

Outwitting the Gestapo? German Communist Resistance between Loyalty and Betrayal

Journal of Contemporary History

2022, Vol. 57(2) 365–386

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0022009421997906

journals.sagepub.com/home/jch



Udo Grashoff 

Universität Leipzig, Germany

Abstract

This article discusses ambiguous tactics of German Communist resisters in the Third Reich. The official historiography of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) portrayed Communist resisters as unflinching heroes. By contrast, revisionist studies published after 1990 presented Communists as traitors and renegades. This study transcends these approaches that revolve around legitimation or de-legitimation of the dictatorship, and examines the dubious manoeuvring of three German Communists who strategically collaborated with the Nazis, namely Theodor Bottländer, Friedrich Schlotterbeck and Wilhelm Knöchel. While Knöchel's attempts to outwit the Gestapo failed and could not prevent his execution, Schlotterbeck and Bottländer found ways to survive - largely without betraying their comrades. Even so, the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD), as well as its successor in the GDR, the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED), reprimanded venturesome, inventive and obstinate Communists, excluded them from the party and brought them to court. The harsh reactions are indicative of the inability of Communist historiography to acknowledge 'Eigen-Sinn', and highlight a central shortcoming of the antifascist doctrine. Likewise, more recent revisionist approaches have failed to recognise various attempts of Communists to minimise harm and survive in the grey zone between betrayal and loyalty.

Keywords

collaboration, German Communist Party, German Democratic Republic, grey zone, resistance, Third Reich

Corresponding author:

Udo Grashoff, Universität Leipzig, Leipzig, Germany.

Email: udo.grashoff@uni-leipzig.de

The main purpose of the East German antifascism was to compensate for the legitimacy deficit of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a state that was not a national entity, lacked support from large parts of the population and underperformed economically, particularly compared to the West German state.¹ In order to make the GDR appear the better of the two German states, the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland (SED) presented the German Communists' resistance and their particular political project as a universal endeavour. That was barely possible without a certain distortion of facts. Take as an example one central component of the antifascist narrative in the GDR, Bruno Apitz' novel *Naked Among Wolves*. The story of the book (and the movie with the same title) is based on the authentic case of Jewish child Stefan Jerzy Zweig. The plot claims that self-sacrificing Communists saved the life of the little boy, but in reality the Communists who had to compile the lists for deportation sent another child to Auschwitz instead.² *Naked Among Wolves* depicts vividly the torture and murder of Communists by the SS (Sturmstaffel; Nazi organisation which ran the concentration camps) and claims that the Communists fell victim to the SS because of their attempts to save the child. In reality, the reason for the persecution by the SS (which actually took place) was a political event, a secret celebration of Ernst Thälmann's birthday.³ The story also provides a somewhat exaggerated image of the supposed 'self-liberation' of the camp, which was in fact a takeover after most of the SS guards had left due to the approach of US troops.⁴

Since the end of the Communist dictatorship in East Germany, historiographers have put in great efforts to dismantle the antifascist myth that dominated the GDR's public discourse. Terms such as 'state-ordained' or 'prescribed' antifascism have served to highlight the function of the myth as a political tool.⁵ Recent studies have called all components of the politically-motivated myth into question. Critical scholars have pointed to the fact that the 'one-dimensional master narrative' propagated by the SED glorified Communists as unfaltering heroes and excluded politically sensitive issues.⁶ It placed the Communist resistance movement at the centre of antifascist resistance and downplayed the importance of other opponents and victims of Nazi terror. New research has challenged the glorification of

1 U. Grashoff, 'Legitimation, repression and co-optation in the German Democratic Republic', in U. Backes and S. Kailitz (eds) *Ideocracies in Comparison. Legitimation-Co-optation-Repression*. (New York, NY 2016), 173–97.

2 B. Niven, *The Buchenwald Child. Truth, Fiction, and Propaganda* (Rochester, NY 2007).

3 L. Niethammer (ed.) *Der "gesäuberte" Antifaschismus. Die SED und die roten Kapos von Buchenwald* (Berlin 1994), 61f.

4 Stiftung Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, Chronologie der Befreiung. Available at: www.buchenwald.de/473/ (accessed 30 November 2019). Communists developed the image of heroic Communist resistance at Buchenwald mainly as a counter-image against accusations by a US report highlighting the dominant role of red Kapos and atrocities committed by them. Niven, *The Buchenwald Child*, 55–56.

5 J. Danyel (ed.) *Die geteilte Vergangenheit. Zum Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Widerstand in beiden deutschen Staaten* (Berlin 1995); M. Agethen, E. Jesse and E. Neubert, *Der missbrauchte Antifaschismus. DDR-Staatsdoktrin und Lebenslüge der deutschen Linken* (Freiburg 2002).

6 C. Plum, *Antifascism After Hitler. East German Youth and Socialist Memory 1949–1989* (New York, NY 2015), 1.

Communists and questioned the ‘Thälmann myth’.⁷ It has revealed un-heroic sides of Communist resistance in the Third Reich, most notably collaboration with the SS and the Gestapo.⁸ Several scholars have emphasised one of the most striking shortcomings of antifascism: its marginalisation of the Holocaust.⁹ Following Dimitrov’s famous definition, the Communist interpretation of fascism reduced Nazi rule to mere class struggle and thus overlooked the racist and antisemitic nature of the Third Reich.¹⁰ The mass murder of European Jews was remembered in the GDR and became part of official education and culture, but it was always marginalised compared to the suffering of the Communists.¹¹ Likewise, East German antifascism largely ignored conservative, Christian or military resistance.

The story of the Buchenwald child is a typical antifascist amalgam of fact and fiction. In the antifascist myth, ideologically motivated distortions interfere with historical substance, in accordance with its function as justification of dictatorial rule.¹² But the main problem of Communist antifascism is not that its references to the past were entirely unsubstantiated. Even though doubts can be raised over many details, it cannot be denied that many Communists did engage in large-scale resistance activities. Revisionist critique has complemented the history of Communist resistance by revealing its many limitations and weaknesses, but has not always acknowledged that the heroic antifascist myth still retains some substance.¹³ The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was the most important force among different strands of resistance against the Nazi dictatorship. After Hitler’s appointment as chancellor, approximately 10% of its 300,000 members still actively supported the party even though these activities were illegal.¹⁴ Communist resistance varied in form and scope, and was for the most part not centrally coordinated (contrary to a central dogma of the myth), but it did continue until

7 R. Börrnert, *Ernst Thälmann als Leitfigur der kommunistischen Erziehung in der DDR* (Braunschweig 2002); A. Führer, *Ernst Thälmann. Soldat des Proletariats* (München 2011).

8 Niethammer (ed.) *Der “gesäuberte” Antifaschismus*; K.-M. Mallmann, ‘Die V-Leute der Gestapo. Umriss einer kollektiven Biographie’, in G. Paul and K.-M. Mallmann (eds) *Die Gestapo. Mythos und Realität* (Darmstadt 1995), 268–87; Mallmann, ‘Brüderlein & Co. Die Gestapo und der kommunistische Widerstand in der Kriegsendphase’, in G. Paul and K.-M. Mallmann (eds) *Die Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg. ‘Heimatfront’ und besetztes Europa*, (Darmstadt 2000), 270–87; W. Mensing, ‘Vertrauensleute kommunistischer Herkunft bei Gestapo und NS-Nachrichtendiensten am Beispiel von Rhein und Ruhr’, *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung* (2004), 111–30; Mensing, ‘Bekämpft, gesucht, benutzt. Zur Geschichte der Gestapo-V-Leute und Gestapo-Agenten’, *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat* 17 (2005), 111–35.

9 D. Diner, C. Gundermann, ‘On the ideology of antifascism’, *New German Critique* 67 (1996), 123–32.

10 G. Dimitrov, ‘The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International’, Main Report delivered at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, August 1935, in *VII Congress of the Communist International: Abridged Stenographic Report of Proceedings* (Moscow 1939).

11 J. Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA 1997).

12 K.H. Jarausch, ‘The Failure of East German Antifascism: Some Ironies of History as Politics’, *German Studies Review* 14, 1 (1991), 85–102.

13 Hirschinger has debunked several biographical myths about Communists, but the examples are the exception rather than the rule. F. Hirschinger, *Fälschung und Instrumentalisierung antifaschistischer Biographien: Das Beispiel Halle/Saale 1945–2005* (Göttingen 2007).

14 D. Peukert, *Die KPD im Widerstand. Verfolgung und Untergrundarbeit an Rhein und Ruhr 1933 bis 1945* (Wuppertal 1980), 97.

1945 (in this regard, the SED historiography was correct). Particularly during the first three years of Hitler's rule, the KPD called on its members to resist heroically, at the risk of their lives. The tragic struggle took its toll. About one in two party members were imprisoned at least temporarily; 20,000 German Communists died in concentration camps or were executed.¹⁵

In West Germany, there has been a decade-long unwillingness to appreciate the Communists' contribution to the anti-Nazi resistance. The main reason for this reluctance was that most West German historians and politicians saw the Communist resistance as a precursor to the Communist dictatorship in East Germany. But this politically motivated linkage has been loosened beginning with Richard von Weizsäcker's famous speech in 1985.¹⁶ However, during the following years, the commemoration of ardent Communists such as Lilo Herrmann was still controversial in West Germany.¹⁷ And the politically motivated reluctance rose again after the reunification. In 1994, Franz Ludwig Graf Schenk zu Stauffenberg demanded the removal of the Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland (NKFD) from the exhibition of the Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand in Berlin. But director Peter Steinberg's insistence on the inclusion of the NKFD, as well as images of Wilhelm Pieck and Walter Ulbricht, became a turning point.¹⁸ Since then, the answer to the question of whether Communists belonged to the German resistance has usually been a positive one. Today, most contemporary historians acknowledge the Communist resistance, at least to some extent. There is still a certain preference for resistance from conservatives, the military and private individuals. Popular exhibitions, as well as university teaching and educational state guidelines, tend to downplay the workers' resistance.¹⁹ But there is also a growing body of literature on leftist resistance groups in the Third Reich.²⁰

15 A. Herbst, *Kommunistischer Widerstand 1933–1945*. Available at: www.ddr-biografien.de/00000095890f9bc01/0000009589137ed36.html (accessed 27 March 2020).

16 M. Wilke, 'Der Schwur von Buchenwald – Zwei Wege aus der Katastrophe', in M. Agethen et al. (eds) *Der missbrauchte Antifaschismus* (Freiburg im Breisgau 2002), 40–62, see 59. One of the first West German historians who acknowledged the KPD's contribution to the anti-Nazi resistance was Rothfels. See H. Rothfels, *Die deutsche Opposition gegen Hitler* (Frankfurt 1964).

17 L. Letsche, 'Schwierigkeiten mit einer Ehrung', in *Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes – Bund der Antifaschisten, Landesverband Baden-Württemberg e.V.* (eds.) *Lilo Herrmann - eine Stuttgarter Widerstandskämpferin* (2nd edn, Stuttgart 1993), 56–65.

18 P. Steinbach, *Widerstand im Widerstreit. Der Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus in der Erinnerung der Deutschen* (2nd edn, Paderborn, Munich, Wien, Zurich 2001), 467.

19 In view of the one-sided remembrance of conservative resistance, Hans Coppi has called the workers' massive opposition to Hitler a 'forgotten resistance'. H. Coppi, S. Heinz (eds) *Der vergessene Widerstand der Arbeiter. Gewerkschafter, Kommunisten, Sozialdemokraten, Troztkisten, Anarchisten und Zwangsarbeiter* (Berlin 2012), 9, 15.

20 A.G. Graf (ed.), *Anarchisten gegen Hitler. Anarchisten, Anarcho-Syndikalisten, Rätekommunisten in Widerstand und Exil* (Berlin 2001); A. Herbst, 'Kommunistischer Widerstand', P. Steinbach and J. Tuchel (eds) *Widerstand gegen die nationalsozialistische Diktatur 1933–1945* (Berlin 2004), 33–55; H.-R. Sandvoß, *Die 'andere' Reichshauptstadt. Widerstand aus der Arbeiterbewegung in Berlin von 1933 bis 1945* (Berlin 2007); idem, *Mehr als eine Provinz! Widerstand aus der Arbeiterbewegung 1933–1945 in der preußischen Provinz Brandenburg* (Berlin 2019).

However, overcoming ostracism of the KPD is one thing, and developing a nuanced and precise understanding is another. Neglect of the individual perspective is, to some extent, a legacy of the GDR. In accordance with the 'legitimising' function of antifascism, the main values heralded by the SED were obedience, discipline and identification with the state and party.²¹ The fact that antifascism was often based on civil courage was barely mentioned. While this blended well with the dictatorial nature of the SED state, the denial of ambiguity and the rejection of 'psychologically oriented approaches to the question of Nazi collaboration' was a missed opportunity to make antifascism more authentic and credible.²² The SED's antifascist propaganda with its inauthentic heroes did not always find acceptance among the younger generation.²³ The fact that Communist heroes rarely had any doubts, contradictions, bad habits, etc. made them abstract and uninteresting, and an easy target for critique and disregard. The ideological misinterpretation of fascism as a radical form of financial capitalism, together with this heroic presentation, led to a superficial process of coming to terms with the Nazi past, made antifascism appear a hollow slogan to many, and, most notably, did not eradicate fascism for good as expected, as the significant number of reported incidents of racism and fascist provocation in the GDR indicates.²⁴

While the politically motivated Stalinisation of the Communist resistance made the internal (and conflicts around dissent, secession, opposition and betrayal) a forbidden zone in the GDR,²⁵ this schematic representation has been mirrored by a Western stereotype of seeing communists as party soldiers and Stalin's loyal followers. Historians such as Hermann Weber and Carola Stern established this assessment during the Cold War.

A new generation of scholars has challenged this overly static view of the Communist resistance during the 1980s. Detlev Peukert and Beatrix Herlemann have shown, for instance, the relative independence of Knöchel's underground network and his actions and provided a nuanced and balanced interpretation.²⁶ The new approach by West German historians came, at least partly, along with an acknowledgement of the dark and dubious aspects of resistance in the grey zone between betrayal and opposition.²⁷ In particular, Herlemann has scrutinised the

21 J.H. Brinks, 'Political Anti-Fascism in the German Democratic Republic', *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, 2 (1997), 207–17; H. Peitsch and J. Sayner, 'Tendentiousness and Topicality. Buchenwald and Antifascism as Sites of GDR Memory', *German Politics and Society*, 33, 114 (2015), 100–18, see 106.

22 S. Allan, 'DEFA's antifascist myths and the construction of national identity in East German cinema', K. Leeder (ed) *Rereading East Germany. The literature and film of the GDR*, (Cambridge 2015), 52–69, see 54.

23 O. Groehler, 'Antifaschismus – Vom Umgang mit einem Begriff', in U. Herbert and O. Groehler (eds) *Zweierlei Bewältigung* (Hamburg 1992), 29–40.

24 Waibel, *Der gescheiterte Anti-Faschismus der SED*.

25 Sandvoß, *Die "andere" Reichshauptstadt*, 13.

26 B. Herlemann, *Auf verlorenem Posten. Kommunistischer Widerstand im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Die Knöchel-Organisation* (Bonn 1986).

27 B. Herlemann, 'Kommunistischer Widerstand', in W. Benz and W.H. Pehle (eds) *Lexikon des deutschen Widerstandes* (Frankfurt 2001), 40.

dubious aspects of Knöchel's tactics. With the new approach, a complexity of behaviour in existentially threatening situations came into view that can be described with the analytical category of 'Eigen-Sinn'.²⁸ Even though the term did not yet exist at the time, the concept of 'Eigen-Sinn' allows for recognition of the paradoxical concurrency of party allegiance and nonconformist 'stubborn' actions of quite a few members of Communist resistance groups.

Since the end of the GDR, however, historians have studied the work of informers mainly from the perspective of the Gestapo,²⁹ often with de-legitimatory intentions.³⁰ One of the most influential revisionist publications, Lutz Niethammer's edited volume on the red 'Kapos' of Buchenwald, emphasised the privileges of Communist prisoner functionaries and their involvement in corruption and murder, but the book failed to contextualise the actions of Communist camp inmates sufficiently.³¹

Moreover, to the present day, some historians take up views developed during the Cold War and argue, for instance, that the KPD's resistance mainly failed due to the persistence of rigid ideological guidelines, and the Communists' uncritical following of Stalin.³² One historian has even claimed that German Communist resisters, like Stalin, used to murder comrades who did not conform to the party line.³³ In a similar vein, Niethammer insisted that members of the Communist organisation in the Buchenwald camp always toed the party line, and he maintained that their ideological conformity went hand in hand with a strong will to fight for the survival of the own group, including the acceptance of participation in murderous crimes of the SS.³⁴ To be fair, Niethammer put in every effort to paint a

28 T. Lindenberger, 'Eigen-Sinn, Domination and No Resistance', *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 3.8.2015. Available at: http://docupedia.de/zg/Eigensinn_28english_version.29?oldid=108826 (accessed 19 October 2020).

29 K.-M. Mallmann, 'Die V-Leute der Gestapo. Umriss einer kollektiven Biographie', in G. Paul and M. Mallmann (eds) *Die Gestapo. Mythos und Realität* (Darmstadt 1995), 268–87; Brüderlein & Co. 'Die Gestapo und der kommunistische Widerstand in der Kriegsendphase', in G. Paul and M. Mallmann (eds) *Die Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg. 'Heimatfront' und besetztes Europa* (Darmstadt 2000), 270–87.

30 W. Mensing, 'Gestapo V-Leute kommunistischer Herkunft – auch ein Strukturproblem der KPD?' *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen* (2005) 34; 'Vertrauensleute kommunistischer Herkunft bei Gestapo und NS-Nachrichtendiensten am Beispiel von Rhein und Ruhr', *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung* (2004); 'Bekämpft, gesucht, benutzt. Zur Geschichte der Gestapo-V-Leute und Gestapo-Agenten', *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat* (2005), 17.

31 L. Niethammer (ed.) *Der 'gesäuberte' Antifaschismus. Die SED und die roten Kapos von Buchenwald*, (Berlin 1994); for a critical view, see W. Bramke, 'Die öffentliche Erinnerung an die Verfolgung und den Widerstand aus der Arbeiterbewegung. Defizite und Perspektiven', in H. Coppi and S. Heinz (eds) *Der vergessene Widerstand der Arbeiter. Gewerkschafter, Kommunisten, Sozialdemokraten, Trotzlisten, Anarchisten und Zwangsarbeiter* (Berlin 2012), 289–304, see 299.

32 Adopting Weber's earlier arguments, see: R. Stoenescu, *Das Scheitern des kommunistischen Widerstands. Die Auswirkungen der ideologischen Leitlinien der KPD 1933–1945* (Marburg 2013).

33 R. Herder, *Wege in den Widerstand gegen Hitler* (Freiburg im Breisgau 2009), 35. He writes, 'dass die Kommunisten sich weitgehend kritiklos in den Dienst des Stalinismus stellten, mithin eines anderen totalitären und ähnlich mörderischen Systems. Auch im Kampf gegen den Nationalsozialismus wurde stets auf strenge Linientreue geachtet und Abweichler wurden liquidiert.' This is an exaggerated generalisation at best. For a critical assessment see: Gebauer, 249.

34 L. Niethammer, 'Die SED und die roten Kapos von Buchenwald', in H. Schuh (ed.) *Buchenwald und der deutsche Antifaschismus* (Brühl/Rheinland 1996), 75–98, see 85.

nuanced, balanced picture, but in his account, tactical collaboration always amounts to a selfish act, partly to the detriment of other inmate groups such as Sinti and Roma, homosexuals and asocials.

A few studies have challenged these views. Ulrich Peters has tried to justify the actions of the Communists in Buchenwald as adequate (under the given circumstances of a terroristic regime) and humanistic.³⁵ Thomas Gebauer has rejected the derogatory picture, which is still to be found in recent publications, of the Communist resistance as unworldly and suicidal.³⁶ He considers many of the Communist actions opposing the rise of Hitler to be realist,³⁷ and argues that the main cause of the KPD's failure was denunciation and Gestapo infiltration.³⁸ Stephan Stracke has examined the devastating effect of confessions under torture, betrayal and the work of Gestapo informants in Wuppertal, which led to the destruction of a huge local resistance network.³⁹

But even in accounts which paint a favourable picture of the illegal KPD, there is little room for individual decisions and actions. Gebauer emphasises that thousands of Communists supported the illegal KPD according to the party discipline they were used to, and does not focus much on agency.⁴⁰ Stracke develops a perspective of total suffering. Whatever individuals did under pressure – such as testifying against comrades, acting as stool pigeons or informants, or appealing for clemency – they appear as demoralised fighters forced to adapt to the Nazi regime.⁴¹

It is a sign of progress that recent publications often feature the independent ('eigenständig') structures and actions of many Communist resistance groups in the Third Reich, particularly in the period after 1935.⁴² But still, historical actors appear as static figures without much room for manoeuvre. A few historians such as Hans-Rainer Sandvoß have observed the paradoxical ambiguity of the Communist resistance. On the one hand, the individual did not count and was expected to be willing to be sacrificed in order to protect the party. On the other hand, this did not prevent the Communist groups from displaying widespread civil courage.⁴³ But only rarely do scholars focus on individuals, their reactions to extreme challenges and their 'Eigen-Sinn'. Correspondingly, Sandvoß recognises the un-dogmatic and pragmatic actions of the leftist resistance outside the KPD,

35 U. Peters, *Wer die Hoffnung verliert, hat alles verloren. Kommunistischer Widerstand in Buchenwald* (Köln 2003), 189.

36 B. Koehn, *Der deutsche Widerstand gegen Hitler. Eine Würdigung* (Berlin 2007), 50.

37 T. Gebauer, *Das KPD-Dezernat der Gestapo Düsseldorf* (Hamburg 2011), 2.

38 Gebauer, *Das KPD-Dezernat*, 3.

39 S. Stracke, 'Die Wuppertaler Gewerkschaftsprozesse', in H. Coppi and S. Heinz (eds) *Der vergessene Widerstand der Arbeiter. Gewerkschaftler, Kommunisten, Sozialdemokraten, Trotzlisten, Anarchisten und Zwangsarbeiter* (Berlin 2012), 47–71.

40 Gebauer, *Das KPD-Dezernat*, 253.

41 Stracke, 'Die Wuppertaler Gewerkschaftsprozesse', 68–69.

42 W. Benz, *Der deutsche Widerstand gegen Hitler* (2nd edn, Munich 2019), 20–21.

43 Sandvoß, *Die 'andere' Reichshauptstadt*, 614.

and refers to examples such as Ernst Reuter, or oppositional Communists such as members of 'Neu Beginnen'.⁴⁴

This article transcends the abovementioned approaches and more closely examines the Communist resisters' individual behaviour, which otherwise falls between the cracks. It explores the strategies of Communist resisters who collaborated strategically with the Gestapo. These ambiguous cases are situated between the poles of heroic resistance and betrayal.

The antifascist cult in the GDR reflected an abstract concept of man ('Menschenbild'), which prevailed within the party and prevented them from recognising and appreciating some of the real challenges and achievements of the anti-Nazi resistance. Communist leader Ernst Thälmann appeared 'as the iconic embodiment of an abstract political idea rather than an individual of flesh and blood' and most of his portraits lacked 'psychological interiority and character development'.⁴⁵ Unflinching heroes such as Anton Saefkow or Robert Uhrig became icons, but these steadfast Communists remained stereotypical figures. Conflicts, doubts or any signs of weakness could barely be mentioned in the context of the GDR's antifascist memory culture. The SED's depiction of resistance fighters as ideologically firm and morally superior undermined their credibility, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening up of East German archives, a number of case studies added wavering and treacherous Communists such as Brüderlein, Pannek, Rambow and many others to the pantheon of antifascist resistance fighters.⁴⁶

These traitors were barely mentioned in the GDR even though their collaboration with the Gestapo had terrible consequences. Fritz Brüderlein infiltrated an antifascist network in Leipzig, Alfons Pannek acted as an agent provocateur in Hamburg, and Ernst Rambow assisted the Gestapo in making a raid on the large resistance organisation led by Anton Saefkow, Franz Jacob and Bernhard Bästlein in Berlin. All three were long-time members of the KPD, and their betrayal led to the arrest of hundreds of resisters, many of whom were executed by the Nazis.

44 Sandvoß, *Die 'andere' Reichshauptstadt*, 616.

45 S. Allan, 'DEFA's antifascist myths and the construction of national identity in East German cinema', in K. Leeder (ed.) *Rereading East Germany. The literature and film of the GDR* (Cambridge 2015), 52–69, see 57.

46 R. Scheer, 'Rambow – Spuren von Verfolgung und Verrat', *Dachauer Hefte* 10, 10 (1994), 191–213; R. Sassning, *Die Verhaftung Ernst Thälmanns und der Fall 'Kattner'* (Berlin 1998); A. Herbst, 'Heinrich Wiatrek – Kommunist oder "Überläufer"?' *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung* (2002), 336–57; S. Grundmann, *Der Geheimapparat der KPD im Visier der Gestapo. Das BB-Ressort. Funktionäre, Beamte, Spitzel & Spione* (Berlin 2008); A. Herbst, 'Michael Klause: Vom AM-Apparat der KPD zum "Kronzeugen" der Gestapo', in S. Barck and U. Plener (eds) *Verrat. Die Arbeiterbewegung zwischen Trauma und Trauer*, (Berlin 2009), 187–94; A. Sperk, 'V-Leute der Politischen Polizei zu Beginn des Nationalsozialismus' *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Anhaltische Landeskunde* 21 (2012), 139–58; H. Diercks, 'Der Einsatz von V-Leuten bei der Hamburger Gestapo', in KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme (ed) *Polizei, Verfolgung und Gesellschaft im Nationalsozialismus*, (Bremen 2013), 119–35; U. Grashoff, 'Opportunismus und Überläufertum im Konzentrationslager Sachsenburg im Jahr 1933', in B. Pampel and M. Schmeitzner (eds) *Konzentrationslager Sachsenburg (1933–1937)* (Dresden 2018), 262–76.

Research on betrayal within the illegal KPD was, and still is, a necessary step to obtain the full picture. This article builds on this strand of research but goes a step further in exploring the grey zone between the extreme positions of heroisation of Communist resisters and exposure of weaknesses and inconsistencies such as collaboration with the Gestapo. As Primo Levi has shown, it was a typical method of Nazi rule to attempt to turn victims into accomplices. The grey zone of forced collaboration comprised a spectrum of different degrees of compromise, as well as different outcomes.⁴⁷

Unlike Levi's examples and Niethammer's study on Buchenwald, the focus of the following discussion is neither on corruption nor on collective privileges. The individual behaviour discussed here falls rather under the rubric of 'Eigen-Sinn' – denoting the parallel occurrence of conformity with expectations of the party and individually practised detachment from these expectations.⁴⁸ I examine three examples of German Communist resistance fighters. All three were trained Communists in different leadership positions. I have chosen examples of relatively high-level functionaries in order to show that 'Eigen-Sinn' was not a peripheral phenomenon in the illegal KPD. Theodor Bottländer was head of the department within KPD intelligence, the so-called 'Antimilitaristischer Apparat' (AM-Apparat), and Friedrich Schlotterbeck led the Württembergian Communist youth organisation until 1933. The most prominent of the three functionaries, Wilhelm Knöchel, was head of the KPD outpost in Amsterdam from 1936 and became a member of the central committee of the KPD in 1939. In January 1942, the party sent him to the Third Reich with the order to establish a new KPD leadership within the country.

The following case studies set out to explore the strategies these Communists deployed in order to fool the Gestapo, and analyse their motivations to develop their own tactics.

Theodor Bottländer was hardly a typical Communist – not only in terms of his social background as son of an entrepreneur. After being politically radicalised during the unsettled early years of the Weimar Republic, the young man was involved in bomb attacks and temporarily took refuge in the Soviet Union. After his return, Bottländer received a six-year prison sentence, but he was granted amnesty in 1928. Politically trained during his stay in Moscow, he then worked for the KPD intelligence, the 'AM-Apparat'. Bottländer became head of the department that monitored and undermined the military and the police. Soon his main task shifted towards monitoring right-wing organisations. He became leader of the 'Aufbruch-Kreis', a heterogeneous group of Communists as well as renegades from right-wing groups aiming at subversion of the political right.⁴⁹ Theodor Bottländer

47 P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London 1989), 25.

48 Lindenberger, 'Eigen-Sinn, Domination and No Resistance'.

49 Cf. T.S. Brown, *Weimar Radicals: Nazis and Communists between Authenticity and Performance* (New York, NY 2009), 101–2.

was a clever tactician. Several contemporaries acknowledged his cunning – either appreciatively or with alarm, depending on their political views.⁵⁰ During the Weimar Republic, he was able to live under an alias for years, and continued his clandestine activities after Hitler came to power.

On 12 October 1933, the Gestapo arrested him. In this precarious situation, Bottländer showed proof of his concealment abilities. The Gestapo needed almost a month to find out his real name, another month to determine that he was involved in the AM-Apparat and a third month to establish his leading position. Were it not for several comrades who broke under torture, the Gestapo would have been in the dark much longer. Bottländer remained steadfast as long as physically possible and confessed only when it became unavoidable, at which point he concealed much more than he revealed. He managed to withhold information about his Communist engagement during the Weimar Republic, and led the Gestapo to believe that he had become involved in the AM-Apparat only in 1932.⁵¹ At the same time, he avoided disclosing names and persisted in falsely claiming that he knew comrades only under aliases. Moreover, he invented a fictitious functionary in order to cover his tracks. In so doing, he successfully practised what internal party guidelines expected from him.

While the camouflage tactic did work for a certain time, he had to make concessions to some degree. For example, he disclosed organisational details of the KPD intelligence (including the aliases of the departments). In this way, he violated official guidelines stating that a Communist must not betray anything to the Gestapo.⁵² His decision to disclose selected details might have been a result of disappointment with the ill-conceived and panic-stricken behaviour of his comrades, as several arrested comrades had made confessions which severely undermined his defence strategy. In one letter smuggled out of prison, he expressed anger at the panicked reaction of his fellows. But nothing indicates that he had any intention to retaliate for it. On the contrary, even in this situation, he protected his comrades to a large extent.

Half a year later, becoming aware of a fortunate change in circumstances, Bottländer even reversed course and attempted to amend his confessions. One main prosecution witness who had collaborated with the Gestapo, Alfred Kattner, the former secretary of KPD leader Ernst Thälmann, was dead. A Communist killer had assassinated Kattner on 1 February 1934. Another witness, Karl Langowski, a functionary of the AM-Apparat, had changed his mind. Having implicated Bottländer initially, Langowski came under pressure from his fellow prisoners and promised not to incriminate him further. In view of this fortunate

50 Bericht über Bottländer und Artner, 12 November 1937 (SAPMO-BArch, RY 1/I 2/3/92, fol. 203); H. Nürnberger to ORA, Hannover, 18 June 1935 (BArch, ZC 6329, vol. 4 [new R 3017/29906], fol. 312).

51 Cf. Gestapa, Kriminalassistent Giering, Schlussbericht, 13 February 1934 (BStU, MfS, HA IX/11, SV 1/81, vol. 191, fol. 147–52).

52 Gestapa Interrogation Protocols Theodor Bottländer January 1934 (BStU, MfS, HA IX/11, SV 1/81, vol. 247).

turn of events, Bottländer took the earliest possible opportunity to retract some of his statements.⁵³

This underscores his motivation and his tactical skills. The aforementioned letter indicates that he felt betrayed by his comrades, but this did not alienate him from the Communist Party. He behaved responsibly and prudently in order to minimise harm. However, he did learn one particular lesson: in the future, he was to count on himself and not on others. This became his maxim in further interactions with the Gestapo. Before the end of his prison term, in spring 1937, the Gestapo ordered for Bottländer to be transferred to their headquarters in Berlin. Initially the Gestapo wanted him to write a report about the training school of the Communist International in Moscow, which he had attended twice. According to Bottländer's own account, he accomplished the task mainly by compiling existing material, and it is likely that this collaboration was relatively harmless in his own eyes. However, even this form of light cooperation with the Gestapo was definitely not what the party expected from a leading functionary of the KPD.

However, the Gestapo's keen interest in his elaboration provided an excellent opportunity for Bottländer to pursue a hidden agenda of expanding his scope of action. He made the Gestapo believe that he was a compliant renegade, and the feint was successful. Soon the Gestapo entrusted him with the task of investigating the KPD leadership in exile in Paris. As a precaution, his partner Mary Artner was sent ahead. She encountered severe difficulties, as the KPD intelligence met her with immense distrust, culminating in the confiscation of her passport. The vigilant Communists gave her an ultimatum: the KPD threatened to denounce Artner as a collaborator in the event that her partner did not appear within eight days. It is telling that the cunning Bottländer was able to benefit even from that predicament. He reproached his Gestapo officer and made him believe that only he could recover this difficult situation caused by the Gestapo. Bottländer was sent to Paris instantly, outfitted with money and a fake ID. Instead of working for the Gestapo, he approached the KPD in exile, disclosed his situation to his comrades and suggested plans on how to exploit the situation in order to undermine the Gestapo.

But the Communist intelligence in Paris did not show the slightest inclination to consider Bottländer's proposals. Instead, the KPD publicly celebrated its vigilance in denouncing Bottländer as a traitor in a Communist paper in 1938. While it took the Gestapo a good while to realise that Bottländer had fooled them, it was not owing to the Gestapo but to the exaggerated fears of the Communist party in exile that his clever coup failed miserably in the end. In proclaiming ostensible success, the party in exile deceived itself by misreading his 'Eigen-Sinn' as betrayal.⁵⁴ Bottländer's plans were hazardous, reckless and did not comply with the party

53 Reichsgericht, Untersuchungsrichter Landgerichtsrat Mittendorf, Vernehmungen Theodor Bottländer, Berlin, 4.–11.7.1934 (BStU, MfS, HA IX/11, SV 1/81, vol. 191, fol. 154–90).

54 Achtung, Gestapo! Der Fall Bottländer. Vom Verrat zur Provokation, *Die Internationale* (1938) 5/6, 62–7.

line. But there is not the slightest justification for the accusation that Bottländer acted on behalf of the Gestapo. This is corroborated by the fact that the Gestapo listed Bottländer as wanted after his escape.⁵⁵

The longer the Nazi regime lasted, the more difficult it was to determine the current party line. In view of the non-existence of a functioning hierarchical party organisation, Communist resisters had no choice but to come up with their own solutions. They had to second-guess the party line and to follow their political ideals while adjusting their actions to the specific situation. Being detached from the party leadership, they could hardly avoid developing some form of 'Eigen-Sinn'. This held true for the former leader of the Württembergian Communist youth organisation, Friedrich Schlotterbeck. In summer 1943, the Gestapo approached him with the offer of release in return for a vaguely defined service. Faced with the sudden prospect of release, the 34-year-old who had spent almost 10 years in prisons and concentration camps consulted his fellow prisoners. Their reaction was mixed: one experienced Communist advised against it, while others were undecided.⁵⁶ Uncertain, and only distantly aware of party guidelines as well as the devious motives of the Gestapo, Schlotterbeck decided to take the risk.

During the first weeks after his release from concentration camp, the Stuttgart Gestapo summoned and interrogated him regularly. In the beginning, his interaction with the Gestapo was seemingly innocuous – interrogators reminded him of his duty to report every activity hostile to the state, and he was unable to cite any. But then the Gestapo, in Schlotterbeck's words, 'let the cat out of the bag' and demanded written reports. Only then did Schlotterbeck realise that the Gestapo counted him as an informant.⁵⁷

Later Schlotterbeck defended his disputable decision to cooperate with the Gestapo by asserting that refusal would have put his life in danger. As the parallel case of Communist Franz Bellemann demonstrates, it was indeed dangerous to reject the Gestapo's offer. Like Schlotterbeck, Bellemann was released from the Welzheim camp to Stuttgart, but openly rejected the Gestapo. He was arrested again in 1944 and deported to the Dachau concentration camp, where he was forced to stay until the end of the war.⁵⁸

Schlotterbeck submitted a couple of reports but consistently fell short of expectations. The reports no longer exist, but several testimonies by Gestapo officers verify Schlotterbeck's obstinacy.⁵⁹ Most notably, the head of Stuttgart's Gestapo Friedrich Mussgay acknowledged that Schlotterbeck never yielded any substantial

55 Hitler's Black Book – information for Theodor Bottländer, Forces War Records. Available at: www.forces-war-records.co.uk/hitlers-black-book/person/978/theodor-bottlander (accessed 24 February 2021).

56 Willi Bechtle an ZKK, Stuttgart, 8 December 1950 (BStU, MfS, AU 309/54, vol. 13, fol. 6–8).

57 F. Schlotterbeck, Bericht an KPD-Emigrationsleitung Zürich, eingegangen 10.7.1944 (SAPMO-BArch, DY 30/IV 2/4/119, fol. 424–30, see 428).

58 Spruchkammer der Internierungslager Ludwigsburg, Protokoll der öffentlichen Sitzung, 20./21.2.1948 (LABW-StAL, EL 903/4, Bü 154, fol. 179–94, see 190).

59 I. Spruchkammer, Stuttgart, Einstellungs-Beschluss gegen Friedrich Schlotterbeck (BStU, MfS, AU 309/54, vol. 8, fol. 91–2).

information.⁶⁰ According to a former typist, the Gestapo even considered imprisoning Schlotterbeck in the Dachau concentration camp. They hesitated only because Mussgay still hoped to be able to track down subversive Communists with his help sooner or later.⁶¹

During his contact with the Gestapo, Schlotterbeck not only avoided denouncing any comrades, he even began to secretly rally a subversive group around him and his brother Hermann. The unexpected appearance of a former subtenant of the family, Eugen Nesper, served as a decisive impulse for this. As a soldier on the Eastern Front, Nesper had changed sides to the Red Army, and after having confessed himself to be a Communist, he had received training as a spy, first in the Soviet Union, and subsequently in Britain.⁶² After parachuting in from a British plane in January 1944, he contacted Schlotterbeck's family. Unfortunately, shortly after this first visit, the Gestapo seized Nesper and forced him to collaborate.⁶³

As a result, events took a tragic turn. Nesper betrayed various activities of Schlotterbeck's Communist circle to the Gestapo and even instigated a member of the Communist group to steal a military construction plan. The document was supposed to be sent to Moscow but ultimately fell into Gestapo hands. The Gestapo clamping down on the resistance group was only a matter of time.

In May 1944, however, events took another dramatic turn. Schlotterbeck confronted Nesper with his suspicions that he worked for the Gestapo, and Nesper admitted to the betrayal. In order to save their lives, Schlotterbeck organised the flight of four members of the group to Switzerland. But due to unfortunate circumstances, only he himself and Eugen Nesper, who had taken the same path after realising that his comrades had fled without him, reached Swiss territory. The Gestapo took cruel revenge for the escape and killed 11 members of Schlotterbeck's family and friends, including his parents, his brother and his fiancée.

After the war, Schlotterbeck faced accusations that his behaviour had been reckless and that he was at least partly to blame for the death of his family and friends. But in fact, he had acted valiantly and sober-mindedly. Schlotterbeck's 'Eigen-Sinn' was based on his own, debatable interpretation of the party line and even included a dangerous game with the Gestapo, but he always remained loyal to his party and ideology. The failure of his tactical manoeuvres was hardly his fault, and the tragic outcome was by no means foreseeable. Schlotterbeck had a realistic

60 I. Spruchkammer, Stuttgart, Spruch gegen Eugen Nesper, 14.7.1948 (BStU, MfS, AU 309/54, vol. 8, fol. 46–66, see 51).

61 L. Herrmann [Liselotte Kircheiss], 2 October 1948 (BStU, MfS, AU 309/54, vol. 8, fol. 96–7).

62 For an overview of these actions, see P. Erler, 'Militärische Kommandounternehmen. Deutsche Polit-Emigranten als sowjetische Fallschirmagenten und Partisanen 1941 bis 1945', *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat* 8 (2000), 79–101.

63 S. Brüggemann, 'Der Fall des Gestapoagenten Eugen Nesper und die Ermordung von Mitgliedern der Schlotterbeck-Gruppe', in I. Barz et al. (eds) *Die Geheime Staatspolizei in Württemberg und Hohenzollern*, (Stuttgart 2013), 196–208.

chance and was, even if only temporarily and to a limited extent, successful in his recalcitrance towards the Gestapo.

The third example of a Communist who 'supped with the devil' differs from the previous two insofar as his collaboration with the Gestapo was directly motivated by the wish to save his own life. When the Gestapo arrested Wilhelm Knöchel at the end of January 1943, they soon realised that he was a top functionary, and this all but sealed his fate. Knöchel was the former head of the Amsterdam-based section of the KPD responsible for the Ruhr area, and a member of the central committee of the party.⁶⁴ At the beginning of 1942, the party sent him to the Third Reich with the task of reviving the Communist party in West Germany. He established a resistance group with more than 200 supporters which produced and circulated a number of subversive leaflets.⁶⁵ In May 1942, the KPD extended Knöchel's mission and made him responsible for the reorganisation of the party across the whole Reich.

It took the Gestapo almost a year to trace the subversive network, and it was only due to a denunciation by a member of the Hitler Youth that they were able to arrest dozens of resisters and their supporters.

Caught by the end of January 1943, Knöchel initially revealed to the Gestapo only a few details, such as a couple of names and a secret appointment. The latter led to the arrest of his main supporter in Berlin, Alfred Kowalke. But soon Knöchel commenced a painful rearguard action by making concessions to the Gestapo in order to gain some room for manoeuvre. He went even as far as submitting a written proposal to the Gestapo offering to work as an informant.⁶⁶ This attempt, undertaken three weeks after his arrest, is bewildering. Some scholars, such as Hermann Weber, consider Knöchel's behaviour to be betrayal. For others, such as Beatrix Herlemann and Detlev Peukert, it was a deliberate tactic, namely Knöchel preparing bait for the Gestapo, in order to once more seize the initiative.

The controversy mirrors the inconsistency of Knöchel's actions, which were self-contradictory and high-risk. In order to lend credence to his proposal, Knöchel had to offer something. He disclosed to the Gestapo that he was the head of the Communist party in Germany, and offered the names of a few comrades. Most notably, he mentioned a Dutch radio operator in Berlin. Since autumn 1942, this radioman had been on standby for direct communication with Moscow, but the Communists were still waiting for the radio apparatus. Knöchel also

64 By 1935, the KPD organised the resistance from several places outside the Third Reich such as Prague, Amsterdam and Copenhagen. Each outpost was responsible for a sector of Germany. Knöchel became head of the outpost in Amsterdam in 1936, and member of the central committee in 1939.

65 Different to Communist pamphlets in the 1930s, the illegal writings of the Knöchel organisation were less ideologically fixated. They forbore to glorify life in the Soviet Union and were mainly directed against the war and the Nazi regime. Herlemann considers Communist resistance organisations such as Knöchel's to be patriotic ventures. Beatrix Herlemann, *Der kommunistische Widerstand während des Krieges* (Berlin 1989), 15.

66 W. Knöchel, 'Wie ich mir die Zusammenarbeit für die kommenden Tage mit der Staatspolizei vorstelle bzw. in Vorschlag bringe, Düsseldorf, 17 February 1943 (BSTU, MfS, HA IX/11, SV 9/89, vol. 1, fol. 135–38).

revealed that the secret code for radio messages was hidden in his shaving brush. At the same time, he offered to take part in a deceptive manoeuvre called 'Funkspiel' (radio play) with Moscow. This was his 'bait'. In doing so, he demonstrated his importance to the Gestapo, and attempted to carve out time and to delay further arrests. Tragically, this had unintended consequences as the absence of sudden arrests led to a relaxation of safety precautions in the Communist underground in the Netherlands. This in turn facilitated their capture at a later date.⁶⁷

Also included in Knöchel's bait was a proposal to travel with the Gestapo to Amsterdam and lead the Gestapo to Communists gone underground. In order to appear trustworthy to the Gestapo, however, he had to disclose a few more names and addresses. This is the basis on which historians such as Weber see him as a traitor – this is not entirely unreasonable but neglects the fact that this 'betrayal' was an integral part of his tactics. Notably, at no time did he abandon his efforts completely. The fact that he adjusted his statements to the Gestapo depending on the situation corroborates this. He sought to protect certain important figures and to mitigate the impact of previously offered information.⁶⁸

The dilemma deriving from his adaptive tactics underlines the loss of control his endeavours entailed.⁶⁹ His strategy was high-risk, and did not meet with success. The Gestapo headquarters declined his proposal to work as informant for two reasons. Knöchel did not show sufficient knowledge of the Communist radio transmission network in the Netherlands that the Gestapo was pursuing. Gestapo head Müller also considered Knöchel's deployment as a means of entrapment too high-risk, not least in view of the recent escape of another Communist (Hermann Wenzel) during a 'Funkspiel'.⁷⁰

One might ask whether Knöchel had genuinely expected to be able to escape (if this was even his intention in the first place). He was seriously ill and had been suffering from tuberculosis since November 1942. Either way, the Gestapo did not take the risk. Knöchel was brought to Holland in bonds. He was also not directly involved in the Gestapo action but only witnessed the arrest of several Communists. After his return to Germany, the Volksgerichtshof sentenced him to death. He was beheaded on 24 July 1944. In contrast to comrades such as Alfred Kaps and Willi Seng, he neither surrendered all his knowledge nor appealed for clemency before the execution. Knöchel's 'going all in'⁷¹ is the most questionable of the three cases presented here. Unlike Bottländer and Schlotterbeck, he caused real harm to his comrades. But again, his intention to limit and control

67 Peukert, *Die KPD im Widerstand*, 379.

68 H. Weber and A. Herbst, *Deutsche Kommunisten. Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945* (Berlin 2004), 462–64; G. Harmsen, *Daan Goulooze: Uit Leven van Communist* (Utrecht 1967).

69 W. Knöchel, [Niederschrift], Düsseldorf, 22.2.1943 (Abschrift) (BStU, MfS, HA IX/11, SV 9/89, vol. 1, fol. 140–45).

70 Herlemann, *Auf verlorenem Posten*, 141.

71 B. Herlemann, 'Knöchel-Organisation', W. Benz and W.H. Pehle (eds) *Lexikon des deutschen Widerstandes* (Frankfurt am Main 2001), 243–45, see 245.

the degree of collaboration and his undaunted belief in the Communist idea are beyond doubt.

During their self-sacrificing struggle against the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1935, the KPD produced several guidelines stating that any deal with the Gestapo ought to be treated as 'betrayal'. From the Communist perspective, every breach of fidelity (i.e. of the relationship of trust with the KPD) jeopardised the party.⁷² A secret document captioned '11 Commandments for the Behaviour of Prisoners' called on arrested Communists to behave as follows: 'I definitely do not bear witness about my party and my comrades, neither to the Gestapo nor to the investigating judge, the court or similar institutions, because if I do so nonetheless, I will become a traitor to our movement, to my comrades, and will be relentlessly condemned at the proletarian trial sooner or later.'⁷³ The text issued by the KPD intelligence in 1934 leaves the concrete consequences of such behaviour vague. One could read it as a death threat, but assassination of traitors was not within the standard repertoire of German Communists. The murder of Gestapo informant Alfred Kattner in February 1934 was an exception, but might have served as a means of intimidation for other potential traitors.⁷⁴

More importantly, most of the text appeals to proletarian heroism and demands willingness to sacrifice. Arrested Communists were expected not to betray even the tiniest detail about the resistance organisation to the Gestapo, and to accept being bludgeoned to death if necessary. This was not mere propaganda. A number of Communists convinced of the prospect of a utopian future adhered to the norm and remained steadfast under torture. Others committed suicide in order to avoid becoming traitors. They threw themselves in front of cars, hanged themselves in the arrest cell or jumped out of a window at the first opportunity.

But not all Communists were keen to die a martyr's death. Many resistance fighters in the Third Reich were torn between the abstract party norm and the will to survive. Confronted with arrest, torture and blackmail, some found themselves making deals with the Gestapo, more often than not with the hidden agenda of testing the scope of action available to them and increasing the chances of survival. Thus, the three examples discussed in this article represent typical elements in the repertoires of Communist resisters.

However, the party strictly rejected such manoeuvres. In a book published in 1935, Sepp Schwab, a functionary of the Comintern, declared all attempts to 'outplay the police' to be futile: 'Experience has taught that the police is the

72 Due to the increasingly fragmented structure of the Communist resistance, it is questionable to what extent these guidelines reached the members of illegal Communist groups. Equally, those who did know the norms of the party leadership did not necessarily consider these directives particularly helpful. Cf. Karl Hans Bergmann, *Der Schlaf vor dem Erwachen. Stationen der Jahre 1931–1949* (Berlin 2002), 80.

73 11 Gebote für das Verhalten Verhafteter, 6.1.1935 (BArch, R 58/2163, 213–15, see 214), my own translation.

74 R. Sassning, *Die Verhaftung Ernst Thälmanns und der "Fall Kattner". Hintergründe, Verlauf, Folgen. Teil 2* (Berlin 1999).

stronger side in all cases'.⁷⁵ Guidelines distributed within Communist resistance groups stated clearly that all traitors were to be excluded from the party. With reference to Bottländer's case, Paul Bertz, head of KPD counterespionage in Paris, insisted on a zero tolerance policy for his party concerning such manoeuvres towards the Gestapo: 'On this point there can't be any concession'.⁷⁶

Consequently, the party in exile publicly denounced Bottländer as a traitor after his arrival in Paris and celebrated its own successful vigilance.⁷⁷ Moreover, the 'Bottländer case' was presented as a cautionary tale of unconventional independent initiative. The KPD urged party members to accept that tactical manoeuvring and making compromises with the Gestapo were 'unworthy of a Communist'.⁷⁸ For Bottländer, this was the end of his party career. He moved to England, and all trace of him disappeared during the war. One Communist reported seeing him wearing a British uniform in Berlin in 1945, while other accounts claim that he emigrated to Canada or New Zealand.⁷⁹

In the GDR, his supposed 'betrayal' was kept silent. His name was only used behind the scenes, and here the view of Bottländer as a traitor persisted. A Stasi research project on KPD intelligence reiterated the accusations made against him in 1938.⁸⁰ More recently, Andreas Herbst and Hermann Weber deemed it possible that he had only feigned cooperation, but even they consider the case to be still under debate.

Friedrich Schlotterbeck's disputes with his own party were more complicated. In a long statement he wrote after his arrival in Switzerland in August 1944, he defended his decision to go his own way against accusations from comrades that he had violated the party discipline. He emphasised the absence of organisational structures and presented his 'Eigen-Sinn' as unavoidable necessity: 'Regrettable as it is, not the organisation but the lone fighter is prevailing in our work in Germany'. Schlotterbeck defended any possible kind of deceit, pretence or lie towards the Gestapo and dismissed seemingly sincere alternatives as 'ridiculous heroism' and 'foolishly playing the martyr'.⁸¹ Notably, he considered KPD guidelines issued in the 1930s no longer valid as the situation had changed significantly. Shortly after coming into power, the Nazis had used Communist traitors for pro-

75 J. Koch [Sepp Schwab], *Der Kampf gegen Spitzelei und Provokation* (Moskau/Leningrad 1935), 39.

76 W. Glasbrenner [Paul Bertz], "Gestapo", *Die Internationale* (1938) 3/4, 34–42, see 41 my own translation.

77 'Achtung, Gestapo! Der Fall Bottländer. Vom Verrat zur Provokation', *Die Internationale* 5, 6 (1938), 62–67.

78 'Über Gestapomethoden und Konspiration. Beispiele und Lehren für den unterirdischen Kampf' (BStU, MfS, HA IX, Nr. 21383, 76–215, 208).

79 H. Weber and A. Herbst, *Deutsche Kommunisten. Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945* (Berlin 2004), 137–8.

80 Main results were published after the fall of the GDR. See B. Kaufmann et al., *Der Nachrichtendienst der KPD 1919–1937* (Berlin 1993), 408.

81 Friedrich Schlotterbeck an Schweizer KPD-Emigrationsleitung, Zürich, 6.8.1944 (BStU, MfS, AU 309/54, vol. 4, fol. 325–30, 328).

paganda in order to erode the Communists' following.⁸² In this situation, any collusion by a Communist functionary with the Gestapo would have damaged the party's reputation. During the war, when Schlotterbeck was released from concentration camp, the situation was different. The Gestapo had long since altered their strategy to infiltrating Communist groups only. They had also ceased to use Communist renegades for propaganda purposes. In view of the changed situation, clandestine deals with the Gestapo could no longer cause any harm to the party, Schlotterbeck argued.

Interestingly, this argument did hold, at least initially. The Communist party in Swiss exile decided not to exclude the obstinate comrade from the party, but only to suspend his membership, pending a final investigation after the end of the war. Schlotterbeck stayed closely connected with the party and immediately began to write a novel about his experiences in the Third Reich. The book was first published in Zürich in 1945.⁸³ This, as well as the horrible fate of his family, contributed to his rehabilitation: after his return to Württemberg, the Communist party readmitted him.⁸⁴

He became an important figure in public life. The US occupation power appointed Schlotterbeck as the president of the Red Cross in Württemberg-Baden. In summer 1948, he also played a central role in the de-Nazification trial of Eugen Nesper, the Communist parachute agent who had spied on Schlotterbeck for the Gestapo. In the same year, the US forces started the Berlin Airlift in reaction to the Soviet blockade of West Berlin, and asked the Red Cross for support. The Communist Schlotterbeck refused, and US officials attempted to exploit his previous status as Gestapo informant to get rid of this recalcitrant Communist. Seeing the situation deteriorate, Schlotterbeck escaped to the Soviet Occupation Zone and settled in Dresden. However, he soon became entangled in disputes with local party officials, mainly due to his headstrong, blunt and uncompromising attitude. Fuelled by Stalin's paranoia, and in the wake of the Slansky show trials in Czechoslovakia, local conflicts escalated and his life followed a downward spiral. In 1951, the SED excluded him, citing his novel as evidence of his collusion with the Gestapo, and ordered the book to be removed from public libraries. This was only the beginning: in 1953, the Stasi arrested him and prepared a court case.⁸⁵ During his trial, Schlotterbeck was faced with three accusations: deviant political opinions, contact with Noel Field (who was wrongly suspected

82 Cf. U. Grashoff, 'Erst rot, dann braun? Überläufer von der KPD zu NS-Organisationen im Jahr 1933', in G. Heydemann, J.E. Schulte and F. Weil (eds) *Sachsen und der Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen 2014), 215–36.

83 English version: Friedrich Schlotterbeck, *The Darker The Night, The Brighter The Stars. A German Worker Remembers (1933–1945)* (London 1947).

84 Bruno Fuhrmann an Kaderabteilung des Z.K. der KPD, Berlin, 18.10.1945 (BStU, MfS, AU 309/54, vol. 4, fol. 322).

85 It is important to note that he was not merely a victim but also contributed to the climate of accusations and suspicions with denunciatory letters. Likewise, it would be misleading to emphasise only Schlotterbeck's display of self-will. At the same time, he admired Stalin. When he heard about the death of the 'great leader' while under Stasi arrest in March 1953, he cried over the loss.

to be an American spy)⁸⁶ and Schlotterbeck's supposed collaboration with the Gestapo in Stuttgart. The court handed down a six-year prison sentence (which was subsequently reduced by the court of appeal to three years).

Khrushchev's Secret Speech of 1956 came too late for him to be released ahead of schedule, but one year after his release from prison, the party once more admitted him as a member in February 1957. In the wake of the Thaw, the commission even conceded that his punishment had been excessive and his accusation of being a Gestapo agent an 'unfortunate choice of words'. However, when he demanded full rehabilitation in 1960, the SED defended the decision to exclude him and even accused him of bearing part of the blame for the deaths of his relatives and friends.⁸⁷

Schlotterbeck decided to spend the rest of his life as a writer in the GDR. In 1969, he would publish a new edition of his autobiographic novel with the help of writer Gerhard Wolf.

What happened to Schlotterbeck and others after the war reveals a long-term continuity in the Communists' attitude towards risk-taking and obstinacy in their own ranks. Particularly during the first decade, before 1956, the SED's assessment of such cases matched the uncompromising rhetoric of the guidelines illegally distributed in the Third Reich during the 1930s in many regards. The perceived threat of the Cold War might have rekindled old fears.

The KPD's successor, the SED, was similarly unable to tolerate ambiguity. The SED's handling of Wilhelm Knöchel corroborates this. The debate oscillated between the extremes of hero and traitor but the SED was never capable of acknowledging shades of grey. Initially, the standard reference on the history of the workers' movement, a multivolume publication by the SED from 1966, presented the former member of the KPD's Central Committee as a heroic martyr and a flawless, irreproachable Communist.⁸⁸ But around 1967–68, Knöchel's reputation took a sharp U-turn, resulting in his removal from the pantheon of antifascist heroes. In view of new publications in the Netherlands and West Germany accusing him of collaboration with the Gestapo, the SED hastily removed Knöchel from the front line. Party leader Walter Ulbricht stated that he had no notion of hiding or whitewashing betrayal, and initiated investigations behind the scenes. The party ceased hero worship of Knöchel and condemned him as a traitor.⁸⁹ In the 1980s, a contemporary witness and an East German historian attempted to debunk the condemnation. Notably, the impulse for this change again came from Western historiography. After West German historians Detlev Peukert and Beatrix Herlemann highlighted Knöchel's tactical motivation and put his 'betrayal' into perspective, East German historian Heinz Kühnrich interpreted this somewhat

86 B.-R. Barth, Werner Schweizer and Thomas Grimm, *Der Fall Noel Field* (Berlin 2006).

87 ZPKK, Beschluss vom 3.8.1960, Berlin, 25.7.1960 (SAPMO-BArch, DY30/IV 2/4/476, f. 172–73).

88 W. Ulbricht and Autorenkollektiv, *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (vol. 5, Dietz 1966).

89 H. Weber, 'Zwischen Stalinismus und Objektivität. Die achtbändige 'Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung'', *SBZ-Archiv* 17, 16 (1966), 249–53; G. Harmsen, *Daan Goulooze: Uit Leven van Communist* (Utrecht 1967).

one-sidedly as full rehabilitation.⁹⁰ Neglecting the subtleties of Herlemann's fine-tuned analysis, party historians such as Kühnrich deemed rehabilitation possible only if Knöchel was presented as a heroic, untainted resister.⁹¹ But the SED and Stasi procured evidence from a West German archive confirming how dubious Knöchel's tactics were. In light of the evidence, state and party leader Erich Honecker's decision to oppose requests for rehabilitation remained in place until the end of the GDR. This failed attempt to rehabilitate Knöchel underlines the inability of the SED to acknowledge ambiguity.

However, studies published after the end of the GDR can be accused of the same flaw. Bill Niven has made the criticism that 'the narrative reframing since 1990 is not balanced by a recognition of the positive aspects of Communist resistance in other areas'. Niven warned that invalidating Communist resistance would just constitute a 'remythification'.⁹² This study takes this critique to heart and provides a perspective that gives nuance to stereotypes of both party-controlled soldier and traitor. It demonstrates that dealing with ethically-debatable actions does not necessarily imply disparagement of Communist resistance fighters. Rather, the examination of the complicated nature of their struggles and the acknowledgement of the inconsistencies and contradictions involved can restore their human face.

The study suggests that the reality of Communist resistance was much more intriguing and complicated than the SED's myth as well as much of the delegitimatory discourse give reason to expect. For GDR historians as well as many revisionists, the true hero of antifascist resistance was less the individual than the party. Accordingly, Communist resisters featured as party soldiers without much independent initiative.

As the three examples under discussion indicate, Communist resistance was not always uniform and consistent. Confronted with the Gestapo, many Communists learned that party guidelines were hardly helpful.⁹³ Contrary to the image of party soldiers, a few leading figures of the illegal KPD showed 'Eigen-Sinn'. Bottländer, Schlotterbeck and Knöchel made tactical decisions which appeared from the perspective of the KPD to be stubborn and questionable. But they never put their loyalty to party and ideology into question. In their view, the tactical moves were adequate and necessary adaptations to difficult situations.

Moreover, they had, contrary to all warnings from party officials, a realistic chance to outmanoeuvre the Gestapo. Despite Knöchel's failure and the limited success of Bottländer's and Schlotterbeck's tactics, the Gestapo can only claim partial credit for the fact that most of their tactical moves did not end successfully. Tragic complications and distrust from the resisters' own party played an important role as well.

90 Peukert, *Die KPD im Widerstand*, 378f.

91 H. Kühnrich, 'Das Knöchel-Syndrom', *Neues Deutschland*, 26 March 1994.

92 Niven, *The Buchenwald Child*, 209, see also 211.

93 K.H. Bergmann, *Der Schlaf vor dem Erwachen. Stationen der Jahre 1931–1949* (Berlin 2002), 80.

This observation not only promotes the dismantling of the myth of an all-pervasive and omniscient political police in the Third Reich,⁹⁴ it also raises the question of why the KPD and SED upheld the Gestapo myth. The dissemination of a demonising view of the Gestapo might have been, in part, a result of the traumatic experience of hundreds of Communist resistance groups that variously found themselves in prisons and concentration camps, or on death row.⁹⁵ At least partly, however, such a stereotypical view was also useful for avoiding confrontation with their own weaknesses and mistakes.⁹⁶ Much has been written about the exculpatory effect of Communist antifascism on the majority of East Germans and their pasts as collaborators and bystanders.⁹⁷ But to some extent, this is also true for quite a few long-serving Communists. SED historiography barely mentioned renegades and traitors, despite the fact that most Communist resistance groups had been infiltrated by Gestapo informers. Even several prominent SED leaders had something to conceal in this regard. Wilhelm Pieck's son-in-law, Theo Winter, who came as a parachute agent to the Third Reich and betrayed his secret mission to the Gestapo after being arrested, or Horst Sindermann's brother Kurt, who worked as an informant for the Gestapo, may serve as examples.⁹⁸ But it is not only these collaborators who were silenced in the GDR; more ambiguous cases such as those discussed in this article were not treated with due recognition of their differences.⁹⁹ Comrades to be disciplined faced exclusion from the party, prison sentences and public denunciation as traitors. This highlights the inability or unwillingness of the KPD and SED to deal adequately with modes of behaviour based on spontaneity, and adaptive tactics in their own ranks. The official antifascist discourse in the GDR was unable to acknowledge shades of grey between the extremes of betrayal and loyalty.¹⁰⁰ Venturesome, inventive and obstinate Communists did not become part of the official antifascist memory.¹⁰¹

94 R. Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society. Enforcing Racial Policy 1933–1945* (Oxford 1991).

95 Koch [Schwab], *Der Kampf gegen Spitzelei und Provokation*, 39f.

96 Plum, *Antifascism After Hitler*, 110.

97 For example, H. Münkler, 'Antifascismus als Gründungsmythos der DDR. Abgrenzungsinstrument nach Westen und Herrschaftsmittel nach innen', in M. Agethen, E. Jesse and E. Neubert (eds) *Der missbrauchte Antifascismus. DDR-Staatsdoktrin und Lebenslüge der deutschen Linken*, (Freiburg–Basel–Vienna 2002), 79–99; M. Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives. Generations and Violence Through the German Dictatorships* (Oxford 2011).

98 C. Voigt, 'Kurt Sindermann. Als kommunistischer V-Mann in den Fängen der Dresdner Gestapo', in C. Pieper, M. Schmeitzner and G. Naser (eds) *Braune Karrieren. Dresdner Täter und Akteure im Nationalsozialismus* (Dresden 2012), 94–8.

99 For more examples, see A. Herbst, 'Der Fall Lena Fischer. Umgang mit einer Verräterin', in A. Leo and P. Reif-Spirek (eds) *Vielstimmiges Schweigen. Neue Studien zum DDR-Antifascismus* (Berlin 2001), 223–37; U. Grashoff, 'Der Kommunist Karl Plesse und die Gestapo – Taktik oder Verrat?', in D. Brunner and A. Kenkmann (eds) *Leipzig im Nationalsozialismus, Beiträge zu Zwangsarbeit, Verfolgung und Widerstand* (Leipzig 2016), 27–46.

100 See for example H. Voßke (ed.) *Im Kampf bewährt. Erinnerungen deutscher Genossen an den antifaschistischen Widerstand von 1933 bis 1945* (Berlin 1969).

101 Institutionally, this exclusion was underpinned by the dissolution of the VVN in February 1953. Elke Reuter and Detlef Hansel, *Das kurze Leben der VVN von 1947 bis 1953. Die Geschichte der Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone und in der DDR* (Berlin 1997).

However, this study also challenges the view of many revisionist historians who replaced the antifascist foundation myth with another one-sided perspective.¹⁰² Revisionism has complemented the glorification of Communist resisters with a necessary corrective. But Niethammer's term 'collaborating resistance' ('kollaborierender Widerstand'), which conceives the Communist resistance in Buchenwald predominantly as group egotism with negative consequences for all other inmates of the concentration camp, does not do justice to the complexity of resistance under the terrorist Nazi regime.¹⁰³

This study takes a middle ground between the glorifying and debunking approaches and argues for a differentiated understanding of the Communist resistance. While the official historiography of the GDR portrayed Communist resisters as unfaltering heroes, and revisionist studies have featured Communist collaborators and traitors, the core of both approaches is often political. They are intended to legitimise or de-legitimise the dictatorship respectively, and risk overlooking nuances. By taking a closer look at three leading members of the Communist resistance, this article has explored what it meant to be torn between a rigid party bureaucracy and the requirements of their daily struggle against the Nazi regime. The essay analyses individual strategies of survival and highlights that several Communists took risks and made every effort to minimise damage simultaneously. Their intuitively handled, situational and experimental attempts of limiting the damages should be of interest even today.

ORCID iD

Udo Grashoff  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8906-7639>

Biographical Note

Udo Grashoff is Research Assistant at the University of Leipzig. He examines resistance, opposition, political violence and individual agency in borderline situations. Instead of a simplifying contrasting juxtaposition of rulers and subjects, he is interested in grey areas, negotiations, interactions and hybrid forms. He is author of *Schwarzwohnen: Die Unterwanderung der staatlichen Wohnraumlenkung der DDR* (2011) and *'In einem Anfall von Depression...': Selbsttoetungen in der DDR* (2006). He currently finalises a book manuscript titled *Gefahr von innen. Verrat im kommunistischen Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus* (2021, forthcoming).

102 See for example, M. Overesch, *Buchenwald und die DDR oder die Suche nach Selbstlegitimation* (Göttingen 1995).

103 Tuchel, likewise, emphasizes the solidarity within their group. Cf. Peters, *Wer die Hoffnung verliert*, 24.