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Werner Scholem.

A Political Biography (1895-1940). PhD Project*

This dissertation project focuses on the biography of the Communist politician Werner Scholem, a leading figure on the “ultra-left” wing of the German Communist Party (KPD) during the 1920s. The idea of the project is to present a full-length biography of Werner Scholem, concentrating on his activities as communist politician since 1921. Other important aspects like his family background, his political socialization and his later persecution by the Nazis are also subject of research and will be integrated into one coherent narrative.

The idea of this specialized biographical focus is to follow the intellectual trajectory of one leading communist of the Weimar era in order to better understand the various processes of radicalization and political mobilization that characterized not only Weimar Germany, but the first half of the 20th century in general.

The biography of Werner Scholem is highly relevant because of its representative and particular aspects. Scholem was born in 1895 as the third son of a Jewish entrepreneur, Arthur Scholem, owner of a printing shop. Unlike his two older brothers, Werner refused to be trained in his fathers’ profession and found himself in opposition to his fathers’ nationalist political views. Together with his younger Brother, Gerhard (later known as Gershom Scholem), he joined the Zionist youth organization “Jung Juda”. Unlike Gershom, Werner abandoned Zionism and joined the Socialist youth movement (Arbeiterjugend) in 1912. During World War I Werner had to serve as a foot soldier, a traumatizing experience that both radicalized his socialist views and revived his connection to Judaism.

During the war Werner Scholem joined the Independent Socialist Party (USPD) and in 1919 began working for one of its newspapers. At the same time he started a career as a local politician in the city of Linden (today part of Hannover, Lower Saxony). In 1920 he joined the Communist Party (KPD) and in 1921 was elected to a seat in the Prussian Parliament (Preußischer Landtag). In 1924 he became a member of the national parliament (Reichstag) and the Central Committee of the KPD. As chief of organizational affairs (Organisationsleiter) Werner Scholem was a leading figure in the “Bolshevization” of the German Communist Party. When the ultra-left wing of the party lost power in 1925, Scholem went into opposition. In 1926 he was expelled from the party for his resistance to Stalin’s politics. Scholem maintained contact with several oppositional and Trotskyite groups and persons, but dropped his political career in order to study law at Berlin University and become a lawyer.

In 1933, a few months before his university education would be finished, he was arrested by the Nazis and charged with high treason. Although acquitted by the Volksgerichtshof (NS Supreme Court) he was not released but remained in custody as a political prisoner in several concentration camps. In July 1940 he was murdered in Buchenwald.

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Werner Scholem's biography represents central aspects and contradictory trajectories that were typical for 20th century German history. It is, therefore, representative of the collective experience of his generation. Many central issues, such as the rise of anti-Semitism within German society or the uneasy relationship between Zionism and Socialism have to be taken into account and should be analyzed from a new perspective.

For the social and intellectual history of the Communist movement in Germany, research on Scholem might give new insights into the Stalinization of the German Communist Party and the ongoing controversy of its "internal" political dynamics vs. "external" influences from the Soviet Union.

Scholem, for example, was at first an admirer of Stalin and pushed forward his politics of Bolshevization, but in 1925 he became one of Stalin's first and fiercest political opponents in Germany. The reason for Scholem's opposition was Stalin's turn from a policy that promoted international revolution to the policy of "Socialism in a Single Country", i.e. towards stabilization of the Soviet Union within an unchallenged global political system.

A political biography of Werner Scholem may discuss these problems from a perspective within the KPD while at the same time help understand the emergence of the general political radicalism in Weimar Germany. These tendencies have to be contextualized with experiences of World War I and the following German Revolution of 1918 – events that shaped not only Werner Scholem, but a whole generation.

The project is divided into three major stages representing the main phases of Scholem's biography:

- 1) Youth and Political Socialization (1895-1919)
- 2) Political Career (1919-1926)
- 3) Private Life and Persecution (1926-1940)

The dissertation started in October 2009. The first part of the manuscript is almost completed. The project is located at the University of Potsdam (Germany) and funded by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The advisor is Professor Mario Kessler, co-advisor is Professor Michael Buckmiller (University of Hanover).

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