

Trouble on the German Left: Israel and Anti-Semitism

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The party called The Left, which started up so hopefully four years ago and soon became a strong progressive force in German politics, with 76 Bundestag members and delegates in all but three of sixteen state legislatures, now faces earnest, possibly fateful problems. Centrifugal forces in the party, so disturbing this past year, have now erupted into a bitter controversy over Israeli policies and alleged anti-Semitism.

The Left party has been hated, even feared by the four established parties. It had grown stronger when voters and many members punished the Social Democrats and Greens, now nationally in opposition, because they seemed to proclaim progressive policies when out of office but forget most of them when in power. The right-wing government parties, Christian Union and Free Democrats, now also facing serious losses, have always been eager to attack the rather skinny scapegoat on the left.

On May 25th all four jumped on it in the Bundestag during a day-long debate about "anti-Semitic and Israel-hostile positions in the Left party." Among those they attacked were a Left leader in Duisburg, in the Ruhr valley, who favored the campaign to boycott products from Israel, or at least those produced on the West Bank but falsely labeled "Made in Israel". Since its start in 2005 at a World Social Forum meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, this campaign had spread to many countries, calling for an end to the occupation of Palestine, for dismantling the giant Wall being built there and for rights for those Palestinians forced to leave their homes. He had been immediately disavowed by higher Left party echelons, although he disputed any charge of anti-Semitism and pointed to his very active anti-Nazi past.

In Bremen local Left leaders refused to join the other parties in a general condemnation of this boycott of Israeli-labeled or Israeli products. While they, too, opposed any such boycotts in Germany, which reminded people of signs during the Hitler years saying "Don't Buy from Jews", they said they could not condemn all such calls by Palestinian groups everywhere, justifying their position by pointing to current oppression of Palestinians, today's underdogs, and Germany's one-sided support of the Israeli government, even in measures condemned by so many around the world, like the Gaza attack and the Wall. Then, again in Duisburg, the only West German city with the Left a partner in the city government (hardly a coincidence), a message was suddenly discovered on an obscure link from the website of the youth group close to the Left. It was a clearly anti-Semitic, fascistic leaflet, topped by a logo of the Star of David combined with a swastika. It was immediately disavowed by the Left, legal proceedings were begun against whoever planted it there, still anonymous, and everything pointed to an act of provocation. But the media had what they wanted. And so did the members of the Bundestag. The main attack was on those supporting the "Gaza flotilla", now gathering for a renewed attempt to break through the sea blockade of that besieged Palestinian enclave on the Mediterranean coast, this time, symbolically, with urgently-needed medical supplies. In a similar action last year, two deputies

from the Left were on the "Mavi Marmara" when it was forcibly seized by Israeli soldiers, resulting in the deaths of nine of those aboard. In answer to these attacks the Left delegates in the Bundestag, meeting in caucus on June 7th, unanimously adopted the following resolution: {"The delegates of the Left caucus will continue in future to act against every form of anti-Semitism in society. Today, as always, neither right-wing extremism nor anti-Semitism are tolerated in our party. The caucus of The Left vehemently opposes anti-Semitic thinking and right-wing extremist acts. "The members of the caucus declare that regardless of all differences of opinion and in line with the decision of the Party Executive on May 21st: "We shall not take part in any initiatives involving the Middle East conflict which demand a one-state solution for Palestine and Israel nor in calls to boycott Israeli products nor shall we take part in this year's Gaza flotilla''".

"We expect that all our staff members and members of the caucus conform to these positions."

By agreement, fourteen delegates who opposed this statement left the room before the vote so that it could be called unanimous (there are 76 members in all).

There were two prompt reactions. It became clear that no matter what the Left decided or resolved it would not satisfy people opposed to it. Dieter Graumann, president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, wrote a long article in a leading newspaper, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. "After admitting that the Left had been particularly active in fighting neo-Nazis, as in the blockade of their annual rally in Dresden last February, he claimed that anti-Semitism was rife in the party. On the one hand, he recalled that the (East) German Democratic Republic (GDR) had maintained close connections with Arab movements and countries willing to recognize the GDR, but never established relations with Israel, which had soon established close ties with the (West) German Federal Republic. Yet it was largely those Left party leaders from the East German states who could currently be considered more "pro-Israel". So he turned to what he called "downright pathological" hatred of Israel especially in West German sections of the Left. The main tenor of his criticism, reflecting the very close ties of his Central Council with Israel, was a rejection of most if not all criticism of Israeli policy toward Gaza and the Palestinians as "anti-Zionist" and anti-Semitic.

The reaction to the Bundestag statement, at least at the leadership level of the party, was more than turbulent. While no one was against the statement opposing anti-Semitism, always a basic principle of the Left, many were unhappy at the rejection even of discussion on other issues like the boycott. As for the question of a one-state solution, most tended to consider this a matter for Jewish and Arab Israelis and Palestinians to work out for themselves. But the question of the "Gaza flotilla" was especially sensitive; one or two Bundestag delegates of the Left planned to take part once again this year. And many were especially angry at the last restrictive sentence which was viewed as a gag rule - the first one in the young party. Some Left party groups, especially in West Germany, protested.

Of course this debate has raged fiercely for years in Jewish circles and beyond, in many countries. Especially in Germany, however, there is always the added danger that Nazis, young or old, might take advantage of growing disquiet among many Germans about Israeli policy on the West Bank, against Gaza during the war of 2008-2009, about the seizure of the "Mavi Marmara" and the deliberate snubbing of Biden, Obama and the United Nations with its settlement construction in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. While the Central Council of Jews and its friends in the media and government circles rarely if ever criticized these policies, some prominent Jewish figures in Germany have been doing just that, like the famous Israeli lawyer Felicia Langer, now living in Germany, Evelyn Hecht-Galinski, daughter of a past president of the Central Council of Jews until his death in 1992, and Rolf Verleger, a leader in the Council until he was thrown out for opposing

Israel's invasion of Lebanon. And it was an organization of Jewish Germans who were most active in organizing a "German boat" for the second "Gaza flotilla".

Where did criticism of Israel end and anti-Semitism begin? Israel's existence was hardly ever an issue anywhere on the Left, but where did legitimate defense end and unquestioning obedience to Israeli policies begin, such as the strict rejection of the Goldstone report or Palestinian statehood in September? How difficult and delicate these questions are everywhere, but most drastically in Germany! An open letter from over a hundred Israelis, active in fighting for equality for Palestinians, angrily opposed the Bundestag statement of the Left, especially in its "Verbot" of participation in the "Gaza flotilla," and implied that it represented weak-kneed capitulation. Some agreed with them, but others in the Left publicly supported the drastic criticism of the party by the head of the Central Council of Jews.

One group within the party, or more exactly within "solid", the youth partner of the party, had been trying for years to centralize this question, in full knowledge of its potential for splitting the party if not fatally tearing it apart. This group, calling itself "Shalom" and led by a few university teachers, not only advocated single-mindedly positions applauding virtually everything the Israeli government said or did but extended its praise to Washington policies, landing almost to the right of George W. Bush, in full support of the Iraq War, for example, and in basically racist attacks on all of Islam and the Muslims. Even criticism of USA policies was somehow branded as anti-Semitic! Though hostile to virtually all principles of the Left, it could always count on some support within the party and favorable placing in the media.

Now the group has again become prominent as two different wings of the party, which have long been flapping unhappily against each other in other matters, became involved once more in an Israel-Palestine debate. One wing is stronger in East Berlin and East Germany, where the relatively large vote for the Left (often over 20 percent) provided many opportunities to hold office on the local, county or state level. Indeed, the Left is part of the governing coalition in the states of Berlin and Brandenburg, and is second strongest party in other states. Many East German party leaders feared being seen as too radical to hold office; some in the party even dreamed of becoming partners with the Social Democrats and Greens in a national government after the 2013 elections. They did not want to alienate these two parties more than necessary, and this extended to the Israel-Palestine question as well.

The other wing, stronger in West German states, was far weaker in election results, and only rarely had chances to join governments on any level. That, and its generally more militant past, made it the basis of the more radical wing of the party. Pointing to the history books, for example, it demanded the rejection of any and all operations by German armed forces outside the country, even those authorized by the UN. Since the Social Democrats and Greens would never accept a partner with such a position the "reform" wing wanted to moderate it, permitting exceptions. The militants demanded a clear commitment to socialism as a goal and rejected all privatization of public utilities, while some reformers insisted that capitalism, though basically wrong, no doubt, was currently not quite so terrible as the others maintained. These quarrels were currently involved in sometimes heated debate on an official long-range program of the party, whose current version is considered far too "leftist" by the reformers. They demand vigorous changes while the militants, while also wishing some alterations, insist on the basic anti-capitalist, anti-militarist direction.

And now, to heat up these differences even further, the long-smoldering debate on the Middle East has again come into the spotlight, with divisions along much the same lines. Gregor Gysi, chair of the Left caucus in the Bundestag, and ironically the only leader of any party in Germany who is himself Jewish, while again stressing the sharp rejection of any anti-Semitic influences in the party, now wishes to moderate the statement in the Bundestag, most probably in regard to those

supporting the “Gaza flotilla” and to freedom of opinion.

It is ironic, of course, that the older parties, especially the two now in government, were chock-full of old Nazis as long as they were alive and kicking, many of whom kept past views and vita data to themselves but were careful to gain acceptance by stressing ties with Israel. And it has indeed been the Left which most actively fights the neo-Nazis, often enough in defiance of politicians from the old parties.

But, meanwhile, the polls give the Left 7 to 9 percent support nationally, down from a one-time high of nearly 12 percent, and indicate probable losses in the two remaining state elections this year, including a crucial one in Berlin. Many members in both eastern and western states are asking whether the party should tear itself apart about theoretical or distant issues, including the Middle East conflict, while they face painful rent increases, growing dental and medical costs and, despite an easing of the unemployment problem (in part at the cost of southern Europe), a great number of low-paid and temporary jobs which provide wages too low to live on.

Can this picture change? Can the fissures be repaired? The months ahead may be very decisive ones for the still so vitally necessary party called The Left.

By Victor Grossman

P.S.

* ictor Grossman’s ZSpace Page, Friday, July 08, 2011:

<http://www.zcommunications.org/trouble-on-the-german-left-israel-and-anti-semitism-by-victor-grossman>