Israel and Eastern Europe

From Disruption 1967 to Resumption 1989*

What a day in history it was, that Saturday, June 10, 1967. It was a frightful scene, as if the mob would break into the courtyard at any moment and the embassy itself. It lasted for hours, wrote Yosef Govrin, as the outraged Soviets departed. In the last five days Israel had defeated the armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan seizing large Arab territories. As Govrin, First Secretary of the embassy of Israel, rushed through the roads of Moscow, thousands shouted: “Down with Israel!”

In 1967 Soviet helicopters over the Nile at Cairo, az-Zamalik

It seemed to Govrin, who had told this story in his 1998 book on the Soviet-Israeli relations,¹ as if the Soviet giant declared war on tiny Israel. But the Kremlin had “only” severed ties with the Jewish State. The Israelis lowered their flag singing “Hatikva,” their national anthem. All the Israelis at East European missions, except Romania, did the same.

Yosef Govrin was then posted in South America. From 1976 to 1985, he served as director of the Eastern European Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For four years he was ambassador to Romania. About two decades after the breakup of 1967, he participated in the restoration of ties with East Europe. Excepting the political changes in Albania, there emerged 15 new Republics from the territory of the former Soviet Union. One land vanished: the German Democratic Republic, the GDR. It wasn't quite German but Soviet dominated, and not a republic either, but a dictatorship in the Kremlin style. Before the German unification in 1990, Govrin negotiated with the East Germans. In 2010, he wrote this book asking if his talks about possible diplomatic ties with them had been only a passing episode.

Some Background to the Big Breakup

Govrin deals with the nearly forgotten past. Who remembers the Soviet sway on those East European lands and its influence on the radicals in the Middle East? In the second half of the Cold War, the East European states, wrote Govrin, adopted the Soviet formula, demanding:

1. Israel's withdrawal from all territories occupied in 1967;
2. The right of self-determination for the Palestinian people, including their right to establish their own independent state;

Israel rejected this, claiming that two members of the UN Security Council, the Soviet Union and China, had no diplomatic ties with the Jewish State, and that it did not regard the PLO as a counterpart for talks as long as it remained committed to the Palestinian Charter which denied Israel's right to exist. To this day, the Palestinian Authority and its member groups have retained this document with its offending clauses.
Then the American president Ronald Reagan and his Soviet counterpart, Michael S. Gorbachev, changed the equation. The Russian used an idea of his predecessor, Brezhnev. To counter the US "bilateral" approach which it employed during the Camp David negotiations between Egypt and Israel, on February 23, 1981, Leonid I. Brezhnev adopted a multilateral path to settle Arab-Israeli conflicts. Israel refused it because it could be outmaneuvered by Arab majorities. The forum would boost the detrimental Soviet influence. But on October 30, 1991 Gorbachev at the UN Madrid Peace Conference favored a new joint American-Soviet approach as an opportunity for possible bilateral Israeli-Arab deals.

![Photo: W. Schwanitz](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

President Abd an-Nasir's 1959 Soviet missiles in Cairo

This was the framework in which East Europeans broke off and resumed their ties with Israel. During the decades which followed the big breakup on Saturday, June 10, 1967, most of these states abandoned Communist doctrine and voted for democracy, and now there was a foundation for normal ties.

When the June War started on Monday, the reviewer was in school as a sixth grader near the pyramids. After 9 a.m. all hell broke loose over Cairo. On the streets men screamed as in Moscow: "Down with Israel!" That week, Israel defeated Arab armies and stopped on Saturday, day six of its preemptive war. President Abd an-Nasir had stepped down, and protesters demanded his return. Backing him up, the Soviet Union and in four days Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia severed ties with Israel.

Although the GDR's head, Walter Ulbricht, maintained no such ties, he acted as a driving force. He also fulfilled Arab wishes and hoped to deflect a West German threat in the form of the Hallstein doctrine, which stated that Bonn would punish all lands which erected ties with the GDR, by means a large-scale coordinated Arab recognition of the GDR which would remove the threat of a boycott useless, because for Bonn would not act act against a whole group of states.

In seven chapters Govrin surveyed the path from break up in 1967 to the resumption of ties 1991. Five of these are devoted to the lands which broke up ties and two for Albania and the GDR. Since he aptly enlightened us, I shall add East German and Arab background with regard to the broader European and Middle Eastern situation.

Govrin showed that potential ties between East Berlin and West Jerusalem loomed during the brief period between 1989 and 1990. Before this, he wrote, Israel refrained from diplomatic ties with the GDR, because the latter in contrast to Bonn rejected its moral and material obligation to the victims of the Holocaust. He is also right that the GDR's hostile attitude against the Jewish State was the most pronounced of the Soviet Bloc. He stressed that East Germans refused to recognize Israel's right to exist from the start to the finish (96). But its approach was much more sophisticated and harmful because they claimed: “Israel yes, Zionism no.”

The same applies to the author's argument that “no East German leader ever denounced the Nazi's crimes against the Jews as people” (94). Since I lived “on the other side” of the Berlin Wall and know their doctrine, I would say that of course they did. But the East Germans had to hide some dark secrets. One of these was Stalin's order which turned German Communists like Walter Ulbricht against the Social Democrats calling them “Social Fascists.” In 1933, this policy helped Adolf Hitler to gain power.

Later, Ulbricht even supported the Non-Aggression Pact between Hitler and Stalin of mid-1939. Its secret protocol not only divided Poland between both dictators (Stalin got the Baltic states; Hitler, the other part with the Polish Jews). They even agreed that, if Jews would flee to the Soviet side, they will be returned to the Nazis, -- and they were, -- as Govrin documented in his previous book).
German Restitution, Israel and Palestinians

After the war, Ulbricht's group of faithful hardline Communists gained power only by the force of Stalin's occupation army. They would have stood no chance in fair elections. As co-enablers of Hitler's rise, they shared responsibility for the fate of the Jews. Concealing the parallels between the left and right dictatorships in Europe, they did not call the Third Reich “National Socialism” but Fascism. Using the word “Socialism,” this would have come too close to their Soviet model.

By means of this definition of “Fascism for class warriors,” they eliminated also the racist aspects of Hitler's double atrocity against the “Judeo-Communist empire;” racialist and ideological. After 1945, these Communists or Socialists, portrayed themselves as the “left victims” of Nazis who had “nothing to make up” to the Jewish victims. Their ideological argument against restitution was as follows: “Why should we empower capitalists in the aggressive State of Israel that didn't exist when the genocide took place?” So this rationalization of “red class warfare” permitted them to evade the most basic questions of decency and humanity.

Thus, Ulbricht refused Israel's aide mémoire of August 3, 1955, requesting payment of one third of the restitution monies for Jewish lives and properties lost in the territory which in 1949 became the GDR.

Bonn had agreed to two thirds of $1.5 billion in the Luxemburg treaty of September 10, 1955 which were paid in products or transfers to persons. When, on July 9, 1956, Israel demanded $412.5 million from the GDR, Ulbricht rejected the restitution for the State of Israel. But he could not deny the Nazi murder of Jews, that also German survivors lived in Israel, and that there were many Jewish properties left in East Germany. His ideology evaded the responsibility for Nazi racism.

For the first time Soviet tanks on a 1956 parade in Cairo

Ulbricht ignored Israel for reasons of ideology and foreign expediency. Nonetheless, East Germans showcased the Jewish genocide. All of the youth visited the concentration camps. The radical left saw the Jewish question as a social but not national issue. So, in their view of class warriors, Israel was no solution. Instead, the “Palestinian cause” became Ulbricht's ticket for rejecting Israel and scoring points with the Arabs. Fighting against West Germany, he sided with Arab states and Palestinian Arabs.

To Ulbricht, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a promising unifier of Arabs which would open the path to gain their recognition. While West Germans accepted their responsibility toward Jews according to the terms of the 1952 treaty of restitution, Ulbricht's group refused it, hid the sins of the radical leftist past and turned against Israel in the rivalry of the divided Germanies. At first, he welcomed a Jewish State, but when Stalin turned against it in 1953, predictably he followed suit.

Israel became a robust democracy, and in 1952 refused a West German offer for full diplomatic ties. In the next year, “divided German representatives” presented their credentials in the capitals of the Middle East.

Among these acted the West German Ambassador to Cairo, Günther Pawelke, and the East German consul, Kurt Enkelmann. The door was now open for Ulbricht's “nation game,” a method of blackmailing Bonn and West Jerusalem in Jewish and Palestinian questions, a tactic which Arabs discovered early on. Whenever Bonn did something to Israel’s benefit, the Arabs turned to East Berlin. Working with the Jewish genocide and the German Nazi past, this turned out to be a delicate matter in the Middle East and divided Eastern European and West German politics. This became evident in the Eichmann trial of 1961 which had implications for foreign policy of both German and Arab lands. Al-Hajj Amin al-Husaini, ex-grand mufti of Jerusalem, and Nazis in Israel's neighboring states, were main factors as were the ex-Nazis around Konrad Adenauer's state secretary, Hans Globke, and spymaster, Reinhard Gehlen.
Key Points Before 1967

When Ulbricht made his 1965 visit to the Egyptian president Abd an-Nasir in Cairo, he also initiated official ties with Ahmad ash-Shuqairi's PLO and publicly criticized arms deals between West Germany and Israel. Bonn punished Cairo for this visit by withdrawing aid and recognizing the State of Israel. Then, ten of the thirteen Arab countries sided with Abd an-Nasir and broke their ties to Bonn as well. For about seven years the East Germans became the only German diplomats in Arab lands, while West Germans focused on their ties with Israel. The radicals, the East German leftists, Arab nationalists and Islamists gladly filled the vacuum by a string of plots and hostilities against the Jewish state.

On February 23, 1966, a Syrian coup d'état brought Baath radicals to power such as Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad. Nur ad-Din al-Atasi became president (his clan was close to Amin al-Husaini), Yusuf Zuawin prime minister and Ibrahim Makhus foreign minister. Initiated and led by al-Husaini in the Arab League in 1953, the Syrians headed an Arab delegation to Bonn protesting in vain against restitution for Israel which they set out in an aide mémoire. In early 1967, Makhus suggested to Ulbricht's envoy in Damascus, Horst Grunert, a new policy line toward Israel: East Berlin should take the lead among East European states in breaking their ties to the Jewish State and promoting “the Arab fight to liberate Palestine.”

Consul General Grunert reported on February 22 that this meant getting the East European states to break their relations with Israel and giving their support to the current Syrian line of liquidating the Jewish State by force. This, stressed Makhus, would lead to fulfillment of all the goals of the GDR (full diplomatic ties with Arabs) in this region.

Vice foreign minister, Günter Kohrt, sent Grunert's report to Ulbricht with his commentary that: the GDR cannot accept the Makhus proposal. Israel's existence is a fact which cannot be eradicated militarily or otherwise. It is a UN member, recognized by more than 80 states. Our advice to East Europeans to break their ties with Israel would be unrealistic. An earlier idea, claimed Kohrt, gradually to freeze those ties between Eastern European states and Israel, would not be adhered to, because such ties are already reduced. Instead, he suggested, bilaterally consulting East Europeans how to exploit the recent Syrian suggestion, to coordinate their position toward Israel and to organize a campaign of solidarity for the Palestinian refugees by offering them medical aid, nutrition, and training facilities.
Ulbricht marked three lines: to be the *vanguard against Israel* among the East Europeans, to get them to *freeze their ties with Israel* and to *coordinate them*, adopting Syria's proposition to end all East European ties with Israel as “key of East Berlin's goals.” He circulated the text to the top brass of his ruling party. Damascus started negotiations for full diplomatic ties with East Berlin.

Now Ulbricht was ready to seal the deal by visiting Syria. In the war, on June 9, 1967, he ordered arms deliveries to radical Arab states. Before the war he also sent foreign minister, Otto Winzer, on a tour of five those lands. On May 22, 1967, the minister stated that his Algerian counterpart, Abd al-Aziz Butafliqa, again demanded that East Berlin take the lead among the East Europeans to press for a rupture of their ties to Israel. East Berlin should have done it two years ago as Bonn erected ties to Israel.

Thus, we may observe here a coordinated effort on the Arab side. Two weeks later though, on June 5, 1967, Israel, which was subjected to an Egyptian act of war, -- the closing of the Tiran Straits, -- and confronted with Egyptian armies massing in Sinai, undertook the preemptive strike which opened the Six Day War.

**Ulbricht's Initiative and the GDR’s Reward**

In the war, on June 9, 1967, Ulbricht met in Moscow with Soviet and other East Europeans. His handwritten notes of the talks that day also contain the following phrases: surprise war by Israel like 1956, its intelligence apparatus, Sixth US Fleet, UN division of Palestine, 11/29/1947, Gulf of Aqaba, Abd an-Nasir's rejection of UN troops, readiness to negotiate with America.

From Ulbricht's notebook at the East European meeting on 9 June 1967 in Moscow
The last phrase should have alerted everyone in the Kremlin, because this “readiness to negotiate with America” came up again in 1970 when Anwar as-Sadat achieved power. As we can prove, this potential alternative Arab approach was already a point in the discussions among the East Europeans in mid-1967.

Then Ulbricht noted some questions: how could such an aggression have happened? Another one: what should happen to Israel? We read among his conclusions: Global strategy of Imperialism, consultations, coordination of joint solidarity plan for Egypt and Syria, permanent committee, changes, the protection against air raids.  

Ulbricht's conclusions at the East European meeting on 9 June 1967 in Moscow

Obviously, the advice of foreign ministers of Syria Makhus and Butafliqa of Algeria suited Ulbricht's policy of taking the lead in having the East European states break their diplomatic ties with Israel and then to coordinate joint anti-Israeli and pro-Arab actions after the war. He was rewarded, though, not by the Syrians, but by the Iraqis. The Iraqi leader Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr heard about the ongoing talks between Syria and the GDR for diplomatic ties. In the usual rivalry between the two Baath factions, al-Bakr, and in his tow Saddam Husain, rushed ahead and proclaimed on Radio Baghdad, on May 1st, 1969 the opening of full diplomatic ties with East Berlin.  

This was the breakthrough for which Ulbricht had devoted so many years and jettisoned his responsibility toward Jews and Israel. Sudan, Syria, South Yemen and Egypt followed suit. Thus, Bonn's Hallstein doctrine fell, and the German question in Europe had changed for the worse, making it now acceptable for most other lands to recognize the dictatorial regimes of the Soviet type.
Because a group of Arab states established full ties with East Berlin, there now was no point for Bonn to try to prevent this any longer, and there followed the recognition of a leftist regime not based on commonly shared values but on a radical ideology with the backing of the Soviet occupation forces. Suddenly, the GDR gained international recognition. This also transformed the German question in Europe, postponing any thought of unification and resulting instead in a longer period of inter-German coexistence.

**Arming Palestinians, Denouncing Zionism**

Indeed Baghdad's recognition was a great reward for the East Germans. As did the Syrians, the Iraqis forwarded a political and economic wish list. Point one contained a request “for more powerful support of the Iraqi position in the East German media against Zionism and the illegal Zionist existence on Palestinian territory [liquidation of Israel].”

Point two demanded arms deliveries to the Palestinians. That East Berlin would not recognize Israel was included in point three, and point four included “free gifts” [also a code for invitations or vacations and round trips in East Germany].

An Iraqi wish list to East Berlin for 1969 diplomatic ties included in point one “liquidation of Israel” and two “arming Palestinians”
Since the wish list explicitly asked to arm Palestinian groups,\textsuperscript{10} and Moscow favored a new line toward the PLO after Yasir Arafat's takeover,\textsuperscript{11} East Berlin sent arms to the Syrian Palestinian faction as-Sa'iqa (hit force, shock troop or strike guard, named by al-Hajj Amin al-Husaini with an eye to Heinrich Himmlers SS commandos).\textsuperscript{12}

In 1970, East Berlin sent for 5,000 fighters of as-Sa'iqa 3,000 AK-47 rifles, 560 machine guns LMG 34, 2,000 bolt action Mauser Carbines 98, 10,000 hand grenades, 260 binoculars and ammunition (at a value of 4,4 million marks, see below). Two decades later, the Pentagon still listed as-Sa'iqa as a Middle Eastern terror group closely allied with Syria's Baath party.\textsuperscript{13}

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### East Berlin also pushed hard to denounce Zionism

The infamous Soviet campaign, often in the official party newspaper, Pravda, claimed that “Zionism is a world evil,” “Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan are allied with the henchmen of Maidanek, Auschwitz, other death camps and neo-Nazis” (accusing the ex-Nazi party members in the West German Government) and that “Zionists of the Third Jewish Empire should erect a memorial for Hitler, for they took over from him the idea for a Jewish Race.” Soviets made booklets of it and spread them in many languages.

This led to the 1975 UN resolution 3379 “Zionism as kind of racism,” that in 1991, 111 against 25 states repealed with 13 abstentions.

Returning to Govrin's key point, it is self-evident that the resumption of Israel's relations with East European lands was a most important step to fight incitement, although it lingers on. Many East Germans took their opportunity to become properly informed.

A the same time, as Govrin negotiated in three rounds about ties between Israel and East Germany, East German academics built a Friendship Society.\textsuperscript{14} Already in 1985, others began to study Modern Hebrew at the Humboldt University with such teachers as Heinrich Simon, Angelika Timm and Rahel Stillmann.
In Moscow, on 9 June 1967, the Soviets and the East Europeans triggered a new campaign to denounce Israel and “Zionism as the world evil.” They claimed “Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan are allied with the henchmen of Maidanek, Auschwitz, other death camps and the neo-Nazis” (here meaning the ex-Nazis in Adenauer’s West German government of Bonn).

The official party newspaper, Pravda, lead this defamation claiming that “Zionists of the Third Jewish Empire should erect a memorial for Hitler, for they took over from him the idea for a Jewish Race.” Often they urged “Soviet Jews” to write similar vicious opinions pledging that the would never emigrate to the “Fascist State of Israel under the Blue Star.” Terrorist groups took those arguments over: in the Middle East and in West Germany also the Red Army Faction, RAF. They forged an axis of Palestinian terrorist and leftist groups.

On the other hand, the Kremlin and the East Europeans accelerated the arms delivery after Yasir Arafat’s 1969 takeover of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, PLO. As advised and financed also by the ex-grand mufti of Jerusalem, al-Hajj Amin al-Husaini, in 1968 he began his political and armed campaigns by the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, Fatah: in the media, and then “to introduce the Palestinian element by armed propaganda.” Arafat alias Abu Ammar regarded the attacks on Israelis, civilians included, “adventurous, suicidal in nature.” Later his Islamist rivals of Hamas refined those skills of suicide attacks.

A Pyrrhic Victory - Conclusions

Ultimately, no diplomatic ties between Israel and the GDR were formed, but this problem was resolved, when West Germany, which had established relations with Israel, absorbed East Germany. Govrin has uncovered key chapters of this comparative history. From his book and the background we may conclude:
Half a year before the war of June 1967, the East Germans had decided to work for a large-scale East European rupture of relations with Israel. The Syrian and Algerian suggestion how to “solve the German and Palestinian question” envisaged a deal by which they would recognize the leftist East German regime and it would become the East European vanguard to arm the Palestinians for the destruction of Israel. A reward: full diplomatic recognition of the East German regime at once by a group of radical Arab states.

In the 1969 new Kremlin line for the PLO the most disputed point was that Yasir Arafat insisted on Israel's destruction while the Soviets opposed it. Nevertheless they (and the East Europeans) started to deliver him weapons (see the chart above of 1970). East Berlin's claim, “Israel yes, Zionism no,” wasn't true either for it secretly did a lot to arm Israel's foes and to undermine the state's very existence.

There was a specific and long lasting leftist ideology and party line set in place from Stalin to Ulbricht which prevented them to recognize the realities (like in Islamism today). This ideology favored also the coordinated UN campaign against Zionism (As now the one that aims at delegitimizing the State in the Durban process sponsored by the UNESCO since mid-2001: its draft resolution singled out Israel for criticism and likened Zionism to racism. Canada, the U.S. and Israel walked out. The European Union also refused demands by Arab states to criticize Israel for “racist practices.

The Arab victory in their breaking of relations with Israel and the recognition of East Germany was a Pyrrhic victory (similar to the present attempt of the Palestinian Authority to get a state on by means of a vote in the UN, rather than by direct negotiations with Israel). Earlier a concerted action between Arab and the East European states generated a vacuum for the democratic powers. The West German representatives vanished from the region for about seven years while the GDR unfolded a strong presence. We can compare the situation with the weak American position of today and ask who will now fill this gap of democratic leadership and influence? The Russians, Chinese, Iranians and other Islamists try hard and had already a measure of success (just look at Syria).

Govrin made us see that only after the East Europeans returned to a more realistic world view, did the resumption of ties with Israel become possible, and that there were already moderate people on the other side. They, and among them also moderate Islamists, now will become most important as well.

With regard to a more realistic world view, we are witnessing currently just the opposite as a consequence of a regionally triumphant Islamism. This means that the carriers of an unrealistic approach seem on a large scale to be achieving power. If this is the case, we can expect a long phase of difficulties and conflicts ahead as for two decades it was the case after the big breakup of the Eastern Europeans with Israel. Progress can only be realized when other sides or potential partners abandon their unrealistic ideology.

As Yosef Govrin showed, a process of de-radicalization took place in Eastern Europe. This was a precondition of normalization with Israel. But between 1965 and 1967 the opposite had taken place, resulting in a retreat of democratic powers. In the fifties, the advancing Soviets prepared a new regional strategy against Israel and the “main Enemy,” America. During the sixties, under Soviet and East German leadership, some radical Arab states cooperated with East European states, deepening the Cold War in the Middle East, creating the conditions for real wars which prevailed in the region during the second half of the Cold War.

After the East European peoples dismantled that leftist ideology from within, the Berlin Wall and other ideological walls fell too. Thus, the wave of democratization in Eastern Europe swept away a major obstacle which had prevented the rebuilding of diplomatic ties with the State of Israel.

One might ask if, one time, a similar process could take place in the Islamic regions. The ideology of Islam is derived from a world religion, from which it has to be separated and could ultimately break off mainly by the power of liberal Muslims and other forces. This development which hopefully would marginalize the current might of radical Islamists includes the initiation of a process of de-jihadization and the building of peaceful and positive relations in the region.


Dr. Wolfgang G. Schwanitz is a historian of the Middle East and German Middle East policy. He is the author of five volumes and the editor of ten books, including Germany and the Middle East, 1871-1945 (Princeton: Wiener). His upcoming book deals with Islam in Europe, Revolts in the Middle East (Berlin: Weist).


For the 1952 Syrian aide mémoire against West German restitution payments to Israel see document 4, endnote 2, 161-164; for the 1967 document, Kohrt about Makhus and Grunert to Ulbricht, February 1967, see endnote 2, document 1, 156-158.

Federal Archive Berlin, BArchBe, SAPMO, NL182, 1337, B79-92, Travel Report Winzer, five Arab states, 03.-19.05.1967, speech by Algerian foreign minister Abd al-Aziz Butafliqa, East Berlin 22.05.1967, signed Winzer.

Ibid., NL182, 1759g, Walter Ulbricht's Handwriting, Moscow, 09.06.1967, 3 pp.

Author's audio interview with Hans-Jürgen Weitz (1923-1997), 1st East German Ambassador to the Middle East, Berlin, 22.02.1993.

BArchBe, SAPMO, NL182, 13333, Expectations and Demands of the Iraqi Government in Light of the Normalization of Relations with the GDR, Baghdad, April 1969, Iraqi Wist List with 4 Points.


ArchBStU, HAXXII, 18852, Profile terroristischer Gruppen, Berlin, 01.03.1989, 1-87, 54-55: The Pentagon published this watch list under the title "Profiles of Terrorist Groups" on January 10, 1989. It tied as-Sa'iqa under Baathist Syrians Isam al-Qadi and Sami al-Attarito to eight terrorist events, also: a train with Jewish Soviet emigrants in Austria 1971, the failed operation in Amersfoort of the Netherlands by Abdallah Mustafa Ataya 1975, two bombings of 20 Jewish students in Paris in 1979, the attack on Israeli civilians at Tiberias--two dead, 32 hurt--in 1979, the attack on an Israeli bus near Tulkarm in 1985 and an infiltration attempt from the see as three terrorist were killed and one captured in 1987.