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THE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN THE GDR AND THEIR PARTICIPATION IN EAST-WEST COOPERATION
by Christa Grengel

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Abstract:
The Evangelical Regional Churches in the GDR had to deal with the problem that they experienced directly living on the borderline between East and West which divided their own country. They understood this situation to be the result of National-Socialism and World War II, confessed to having been partly responsible for it and became convinced, therefore, that they had a unique responsibility for reconciliation and for overcoming this division on the borderline between the great power blocs. Based on the shared notion of “Christianity in Germany” all Evangelical Regional Churches remained parts of a pan-German institution, the “Evangelical Church in Germany” (EKD), until 1969. They organized a solid system of partnerships between East and West on all levels and all institutions of church-life. This system also remained when, in 1969, the Regional Churches in the GDR separated organizationally from the EKD and grappled more intensely with the problems of GDR society. The awareness of Christians being part of worldwide Christianity overcame the feeling of isolation created especially by the Berlin Wall. The highly creative mutual cooperation within the ecumenical movement came home to especially clearly in the “conciliar process for justice, peace and integrity of creation” in the GDR which contributed to the “peaceful revolution” in 1989. Ecumenism for us was an experience of Christian engagement for peace.

Preliminary Remarks
In the following I speak about the “Evangelical Churches in the GDR”. However, I only describe the Evangelical (Protestant) Regional Churches. The very small Free Churches in the GDR (Methodists, Old Catholics, Baptists, etc.) were, of course, also connected with other churches and with their World Communions. They worked together with the Evangelical Regional Churches within the Association of Christian Churches in the GDR.\(^1\) Their work is beyond the scope of this article.

1. Specifics of the Situation

During the period of the “Cold War,” people generally spoke about the “Eastern bloc”. We had a great deal in common: the “development of socialism” and the repression connected with it, a non-convertible currency, and dependence on the USSR. However, on closer examination one will discover that the Eastern and Central European countries that belonged to the “Warsaw Pact” were not a real “bloc” at all. Each country had its specific realities.

The Political Specificity of the GDR

The national border was at the same time the border between East and West, called in the West the “Iron Curtain”; in GDR usage it was the border between “Socialism and Capitalism” or between “SW and NSW” (socialist and non-socialist currency areas). The GDR was part of a former entity, of which it was said in the text of the GDR National Anthem: “Let us serve you well, Germany, united fatherland!” The text was not sung during the last years of the GDR, but it still existed. Until the very end the most important SED party-newspaper was also called “New Germany”. The GDR had a five-party-system. However, the “Socialist Unity Party of Germany” (SED) played the leading role towards the four others, which were bound together in a bloc.

Unlike other divided countries (Vietnam, Korea) almost all families were affected by the division, because the whole of Germany was flooded with millions of refugees and expellees from the East at the end of WWII and immediately after. It affected all, even the leaders of the party: Erich Honecker, for example, visited his sister in the Saar when he was on an official state visit in the FRG.

The economies after WWII developed in almost opposite directions: whereas in the FRG the economy destroyed during the War was restored by the Marshall-Plan (USA), while the GDR had to pay war-reparations to the USSR. Besides the West of Germany was already more industrialised than the East before the war. Families strove to be reunited, usually in the direction of the better living standard in the West. By 1961 about 2.5 million had fled through the open border from the East to the West of Germany, many of them skilled workers. Often this led to further family divisions. The political and ideological pressures in the GDR strengthened the migration.

The building of the Berlin Wall restricted radically the East-West-connection. It was especially painful for divided families. The “Wall” became increasingly traumatic for almost the whole GDR-population, onto which it projected many of its problems. People did not accept the argument that the Wall was built for their “protection” but rather experienced it as “locking them out”. The situation worsened by military training, by orders to shoot at the border, and also by the deployment in the 1980s of missiles with nuclear warheads on both sides. Could Germans really shoot at Germans, perhaps even members of their own family?

Nevertheless, the GDR was at the same time much less cut off from the outside world than most of the other states of the Warsaw Pact. There was no language barrier with the FRG. Radio and television could be received almost everywhere in the GDR. In spite of all attempts to disrupt reception technically, the government could not prevent this connection. This meant that GDR citizens were extremely well informed, though without the possibility of checking the reality behind what they heard. In addition, the border from West to East was relatively open because of West-Berlin, situated on the territory of the GDR but protected by the Four-Power-Agreement.
The Specificity of the Church

The majority of Christians in the GDR were evangelical (Lutheran, Reformed or in a Union of both). After a strong shrinking process, it was estimated at the end of the GDR that still a third of the population belonged to the Church: 5.1 million members of the Evangelical Regional Churches, 1.1 million members of the Roman Catholic Church, and 30,000 members of the Methodist Church (the largest of the Free Churches). These estimates may have been exaggerated at that time, but the proportion may remain true still today.

Until 1969 the Evangelical Regional Churches were part of a pan-German organisation. Those who belonged to the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) remained so the whole time. The properties of Churches in the Soviet Occupation Zone, the later GDR, were not expropriated (unlike, for instance, those of private persons); they kept most of their buildings, estates, forests, etc. (1% of the GDR forest was Church forest).

In the first constitution of the GDR of 1949, which remained in force until 1968, the articles on the Church were taken selectively from the former Weimar Constitution (as in the FRG Constitution up to now). They were not fully complied with everywhere and always. However, the churches had a special status, also with regard to the legal position and the financing of church employees: the churches alone were responsible for it. So, for instance, the GDR state could not order the transfer of church employees as was the case in some other socialist countries.

There was one “Christian” party, the “Christian Democratic Union” (CDU), among the bloc of four. It had the task of integrating the Christian part of the population into socialist society. The relationship of the Evangelical Churches with this party was extremely complicated. There were some positive assessments because some individual Christians had the possibility to get involved politically by the very existence of this party. However, the Church leadership, with few exceptions, was reserved and rejected the CDU because it masked the real ideological conditions of the GDR. The difficult relationship with this party also had a negative effect on the churches’ relationship with the “Christian Peace Conference” (CPC).

Some Christians in the GDR experienced harsh difficulties and discrimination, especially in career prospects. In extremely difficult times there were also arrests, in later times usually in connection with “illegal emigration”. However, in the GDR there were no show-trials of Christians (as, for instance, in Bulgaria) or persecutions and murders (as suffered by hundreds of thousands in the USSR).2 This situation probably resulted from the German question still being open for all four allies during the first years after the end of the War. Internally, it was possibly due to the fact that some members of the post-war-government had come to know Christians in concentration camps and had begun to appreciate them.

The most difficult year was probably 1953, especially for of the “Youth and Student Congregations”. They were seen as competitors of the “Free German Youth” (FDJ) thus jeopardizing the desired socialist education in the GDR. At that time, very severe attacks and also arrests occurred. These actions were stopped a few days before June 17, 1953. (I owe, for example, to this circumstance that I was admitted to secondary school in 1953. Before that I was refused because I was a pastor’s child and not a member of the FDJ.)

The churches had to deal with the guilty German past during the time of National-Socialism and the War. At the same time, the experiences of the Church Struggle and the conduct of the “Confessing Church” helped us particularly in our theological assessment of our new political and social conditions. The decision to “stay” or to “go” (for church co-workers to leave

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the congregation) was certainly a severe existential question in all the Churches east of the “Iron Curtain”, but it became a special dilemma because of the German-German situation.

2. German-German Cooperation of the Evangelical Churches

During the period of “Cold War” the Christian congregations in East and West of Germany (after 1949 GDR and FRG) never lost the consciousness of belonging together in a special way. They maintained and extended their connections in many ways. The division of Germany was understood as a result of World War II, caused by Germany. Out of the experience of a common history, i.e. of judgement and grace and of a new beginning, there grew a deep inner conviction of having, on the borderline between the blocs, an exceptional responsibility for reconciliation and for overcoming division. In this sense the Churches on both sides were fighting for “unity”, which included the unity of Germany, but went beyond to broader reconciliation.

EKD, 1945 – 1969

Many of the Evangelical Regional Churches were “disrupted” by the Church Struggle and the War. Therefore, they had first to put the Church structures in order. Only a few months after the end of the War in 1945 representatives of some Regional Churches met in Treysa and Stuttgart and joined together in the provisional EKD. In Stuttgart they confessed to having been partly responsible for the past, in National-socialism and in War. This “Stuttgart Confession of Guilt” had a lasting effect.

By 1948 a constitution had been worked out. On the basis of this constitutional order, in 1948 at Eisenach all Evangelical Regional Churches joined together in the EKD as a Federation of Regional Churches on the basis of the Lutheran, Reformed and United confessions. The Lutheran Regional Churches had already founded the United Evangelical Lutheran Church (VELKD). The Regional Churches which had come out of the former Church of the Old-Prussian Union (Lutheran and Reformed) joined anew the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU). Unlike the EKD, the VELKD and the EKU understood themselves, not as federations, but as churches. All three church-bodies consisted of Regional Churches from both parts of Germany; their organs, therefore, were pan-German as well. The basis was “Evangelical Christianity in Germany” (Constitution of the EKD).

After the FRG and then the GDR were established as states in 1949 and after all hopes of a peace treaty, of a united Germany (for example as a neutral state like Austria) or any solution of this kind had been dashed and the Cold War intensified, the pan-German structure of the Churches became a problem, especially for the GDR government. It was afraid of a direct influence via the pan-German structure, declared it to be “non-legal” and made it more difficult for the churches to do their work.

Partnerships of Congregations

German-German cooperation was not confined to the level of Church leaders and their committees. For the consciousness of people in a divided Germany it was probably a proposal in 1949 that was most sustainable. At the manager conference of the Evangelical Relief-work, it was

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3 For the following see Rudolf Mau. *Der Protestantismus im Osten Deutschlands (1945 – 1990)*, Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen IV/3 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2005).

4 See Günter Heidtmann (ed.), *Kirche im Kampf der Zeit: Die Botschaften, Worte und Erklärungen der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland und ihrer östlichen Gliedkirchen*, hrsg. im Auftrag der EKD-Kirchenkanzlei, o.J.

5 For the EKU-history see Friedrich Winter, *Die Evangelische Kirche der Union und die Deutsche Demokratische Republik: Beziehungen und Wirkungen*. Unio und Confessio, Band 22, (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 2001).
suggested that the Regional Churches should build up partnerships. The Regional Churches took up this proposal and began building up firm East-West-partnerships, which via the Church-districts reached the congregations. Each congregation in the East got in this way one or more “godparent-congregations”, later “partner-congregations”, in the West. In the beginning they were really godparent-relationships which were essentially directed towards material help from the West to the East. However, gradually the godparent-relationships changed into real partnerships, which were maintained even after the Wall was built. Church employees, parish councils, and congregational groups from both sides met in East-Berlin or in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, thanks to ecumenical assistance from the congregations there. Many older members of the GDR congregations visited partner-congregations in the FRG as soon as they had come of “travel-age”. In the course of time the consciousness grew of belonging together across the Wall and also of being responsible for overcoming the East-West-conflict.

A special case was the “Berlin Bible Weeks” of the EKU, in which 20 to 25 times a year very different groups from East and West met for a week to discuss specific themes. Participants of Lutheran Regional Churches and Christians from the Netherlands (NL) also took part. This led to the fact that in the course of time partnerships between GDR- and NL-congregations also came into being.

The entire life of the Church in all its institutions and at levels (including the large diaconal work of the Churches) was organised in such a way that there were always partners on the other side of the border. Not all congregations and institutions kept this cooperation throughout, but probably the majority of them did. In the view of the GDR state authorities these partnerships were subversive and de-stabilizing. In reality and to my mind, they contributed positively to minimize and finally to overcome the East-West-conflict.

1969 Splitting Up

After the building of the Berlin-Wall in 1961 it became more and more difficult for the Churches to continue their pan-German work as planned. Synods and other Church-committees could only meet in East-Berlin, where the border was still open to the East. However, many Western members were on blacklists and were turned back at the border. Exit visas were refused for GDR-members or delegates, who wanted to participate in conferences or Assemblies of worldwide ecumenism. After the GDR had worked out a new constitution in 1968, in which the Church-articles of the Weimar-constitution were no longer included, there arose a situation, in which the commitment of the church institutions to “unity” became more and more a stumbling block to real and effective cooperation. Because of this, the Regional Churches in the GDR decided in 1969 to leave the EKD and to establish a corresponding federation. This “Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR” (BEK) took over all the functions which the EKD had up to then.

The VELKD (United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany) had already separated into two VELKs in 1968. The EKU remained as one Church. It regionalized the organs (synod, council, chancellery) and committees in 1972, but always continued to meet together, except for synods. The BEK wrote into its constitution an article, which was constantly under attack by the state authorities. Art. 4 (4) of the BEK-constitution stated: “The BEK believes in the special communion of the entire Evangelical Christianity in Germany. In its share of responsibility for this communion the BEK undertakes tasks, which are common to all Churches in the GDR and in the FRG, by its

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7 Winter, pp. 197 ff.
bodies in free partnership.” The EKD inserted a corresponding paragraph in its constitution Art. 1 (2.2 and 3). The basic concept of “Christianity in Germany” was kept. The partnerships of congregations and institutions remained.

Finding its Place in the GDR

The Evangelical Regional Churches in the “Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR” (BEK), saw themselves as a “Communion of Witness and Service”, and after the long period of “unity” discussions across the state border, they tried now to find their place in their own society. In particular, the synods in Eisenach 1971 and in Dresden 1972 had this purpose. Both were thematically held significantly under the call of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to be a “Church for others”. The chairman of the Conference of Evangelical Church Leaders (KKL), Bishop Albrecht Schoenherr, formulated the aims of the synod: “A Church Communion of Witness-and-Service in the German Democratic Republic will have to consider its place precisely: In the society shaped like this, not beside it, not against it. It will have to preserve the freedom of her witness and service. For by its mission it is committed only to Him, who came to us as the incarnate will of God for the salvation of his creation.” The synod took this up thankfully. However, already during the synod the phrase “in the society shaped like this” turned into “in socialism” – partly through carelessness, partly also deliberately. The expression “Church in Socialism” continued to be used as orientation (as “in finding one’s place”), but it could be misunderstood and misused ideologically. The expression “Church in Socialism” was a rather catchy slogan. All attempts to formulate it more precisely in line with the quotation, failed repeatedly.

The meaning of the expression was that the Church should now be in “critical solidarity” with society in the GDR, after formerly having been exercising its role as “watchman” (prophetic ministry) and at a “critical distance”. The synod in 1972 pursued this concept with the speech of Heino Falcke, who explicitly called for the improvement of Church and society. The state organs understood the latter as a direct declaration of war. They were of the opinion that the Church had to confine itself to ritual functions, not to interfere in social themes and fields. Moreover, the idea of an “improvable socialism” reminded them of the “Prague Spring” in 1968, which they believed to have been recently exterminated.

The state organs of the GDR, therefore, were not at all pleased with the BEK. As long as the Regional Churches were attached to the West-German EKD, one could accuse them of being “Western” and their statements as being interference, influenced by hostile foreign countries. Now, however, the Churches suddenly wanted to have a say in questions of society and even of the great goal, socialism! This was rejected sharply. It took a while, until the first official talks between the BEK and the state organs took place. After that there began an ever-changing process, which was expressed especially in statements of the BEK about living together in GDR-society, about peace, education, human rights and environmental questions. The main tension between state and church about the role Christians and churches should play remained.

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BEK and EKD after 1969

The Regional Churches in the GDR did not understand the foundation of the BEK as division, but as the attempt to fulfill more sustainably and more effectively the commitment to take care of peace and reconciliation on the borderline between the blocs. As a result, the “splitting up” led precisely to better and more intensive East-West-cooperation and put an end to the de facto paralysis of cooperation by the GDR-authorities. At first these goals were not easy to attain. However, I have the impression that the situation became increasingly better. There was close cooperation in those fields of work, which I know best, namely peace-questions, promotion of congregational life and ecumenism. The “FEST” in Heidelberg helped to build up a church workplace for peace research. Delegates of the EKD always participated in the closed sessions of the Commission on “congregational life”. Even representatives of the BEK-committee on “Church and Society” and the EKD-Advisory Committee for “Social Responsibility” met together. The closest cooperation was in the field of ecumenism. Before conferences of worldwide ecumenical Christianity the delegations from both German states were usually brought together for common preparation. There were, of course, also different opinions. However, it often turned out in the discussions that these were not East-West-differences but different opinions within the delegations. In the EKU all ecumenical work was planned and done commonly. Moreover, the VELK-GDR and the National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation in the GDR (NK) were also in constant contact with their partners in the FRG. Besides, the staff-members of the BEK, EKU, VELK-GDR and NK worked closely together in the “Common Institution for Ecumenical Affairs” (GEÖ), which made international ecumenical cooperation easier, too.

The cooperation of the church leadership bodies from EKD and BEK was a bit more difficult in the beginning. There was also lack of understanding and “separation pain”. However, an “Advisory Group” and a small “Consultation Group” were soon set up for working on mutual concerns. The “Common Statements” (public declarations) of EKD and BEK became especially important. It was not by chance, that the first Common Word in 1977 was dedicated to questions of human rights in the Helsinki-process. The hopes of Christians (and of many people) on both sides were strongly directed to the overcoming of the Cold War by this process. In 1979 there followed a Common Declaration on the occasion of the anniversary of the beginning of World War II, and in 1985 of the end of the War. These common declarations were an important sign of how much the churches could still say together at the leadership level after 40 years of the Cold War. The leading bodies did not make it easy for themselves with it. For many formulations they really struggled with each other. However, the Statement from 1985 in particular showed that the churches on both sides of the border could still speak together on essential questions such as peace, guilt, and hope for the future.

Moreover, theological conversation at all levels should not be underestimated. In order to find the right form of theological existence in a politically repressive situation, the heritage of the Confessing Church (BK) was essential. We wanted to stand the test before the mothers and fathers of the BK. This helped very much. However, we wanted to be in agreement with the sisters and brothers in the FRG as well. In retrospect it may be said that this conversation was insufficiently critical on both sides. There was, perhaps, too much mutual consideration. Still, I would assert, that

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12 Ibid., pp. 305ff.
we were well aware in many cases of what critical questions our partners really wanted to ask. This helped us to find our own way.

Without the well organized German-German cooperation a great deal would have been much harder for the churches and the congregations in the GDR. Because of significant financial support on all levels they were also largely economically independent of state subsidies. Other churches in the Eastern bloc did not have such assistance. Perhaps we should have passed more on to them and also initiated a dialogue about the role of the churches in our respective situations.

3. Ecumenism

Beginnings

The Evangelical Churches in Germany could look back on a long ecumenical history. Germans were involved in the first beginnings of the ecumenical movement. However, National Socialist-time and World War II had broken the connections. It was all the more heartening, that already in 1945 in the context of the meeting in Stuttgart and the "Stuttgart Confession of Guilt" the brothers and sisters in the ecumenical movement decided to reach out their hands towards the German Churches and bring them back into the worldwide community of churches. The people in all of Germany received much material and spiritual help from Christians all over the world. As a result consciousness and commitment were raised and strengthened for participating in ecumenical cooperation and helping each other as sisters and brothers.

After the building of the Berlin Wall it became more and more difficult for the Churches in the East of Germany to maintain connections. The GDR authorities very often rejected exit visas because of the pan-German structures. However, also on the other side of the Wall GDR citizens had problems because of the "Hallstein-doctrine" of the FRG, according to which countries recognizing the GDR had to reckon with sanctions. That led to the rejections of entrance visas for GDR citizens, even for ecumenical events. After the foundation of the BEK and the gradual recognition of the GDR by many states, including the Allies, this Cold-War-blockade of both sides was slowly reduced, with the result that participation in ecumenical events became better and better from year to year. This met the great desire of the Evangelical Churches in the GDR to participate actively in ecumenical events. What first looked like a withdrawal into themselves and a turning towards immediate GDR social environment proved in reality to be a great opening across the borders into the entire worldwide ecumenical Christianity, leading to the intensification of inter-church relationships, as well as participation in worldwide ecumenical cooperation.

Inter-church Relationships

It is not possible to expound here the entire breadth of ecumenical contacts and relationships the BEK, EKU, VELK-GDR and NK maintained. Only name the categories and some specifics to do with the question of the Cold War.

There were relationships:

• with former mission-churches (for example Tanzania, South Africa and Namibia, India, China),
• with churches with German roots (for example United Church of Christ (USA), Evangelical Church of La Plata (Argentina), Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Brazil)

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with member-churches of the World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation, Conference of European Churches, United Churches, churches that had signed the Leuenberg Agreement, etc.

• with churches in whose countries humanitarian programs were supported (for example Mozambique through the Programme to Combat Racism, and, medical aid to Vietnam),

• with National Councils of Churches,

• with non-European churches in a similar situation (for example Cuba, Nicaragua),

• with churches where a common theme or project had started a relationship (for example: the Swiss Federation of Churches),

• with the churches bound together in the Nordic-German Church Convent,

• with churches in other socialist countries (for example Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland),

• with the German speaking congregations in the USSR,

• with Orthodox Churches (for example Theological Dialogues with the Russian Orthodox Church and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church).

I would like to stress the particular relationship with congregations in Great Britain: Coventry and Dresden had suffered a similar fate by German and British bombing in World War II. Therefore, the will and commitment for reconciliation were especially strong in these congregations. A number of congregations in the GDR joined in this movement and received the Cross of Nails from Coventry as well (this continued up to the recent past: the cross on the dome of the Church of St. Mary (Frauenkirche) in Dresden, restored in 2004, was shaped by the son of a pilot who had bombed Dresden).

Another example: The BEK established relationships with the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA when the so-called neutron-bomb was developed in USA. From this a closer relationship came into existence throughout many years in which the peace question played a decisive role.

With the churches in the Netherlands, a regular partnership movement developed at the congregational level on the model of the German-German partnerships (at one time estimated at over 700). The Dutch were extremely creative and always invented new possibilities of communication. A few groups in the Netherlands wanted to use these partnerships also for changing society in the GDR and other socialist countries. This was taken up enthusiastically by some groups in the GDR. However, there was also reservation toward this goal—not only by the church-leaders. These stories are described in an exciting book by Beatrice de Graaf.15

Worldwide Ecumenism

The mere existence of worldwide institutions of Christianity, to which the churches in the GDR belonged as members, helped to overcome the wall. This happened on the border between East and West by drawing the attention of Christians and Churches to the fact, that they were part of a worldwide community, thus releasing them from the trauma of isolation. But it happened also in a much deeper sense. From the ideological viewpoint the socialist structure of state and society was a closed system into which everything had to be integrated. It did not succeed in integrating Christians and churches into this system because the churches, as parts of World Christianity, were just not compatible with such a system.

The churches in the GDR always had considerable difficulties when they formulated their Christian witness to political or social problems within their own society. It was taken as an affront

when someone outside the closed socialist system spoke of problems for which, according to the socialist ideology, only the system itself was responsible, such as education, law and human rights, relationships with the Third World, peace concerns, etc. But the Churches in the GDR were convinced that it was their duty to speak, and they attached high importance (perhaps too high to some Western eyes) to the fact that their statements were really their own, speaking to their own problems and thus were “genuinely Christian”. The fellowship with the Christians of worldwide ecumenism was of decisive help to us in coming and holding fast to this position.

So the studies of the World Council of Churches (WCC) had a deep and lasting effect on the content of the work of the Evangelical Churches in the GDR. For example, the study of the missionary structure of the congregation, the World Mission Conference on “Salvation Today”, the convergence document on “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry”, the study on “giving account of the hope that is within us”, the conference on “Church and Society” 1966, seminars and projects about human rights, development questions, combating racism, and not least the various Assemblies (for example I was asked to report about the 1975 Nairobi WCC Assembly to congregations and working groups more than a hundred times; and the same was the case for other participants). The hope of renewal in our own Church through discussion with brothers and sisters in the ecumenical movement accompanied this cooperation. It was important that impulses came not only from outside into the GDR, but vice versa that a lot of impulses came from the Churches in the GDR into the WCC-Commissions, which worked on those studies. The actual methods of working together would be worth further study, because this cooperation certainly minimized the Cold War.

The World Communities were also “used” as means. It was often more effective when a representative of the WCC or other World Communities expressed something than a local church-representative. Just before talks with state representatives during visits in the GDR, for example, WCC officers always informed themselves about the problems. Conversely, church-representatives from the GDR put forward several proposals at WCC conferences or committees, which they later could present in the GDR as a proposal of the worldwide ecumenism. The most prominent example was the “conciliar process”, which probably would not have happened without the proposal by the GDR-delegates at the Assembly in Vancouver 1983 to convene a world peace assembly. However, without the WCC-convening a “conciliar process for justice, peace and integrity of the creation” as a worldwide echo it would not have led to the movement in the GDR which we experienced in the following years until 1989. This process was not the only reason for the changes in the GDR. However, the long-term work of the churches with congregations and groups on peace-education and non-violence contributed much to the fact that the change was peaceful.

4. “A Bridge” or “Between All Stools”? (Some Personal Reflections)

Assessment

We had many dialogue partners in the East-West-Relationship. Most of them considered us to be a “bridge” over the Wall or across the “Iron Curtain” towards the West. Some considered us to be a mediator from the West to the East, for example for the smaller Evangelical Churches in the socialist countries.

However, there was criticism as well. In evaluation talks during official visits the Chinese missed in us any real love of the GDR as our fatherland. The Cubans and North-Vietnamese accused us of not standing up enough in a revolutionary way for socialism. Similar words came

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16 There are a lot of publications about that process in the GDR. However, I would recommend Stephen Brown. *Von der Unzufriedenheit zum Widerspruch: Der konziliare Prozess fuer Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und Bewahrung der Schöpfung als Wegbereiter der friedlichen Revolution in der DDR.* (Frankfurt a. Main: Verlag Otto Lembeck, , 2010).
from Hungary, parts of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Czechoslovakia and from the Christian Peace Conference. With the Russian Orthodox Church we struggled about the deployment of nuclear warheads and about Afghanistan. Others considered the Churches in the GDR as “too conformist”. Some guests from the Netherlands complained that the churches in the GDR did not fight hard enough for a change of circumstances. We did not find the varying criticism surprising. There were, of course, critical questions and different views about the way Christians and churches should follow, also in our own churches. However, the discussion was never broken off, either in our own country or within the wider ecumenical movement; the fellowship of the Church communion did not break because of it. That was one of the best experiences of that time.

An appropriate judgment of the work of the churches in the GDR will certainly be possible only in the future and will not be done by those who were directly involved in it. We, who were witnesses of our age, can only report what we have done and what we wanted to express with it.

Church Cooperation as Peace-making

Church communion and partnership between Churches and congregations across the border are to my mind real peace-making. They helped to bear spiritually the deep gap created by the Cold War and finally to overcome it. “How can we shoot at those with whom we have just celebrated the Holy Communion?” asked young people from the UCC/USA after worshipping in St. Mary’s Church in East Berlin. With this they had put it in a nutshell: The spiritual experience of fellowship in worship and Holy Communion effected real change. It became clear that, as an effect of fellowship, everything had to be done to prevent war. Such experiences characterized East-West cooperation again and again.

Interference

After the synods of the EKU and the UCC had officially decided on full communion, it was proposed, as a way of intensifying cooperation that Church partners should “interfere” more in the work of the other Church. If we are honest, then we have to confess that there has not really been such “interference”, not even between the Churches in the GDR and the FRG. There was too much consideration on both sides. In a process lasting over several years UCC and EKU tried to find out how the Churches could contribute more to justice in their respective societies. The process brought to light many interesting aspects. It did not, however, go beyond taking note of the different situations – without direct interference. Even in the Councils of the EKU, which met almost monthly, it was admitted after the fall of the Berlin Wall that too much consideration had been taken to protect each other.

Reservations

There were also some reservations about attempts at interference from the West, sometimes simultaneously towards politically active groups in our own midst or at least on church property. This reserve was to my mind not an “adaptation” to or an “affirmation” of the repressive GDR system. The majority of Church leaders urgently wanted a change in the situation and especially the breaking down of the Wall. I see three reasons for their reservations.

Firstly, the older people (among whom I include myself) did not believe, in spite of the “warm wind from the East” with “perestroika” and “glasnost”, that the USSR would give up

without military conflict the Western border of the Warsaw Pact, because this would lead to further secessions (Poland, Baltic Republics, Ukraine, etc.). The experience of bloody suppression of attempts at change in 1953 (GDR), 1956 (Hungary), 1968 (Czechoslovakia) were still too strong. The Church-leaders fought, therefore, in discussions with the state authorities again and again for a “controlled breaking down of the Wall”.

Secondly, the question of the “political mandate of the Church” remained controversial within the responsible boards of the Churches. The Church is not the party, nor is it an opposition party acting as substitute for such a party. However, the Church has to fight in the name of Jesus Christ for peace and human rights. And it offers refuge to victims of persecution. So, where was the limit to supporting oppositional individuals and groups who found protection under the roof of the Church?

Thirdly, there was a problem of “credibility” which is perhaps hard to understand outside the GDR. After 1970 there was a severe struggle about the so-called “directive on events” (VVO). Congregations were obliged to register with the police all events, which were not listed in the VVO. Because the events listed in the VVO obviously only covered narrowly defined liturgical activity this meant that for instance all groups led by lay people, house-groups, etc. had to be registered with the police. Evangelical Churches were of the opinion that this would deeply intervene in their self-understanding. What was “genuinely ecclesiastical” could not be decided by the police, but only by the Church itself. After years of often very hard confrontations this position was accepted. However, during the late eighties, the Church had to keep her word and to register with the police anything, which it did not regard as genuinely ecclesiastical. During the last years of the GDR the Church got into difficult conflicts with non-Church individuals and groups seeking and receiving protection and refuge under the roof of the Church. One of the Church-leaders formulated the problem as such: “The Church is there for everybody, but not for everything.”

Eastward

The Evangelical Churches in the GDR had contacts not only in the West, but also in the East. I do not intend to add a further chapter about partnerships, but I would like to draw attention to the fact that within the East-West-Cooperation during the period of Cold War there was also an East-West within the “East”. There the Churches in the GDR had to be counted very often as “West”. This is true of some other “East European” countries which would call themselves “Central European”. For instance, the Evangelical Churches in the GDR were, much to the regret of some other churches in the socialist “brother-nations”, never ready to build a special East-ecumenism and accepted invitations only when the WCC acted, so to speak, as patron. Moreover, they were not members of the CPC like the majority of the other Churches. However, the view to the East brought great gain. Beside the discovery or the intensifying of the relationships with Orthodox Churches through regular visits and Theological Talks (“Zagorsk”18 with the Russian Orthodox Church and “Herrnhut”19 with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church) the Evangelical Churches in the GDR found themselves within a group of other Churches who had been thrown together by fate, some of them suffering much more under repression and restrictions than they themselves. We do not want to relinquish that experience of communion.

The “Second World”

The GDR was reckoned to belong to the “Second World”. One can, of course, question if that was really true. The standard of living was quite comparable with that of the First World. However, the socialist countries really did stand somewhere between the First and the Third Worlds. This was on the one hand due to the non-convertibility of the currency and on the other hand also due to the fact that for some countries in the Third World socialism was quite attractive.

The Evangelical Churches in the GDR took part in aid programs for the Third World, with much imagination, usually due to non convertible currency it was with material aid: tractors, restored sewing machines, bicycles, ships out of service which still could be used for fishing near the coast, etc. (Surprising things happened, such as, that in the midst of the Cold War Vietnamese bibles, printed in the FRG, were going on GDR-ships via China to Vietnam through the mediation of the Churches in the GDR.).

On the world level, for instance in the WCC, the Second World was, according to my perception, scarcely to be found. Since the Assembly in Uppsala 1968 the North-South-contrast was the dominant topic. Had the North-South-contrast overtaken the East-West-contrast? Or did it relativize the East-West-contrast? Was the East-West-contrast only a North phenomenon? Or was the East-West-contrast now divided into North and South? (In CCPD I had the feeling of being pulled first by the representatives of the Third World and then by those from the First World to their respective sides.) Perhaps within the WCC it was already evident that the problems of globalization would gain more importance.

Priorities

In a certain sense it turned up in the question of priorities as well. The Churches in the GDR were concerned especially with the question of peace. Already at the Assembly in Nairobi 1975 an Indian woman within our small group said: “As long as we are hungry your peace discussion will not be of interest for us.” In the “conciliar process” peace, justice, and integrity for the creation were put together. Moreover, the Churches in the GDR had gradually understood how important were the questions of the environment and a just world order. However, for many the priority was still the peace question,20 partly because of the guilty history of the Germans, partly because of the deployment of missiles with nuclear warheads on both sides of the border in the middle of Germany, which continually provoked in the GDR and in the FRG the fear of a new war.

Today for us, too, the questions of the global world must have priority. Perhaps the peace question has now led to the question of the relationship of the religions and their (i.e. also our) role in the common life of individuals and peoples in the global world. However, this is a new subject.

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