

Jewish Dissidents in the Eastern Bloc

Veranstalter: Sander L. Gilman, Emory University, Atlanta; Cathy Gelbin, University of Manchester; Monika Schärfl, Selma Stern Center for Jewish Studies Berlin-Brandenburg, Berlin

Datum, Ort: 14.04.2021–15.04.2021, digital (Berlin)

Bericht von: Ion Popa, University of Manchester

The conference gathered internationally renowned specialists in the field of Jewish Studies. The opening address was delivered by THOMAS KRÜGER (Bonn), who is currently Director of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education.

Some of the panellists focused on specific figures of Jewish dissidence in communist countries. For example, SANDER L. GILMAN (Atlanta) examined the labels applied to Jurek Becker (1937-1997) both in the public sphere as well as in his private accounts of his relationship with the communist state until shortly after the Biermann affair.

MARIO KESSLER (Potsdam) looked at Alfred Kantorowicz (1899-1979), the anti-fascist German-Jewish literary scholar who returned to Germany only to face a dubious welcome in the East, and later in the West.

SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN (Harvard) explored dissidence of several Jewish intellectuals during Hungary's Kádár regime, such as filmmaker János Herskó, who was sent abroad around 1970 and never returned, or writer György Konrád, who never left Hungary for the West. Using as background Albert Hirschman's concepts of „exit“ and „voice“ in relation to the communist state, she looked at Jewish dissidence as exemplified in those who left/exited (mostly via immigration to the West and/or Israel), and those who remained and who openly voiced their criticism of various aspects of communism.

Other panellists either provided more general overviews of dissidence in specific countries, or looked at specific areas of dissidence. ION POPA (Manchester) explored possible definitions, chronology and particularities of Jewish dissidence in communist Romania, while JANEK GRZYTA (Bristol) looked

at how memory of the Holocaust in communist Poland, promoted by regional Jewish leaders, might have acted as a form of dissidence.

ANNA SHTERNISH (Toronto) examined Yiddish culture and activism in the Soviet Union as a form of dissidence, looking at the poetry of Moisei Teif, studies of Yiddish music by Moisei Beregovsky, and activism of Shifra Lipshitz.

One of the most touching moments of the conference was MAXIM D. SHRAYER's (Boston) reading from his autobiographical book, „Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story“ (Syracuse University Press, 2013). Born in Moscow in 1967 to the family of writer David Shroyer-Petrov and translator Emilia Shroyer, Maxim Shroyer spent over eight years as a refusenik before immigrating to the United States in 1987. He has authored over fifteen books in English and Russian, his „Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature“ winning a 2007 National Jewish Book Award.

In the concluding paper of the conference, CATHY GELBIN (Manchester) also paid particular attention to definitions, noting that dissidence has often been described as resistance, activism, revolt, criticism, rebellion, or opposition. Probably one of the best approaches, she argued, would be to look at dissidence as nonconformist behaviour that leads to opposition. The Jewishness aspect is even more complicated as in many cases Jewishness of early communists of Jewish origin, and sometimes of dissidents themselves, was usually not known and resurfaced only later. The memory of the Holocaust was one of the catalysts of Jewish dissidence, as in most states under the Iron Curtain local participation in the murder of Jews was officially denied; other countries, such as the German Democratic Republic, obscured local perpetrator legacies by reinventing themselves as nations of anti-fascist resisters. That manifested in East German novelists' writings about the event, or in efforts of local Jewish leaders in Poland to erect monuments commemorating those killed, or in Romanian Jewish community's efforts to open a Museum of Jewish History (which was inaugurated in 1978).

All presentations sought to provide an

insight into theoretical aspects, addressing questions such as „how to define dissidence?“, „what is Jewish dissidence?“, and „is dissidence self-defined, or a label applied by external actors?“ As this topic is only now gaining consistent academic attention, the conference was particularly important in setting up a framework for future examination. Almost all speakers warned about the dangers of simplifications and classifications. The papers revealed various types of dissidence, often dependent on the type of communism in specific countries, on the specificities of cultural/intellectual contexts, or on the size of the Jewish community.

The Jewish Dissidents conference has now been uploaded for public view into Manchester's Centre for Jewish Studies YouTube channel.¹

Conference overview:

Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Selma Stern Center for Jewish Studies Berlin-Brandenburg): Welcome

Thomas Krüger (German Federal Agency for Civic Education, Bonn): Opening address

Panel I

Chair: Norman Salusa (Selma Stern Center for Jewish Studies Berlin-Brandenburg)

Sander Gilman (Emory): Opposition/Dissident/Collaborator/Victim/'Magic Jew'? Jurek Becker in the GDR

Anna Shternshis (University of Toronto): How (not) to Say Gulag in Yiddish: Soviet Yiddish Intellectuals and the early Days of Thaw

Panel II

Chair: Stephen Parker (Cardiff / Manchester)

Mario Keßler (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam): Alfred Kantorowicz between East and West

Jane Gryta (University of Bristol): Navigating the Communist Reality of Poland. Regional Jewish Leaders and the Memory of the Holocaust in the 1950s and 1960s

Panel III

Chair: Katja Stürzenhofecker (University of

Manchester)

Ion Popa (University of Manchester): Jewish Dissidence in Romania: Definition, Chronology and Particularities

Susan Rubin Suleiman (Harvard University): Forms of Intellectual Dissidence in Communist Hungary

Reading

Chair: Vera Tolz-Zilitinkevic (University of Manchester)

Maxim D. Shrayer (Boston College): The Refusenik Legacy: A Reading and A Discussion

Concluding comments

Chair: Irmela von der Lüh (Selma Stern Center for Jewish Studies Berlin-Brandenburg, Berlin)

Cathy Gelbin (Manchester): What is Jewish Dissidence?

Roundtable discussion with public Q&A

Tagungsbericht *Jewish Dissidents in the Eastern Bloc*. 14.04.2021–15.04.2021, digital (Berlin), in: H-Soz-Kult 25.05.2021.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPLqG3gVKPseuSPYXZI6AQ>.