

The Bucerius Institute for Research of Contemporary German History and Society

2nd Manfred Lahnstein Lecture

Between anti-fascism and Anti-Zionism: East Germany's Complex Relationship with Israel and Zionism

Dr. Jonathan Kaplan

(Manfred Lahnstein Post-Doctoral Fellow, Bucerius Institute)

The Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October and the ongoing war in Gaza have sparked a massive protest movement against Israel, leading to a rise in anti-Semitic incidents worldwide. Some demonstrators not only criticize Israel's military actions, but also question the very Zionist ideology that allowed Israel to be established as a Jewish state in 1948. Criticism of Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories, anti-Zionist arguments and denial of Israel's right to exist are not new phenomena; expressions similar to those heard today were part of the official discourse in the Soviet bloc throughout the Cold War. One of the leading opponents to Israel during that time was the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which adopted the anti-Zionist view and refused to recognize Israel.



In his new research, Dr. Jonathan Kaplan examines the East German attitudes towards Israel, as a crucial element in the GDR's reconciliation with its National Socialist past. Archival material shows that, despite ideological hostility and the absence of formal diplomatic relations, there were constant official and unofficial interactions between East German politicians and Israeli and Jewish communities in Western countries. The "non-relations" between the GDR and Israel were influenced by several factors, including the legacy of the communist movement in Germany, Soviet policy in the Middle East during the Cold War, and the GDR's moral and political reckoning with its Nazi history. Some scholars have even interpreted the GDR's critical stance towards Israel and Zionism as institutional anti-Semitism. In his lecture, Dr Jonathan Kaplan will discuss the definitions of Zionism formulated within the GDR and their political-historical significance in shaping the East German self-image as an anti-fascist state.



Dr Jonathan Kaplan is a historian of modern German history. His research interests include German-Jewish relations, nationalism, cultural memory and postwar history. Kaplan completed his undergraduate studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and earned his PhD from the Freie Universität Berlin. His first book on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the German Democratic Republic and the National Socialist past was published in 2022. He has published several articles on post-war German-Jewish history, visual history and Holocaust memory. He is currently working at the Specialized Information Service (FID) for Jewish Studies at Goethe University Library Frankfurt am Main. His postdoctoral project focuses on the interactions between Western Jewish and anti-fascist organizations and the government

of the German Democratic Republic. For this project, he received the Hilde Robinsohn Guest Fellowship at the Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies and the Manfred Lahnstein Fellowship at the Bucerius Institute for Research of Contemporary German History and Society at the University of Haifa. From October 2024, he will be an MSCA Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for European Studies at the University of Verona.

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16:00-18:00

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