of the Nazi regime." In his *Newsweek* interview, Bronfman also spoke in terms of the symbolic responsibili-

ty of the G.D.R., apparently ready to accept a bowl of soup as a symbolic substitute for reparations.

The United States government seemed unable to follow the twists in this yellow brick road. On November 30, 1989, Stern told Fischer that, regretfully, the United States "did not understand, and insisted on the fulfillment of the Jewish claims." Stern reportedly informed the Israeli government about the WJC's interest in establishing relations between the G.D.R. and the Jewish State. According to the protocol of their conversation, Fischer stated that, although a meeting he had hoped to have with his Israeli colleague in New York in the fall had not materialized—"despite the declared readiness of the G.D.R."—the East German foreign minister remained ready. He gave Stern "full powers" to communicate his good intentions to the Israeli side. "Even a meeting," he pointed out, would represent "a fact of considerable weight." "In this context," Fischer also informed Stern of "aspects of his conversation of that day with the representative of the PLO."

Did Fischer intend to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians? He apparently wanted to create this impression with the WJC. However, in an internal Foreign Ministry position paper written at about the same time as Fischer's conversation with Stern, the "Israeli aggression of 1967" was condemned as roundly as ever, as was the continued "policy of aggression" of the Jewish State. Furthermore, the document continues, "statements by the deputy prime minister of Israel that the G.D.R. must alter its attitude toward the Arab states are not conducive to speeding up the process" of establishing diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, Fischer and his colleagues desired to take up diplomatic relations with Israel "without preconditions." On December 11, 1989, Heinz-Dieter Winter once again emphasized this point in a communication to Fischer.<sup>6</sup> On November 30, Stern also volunteered invaluable advice on this issue. He recommended to continue the contacts between the G.D.R. and Israel via its ambassador in Bucharest and to go through the Israeli ambassador to Belgium rather than its ambassador to France. As to Benjamin Navon, Israel's representative in Bonn, Fischer told leading functionaries of East Germany's Jewish community (Siegmond Rotstein and Dr. Peter Kirchner) in a meeting on December 8,

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<sup>6</sup> Winter to Fischer, December 11, 1989, G.D.R., MfAA, ZR 5878/90.

1989, that he intended to "keep his distance."<sup>7</sup> No wonder, since soon after the fall of the Wall, Navon had already commented most favorably on the possibility of German reunification. Having offered so much valuable advice, it is not surprising that WJC representative Stern also expressed a wish of his own at the meeting of November 30. Stern asked his interlocutor to refrain from doing anything that might contribute to creating a situation in which Heinz Galinski, the leading representative of the Jewish community in West Germany, could "again achieve a monopoly on the representation of the Jewish citizens of both states." As early as April 19, 1988, Saul Kagan of the JCC had stated in the presence of Fischer, WJC representatives, and other East German Foreign Ministry officials, that "Heinz Galinski is not empowered to speak in the name of the JCC" with regard to the reparations issue.<sup>8</sup> According to the Foreign Ministry memorandum, Kagan stated further that he "well understood" the "irritations" of the G.D.R. Obviously, it was especially irritating that Galinski kept insisting on solid financial, not just symbolic, reparations.<sup>9</sup> In a conversation on August 15, 1988, with the chief U.S. Desk officer in the East German Foreign Ministry, Stern expressed his disapproval of Galinski's "all-German" activities.<sup>10</sup> Kirchner, the chairman of the Jewish community in East Berlin, was also present. As one of the reasons for his criticism of Galinski, Stern mentioned that the WJC was interested in maintaining "earnestness." This was achieved, at least as far as the German-German demarcation between the East and West Berlin Jewish leadership was concerned. In late fall of 1990, Kirchner still found words of praise for Honecker. According to the Israeli daily *Maariv* of November 16, he maintained that Honecker had been turned into a "scapegoat." Honecker, Kirchner argued, had brought "improvements" to the Jewish

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<sup>7</sup> G.D.R., MfAA, Israel, Gesprächsvermerke, ZR 5878/90.

<sup>8</sup> For an account of this meeting between Fischer and Stern, see G.D.R., MfAA, ZR 5889/90.

<sup>9</sup> See also the report of Kagan's meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Kurt Nier on June 24, 1988, G.D.R., MfAA, ZR 5889/90.

<sup>10</sup> For an account of this meeting between Barth and Stern, see G.D.R., MfAA, Israel, Gesprächsvermerke, ZR 5878/90.



community in East Berlin, "in complete contrast to his predecessor, Walter Ulbricht, who allowed for no compromises. ... Now the Jewish community in East Germany is faced with another problem: Heinz Galinski, who has led the community in West Berlin with a strong hand, is now grasping for control of the East Berlin community."

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After November 9, 1989, the disintegration of the German Democratic Republic proceeded at an ever-accelerating pace, and the supposedly all-powerful World Jewish Congress looked on helplessly. By the time of their conference in Berlin in May 1990, Bronfman and the WJC had learned to accept German unification and the "all-German" activities of Galinski, who was one of the sponsors of the conference.

The fact that the SED/PDS leadership under Gregor Gysi and Hans Modrow believed it could slow down or even prevent German reunification with the help of the World Jewish Congress was grotesque and cynical. Like many other politicians, the East German leaders succumbed to the widespread misconception that the World Jewish Congress represented the Jews of the world—a legend that the representatives of the WJC energetically and enthusiastically promoted. Only a number of the smaller Jewish organizations in the United States actually belong to the WJC, and the Jewish State obviously does not need outside representation. Except for the WJC itself, only a strange coalition of the well- and the ill-inclined believe in its power. The well-intentioned do not realize that the WJC is not a fully representative organization, and they remember only the man who was its president for many years, the impressive Nahum Goldmann. The ill-meaning believers consider the WJC clear proof of the validity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the argument that the Jews secretly rule the world. The SED/PDS politicians Modrow and Gysi seemed to have succumbed to this old superstition of the extreme Right. But the secret or other power of the Jews was not even sufficient to prolong, much less preserve, the existence of the German Democratic Republic. This failure, of course, will not prevent the new anti-Semites of the Right and of the Left from continuing to embellish the legend of Jewish conspiratorial omnipotence.

"The World [Jewish] Congress possesses considerable worldwide political and economic influence and has a voice in all political decision-making in the U.S.A." This almost unbelievable statement was supposedly made by Stern to Fischer on April 19, 1988. At least, that is what we read in a memorandum dated one day later, written by Norbert Reemer, an official of the U.S. Desk in the East German Foreign Ministry. The document was classified "personal" and "confidential." We hope, and presume, that this nonsense equivalent to that of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was not what Stern actually said. Later readers may lend credibility to these remarks that were intended for internal distribution only and written by someone who may have internalized the legend of the omnipotence of the World Jewish Congress to the point where he automatically heard and recorded the content of Stern's conversation through this filter.

Does criticism of the leadership of the World Jewish Congress help further the cause of the anti-Semites? I prefer to answer the question with a counter-question: Is criticism of a policy that is harmful to Jewish and Israeli interests considered anti-Semitic? As the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Acharonot* pointed out on October 20, 1988, immediately following Bronfman's visit with Honecker, "Bronfman represented neither the state of Israel nor the survivors of the Holocaust in the G.D.R." Out of consideration for Bronfman, Stern, and the World Jewish Congress, I will not go into detail about the reactions of Israeli officials and members of parliament, who were also given copies of the East German documents. A double moral standard remains a double standard, no matter who practices it, Jew or non-Jew, German or non-German. Morality is not divisible by national heritage or history. Who does not understand Jewish anxiety over Germany? But fear does not lend itself to sound political advice. The new democratic Germany is not the Third Reich, and Helmut Kohl is certainly not another Hitler. As the Jewish French philosopher André Glucksman put it: "Only idiots see the German as the perpetual Nazi."