
This thesis analyzes the archives of the Nachrichtenblatt der Jüdischen Gemeinde von Groß-Berlin und des Verbandes der Jüdischen Gemeinden in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, in order to better understand the experience of the Jewish community in the GDR from 1953 to 1990, the period during which the newspaper was published. As the only Jewish periodical published in the GDR, the Nachrichtenblatt offers valuable insights into the situation of Jews in the communist state, which constitutes “one of the least explored chapters of German-Jewish history.” As such, this thesis broadly touches on topics related to GDR Jewish identity and relations between Jews and the SED state, with the Nachrichtenblatt serving as the prism through which this study will be conducted.

The immediate questions that emerge from this study relate to the purpose and meaning of a state-sponsored organ serving the Jewish community in a communist dictatorship that legitimized its existence through its self-declared anti-fascist identity. I seek to better understand to what extent the Nachrichtenblatt can be seen as representative of the lived experiences of Jews in the GDR, and the extent to which the quarterly paper can be understood as a medium of Jewish self-expression or whether it should primarily be considered to be a vehicle of government propaganda. Through this question, I investigate the extent to which one can discern a space for independent Jewish expression in the GDR, particularly pertaining to issues such as Zionism, Israel, and Holocaust remembrance, and how this shifted throughout the newspaper’s existence. This thesis also analyzes broader shifts in the Nachrichtenblatt’s content and political message throughout these 37 years, and seeks to understand the factors behind these changes. Most notably, to what extent did the paper mirror the SED’s official positions throughout the years, and what can explain the changes that did occur? More broadly, to what should one attribute shifts in the Nachrichtenblatt’s line, and how did domestic political trends impact the newspaper? I will examine the relative role of changes in the GDR’s self-definition and evolutions within the SED, as well as personal factors relating to the composition of the newspaper’s editorial board, relations between the state and the Verband, changing attitudes towards Holocaust memorialization, and shifts that occurred within community members’ understandings of GDR Jewish identity. I will also shed light on the impact of international developments on the newspaper’s content, especially relating to the role, both real and perceived, of the Jewish community as a link between the GDR and the West. Through the Nachrichtenblatt I also examine how an increasing number GDR Jews came to form a distinct identity independent from the Holocaust and socialist anti-fascism during the 1980s, and how this impacted attitudes towards the Wende and German reunification. Finally, by placing the paper within the broader context of relations between Jews and the SED, and examining subjects omitted or only partially covered, I will better understand how existence within an ideologically based dictatorship defined Jewish life in the GDR, and how this was addressed in the final copies of the Nachrichtenblatt published after the end of censorship in late 1989.

Sources include:

Archives of the Nachrichtenblatt
Archives of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the GDR
Archives of Neues Deutschland, Neue Zeit, and the Berliner Zeitung
Archives of the GDR State Secretary for Church Questions