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"EX ORIENTE PAX?"*

by Peter Wensierski

Peter Wensierski is editor of Kirche im Sozialismus (West Berlin), a periodical devoted primarily to religious issues in East Germany. Wensierski's "Theses on the Role of the Church in the G.D.R." was published in OPREE, Vol. 3, No. 4 (May 1983), pp. 22-29.

The Fifteenth Party Congress of the GDR-CDU (Christian Democratic Union of East Germany) was held in October, 1982. The GDR-CDU should not be confused with its namesake, the CDU of West Germany, the new party in power. The GDR-CDU has 125,000 members and is the second largest party in the GDR (East Germany) after the SED (Socialist Unity Party of East Germany).

Compared with its West German namesake, the GDR-CDU has very little latitude. All other parties and organizations must adjust to the SED party line. What remains is merely the realization and transposition of the given facts in individual domains, such as youth, farmers, or--as with the GDR-CDU--with the Christians in the GDR.

However, the influence of the CDU upon the churches is minimal. The official GDR media like to project the CDU as the official voice of the Christian citizens in the GDR, but that picture is badly distorted. Only a few pastors and church workers are members, preferring to listen directly to what the SED has to say. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to follow the policies of the GDR-CDU, especially at a party congress, for here one can witness trends as well as general perspectives of government politics.

The news published about the congress was then, in the above sense, informative. The church was treated gently. The past conflicts concerning "Swords into plowshares" were not mentioned; polemic against the discussion of pacifism in the church was missing. Only well-known ideological positions concerning the necessity of weapons to keep peace were repeated.

*Translated by permission from Kirche im Sozialismus (West Berlin), Vol. 8, No. 5 (1982), pp. 9-10.

"Today it would be not only unpardonable foolishness, but practically irresponsible to weaken our defensive readiness," said the party chairman, Gerald Goetting, in a conscious reference to church discussions on introducing an unarmed peace service [trans. note: instead of military service] in the GDR.

In the GDR one does not expect surprises from the CDU. In his greeting, SED politburo member Paul Verner, who is responsible for church policy, avoided any attacks on the churches' work for peace. The government and party both seem to want to avoid conflicts this fall.

Verner spoke in a reserved manner. According to him, good neighborly relations between both German states could not prosper if atomic missiles were installed in the West in 1983. Anyone who is for developing good inter-German relations and wishes to reduce the danger of an atomic war must be concerned that no new American missiles be stationed in West Germany.

One cannot merely dismiss that as a threat; there is a political pressure behind it to which the SED is subject with the future of the negotiations in Geneva and the beginning of new rocket installations in the West, the elbow-room Moscow grants the GDR decreases, while at the same time the economic pressure increases. Even if the SED wanted, it could retain only minimal independent initiative. Hence, the churches reckon with a curtailing of their work. "Our independent peace engagement will doubtless become much more difficult," said Manfred Stolpe after the last synod.

Verner's appeal is not directed only to the West, but also to the churches in the GDR. Goetting practically pleaded with the church membership: the struggle against threatening mass destruction can only succeed if unity is accentuated. The churches in the GDR ought to place themselves in this front.

Such language eliminates at the outset the possibility of discussing disputed issues. Realistic politics are, however, impossible in the GDR today if one follows that path. At the last synod it was mentioned that it is exactly such contradictions which drive GDR youth to pacifistic peace engagements. They cannot reconcile the state arming itself, militarizing society more and more, and harassing those engaged

in peace--while on the other hand it verbalizes an appeal for peace. When the GDR-CDU delegates at their conference unconditionally approve military courses in the schools, preparation for atomic war and further rearming, and then merely argue that the West is forcing the GDR to do so, they earn little credibility.

The Evangelical Church Alliance, for its part, at the Federal Synod in September [1982], clearly demonstrated the will of many GDR Christians to be in conversation with people of other opinions. At the following fall synods of the churches of various states, for example, in Magdeburg, delegates invited an "open dialogue" in the GDR society about questions of peace and security policies. Only in this manner can the "unified peace movement," proclaimed by the SED, be encouraged. Reprisals against people with other opinions are "destructive to peace."

The church, for its part, takes seriously those in the government who talk of peace; Erich Honecker recently said that more arms do not guarantee peace. That is a beginning for discussion between Christians and Party members in the GDR about which topic the youthful wearers of the peace button "Swords into plowshares" are concerned: steps toward disarmament. The SED leadership can hardly afford to completely decline a discussion of alternatives to preserving peace through deterrence.

Anyone in the SED who wants to stay on top of the times and keep eyes open to reality ought to realize that no one is served with half-baked peace and lukewarm unity. At the edges of the CDU party conference there was evidently more activity than could be read from the strict schedule: a discussion on pacifism or the debates concerning ecology; and peace in the new ecological society. Perhaps it is less important to affirm unity than to show more courage for open and honest discussion about what really furthers peace.

In the last few weeks, Gerald Goetting has been fond of quoting Luther's laudable characteristics and values, above all his work ethic, which Goetting finds so helpful in fulfilling economic plans. One senses little of Luther's joy of dispute and criticism, his antipathy toward obsequiousness and his courage to lead a happy, fulfilled life. Oh well, perhaps that will come at the Sixteenth Party Congress.

Translated from German
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