8-2011

Tyndale's "Protestants in Communist East Germany. In the Storm of the World" - Book Review

Robert F. Goeckel

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol31/iss3/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
and lengthy footnotes are full of useful and interesting source material and comments. I am awed
by the sheer amount of information on a wide range of materials. I found practically no mistakes
in the book, except a very minor one, in his statement that the Russian Orthodox community in
Novi Sad does not have its own church building—which, was not correct when I lived in that city
in the 1950s. The English reading public would greatly benefit from a translation of Buchenau’s
work. Since he does speak English (in addition to at least Russian and Serbian/Croatian), it would
be good to have him lecture in the USA. He is a young man with a promising academic career.
Reviewed by Paul Mojzes, Rosemont College

Wendy R. Tyndale, Protestants in Communist East Germany. In the Storm of the World. Farnham,
Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010. xxvii+189 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN

As the world watches largely peaceful revolutions of the Arab Spring give way to violent
repression and civil war in the Mideast, it is salutary to recall the non-violent revolution in East
Germany (GDR) of 1989 and consider the role of the Protestant churches in galvanizing civil society
and serving as the focal point of protests against the Communist dictatorship. In this volume
Wendy Tyndale, a lay activist for various Christian aid organizations with experience in Latin
American and European contexts, adds to the burgeoning number of monographs on the
“Protestant revolution” in the GDR. To this enterprise Tyndale brings an advocate’s queries: how
did church leaders, theologians and laypeople deal with the challenges posed by the atheistic
regime, a regime which succeeded in gaining the world - emptying the churches - while losing its
soul – forfeiting its claim to political authority as the more progressive Germany? What is left of
the legacy of the church’s stance of “critical solidarity” and were its compromises with the “real
existing socialism” justified?

The answer she arrives at, in brief, is that the church remained true to its mission as a
Bonhoeffer-inspired “church for others”, a model for churches today despite the changed
circumstances. She argues that the churches inculcated values of peace, ethics, and non-violence
and nurtured “social capital” which was to pay dividends in the context of 1989. The churches
were not system stabilizers, as some have argued, but undermined socialism from within.

Although Tyndale covers the main periods of historical development in the church-state
relationship, her main focus is on the lived experience rather than the documented one. Thus she
uses the documentary evidence on the topic – particularly the rich trove of archival documents
from the East German Communist Party (SED), Stasi, or churches - very sparingly. As a result this
volume cannot claim to be definitive history. Instead she relies primarily on secondary sources and
extensive interviews with laypersons and selected church leaders/theologians, such as Heino Falcke
and Friedrich Schorlemmer, whose political orientation is decidedly on the left of the German
spectrum.

This methodological approach produces a rich, albeit anecdotal description of church life.
For example the SED’s battles with the churches’ youth work are very vividly reconstructed. Most
theological debates regarding dealing with the regime are likewise elaborated robustly. The
strongest part of the book is the author’s intelligent and balanced, yet comprehensive treatment of
the effect of reunification on the church, as well as the dilemmas in “coming to terms with the past”
regarding church complicity with the Stasi and SED.

Tyndale’s take on these issues is clear: the churches did not particularly benefit from the
“golden calf of reunification” (p. 128), but suffered a relapse of inferiority toward West German
society and churches, magnified by the Stasi revelations of complicity by some church officials. In her view, the Stasi penetration was relatively limited and did not compromise church decision-making structures. For its part, the Catholic Church, free-riding on the Protestant nurturing of civil society groups, benefitted inordinately from reunification, despite its political abstinence in the GDR period and similar Stasi complicity.

Most of Tyndale’s conclusions are reasonable ones, although her characterization of the church as largely pacifist in orientation does not comport with the findings of this reviewer. However, there are some weaknesses of this monograph. Even for a work that defines itself more in theological than political terms, some theological topics seem shortchanged. For example, the theological debates over the separation from the EKD in 1960s are hardly covered. Although pro-SED groupings are mentioned, the Christian socialism of the early East-CDU goes undeveloped. The book also has some errors in terminology (“Two Kingdoms Theory”) and translation (“Evangelical Student Communities” for Evangelische Studentengemeinde). Notwithstanding the numerous interviews referenced, the reader deserves more credible secondary sources for the historical narrative. Factual errors also arise periodically (e.g. purges by Ulbricht occurred in 1953-53, not 1950, p. 20; Kurt Scharf was provost, not bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg, when the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, p. 36), minor irritations that nonetheless create the impression of carelessness.

Yet the author’s fundamental conclusion remains valid: though its results may have left eastern German churches ambivalent and susceptible to Ostalgie, the non-violent process of the 1989 revolution is impossible to explain without reference to the churches’ self-conception as witnessing “in the storm of the world” of this dictatorship. The violent versions of the Arab spring are a sobering reminder of the alternative trajectory such democratic movements can take.

Reviewed by Robert F. Goeckel, Prof. Of Political Science, SUNY Geneseo.


John and Carol Garrard introduce their latest work by claiming that the resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church has largely been overlooked by academics who prefer to see Russia “through the traditional secular lens of economics, politics, demography, and other social sciences (x).” In *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent*, the Garrards hope to correct this problem by adding a cultural lens to the analysis. However, the authors have a strong propensity for overstatement, and the manner in which they address this problem offers no exception. If other Western academics have overemphasized traditional social scientific approaches to the neglect of religion, the Garrards go to the opposite extreme, referring to Orthodoxy as the “hidden mainstream coloring Russian domestic behavior and shaping Russian policies abroad (13).” This lack of balance and proportion is perhaps the salient feature of this book and brings into question its utility even as an introductory analysis of this very important topic.

Perhaps the most important contribution the Garrards make is their addition to the argument surrounding the legacy of the late Patriarch Aleksei II, which provides the “leitmotif” of this book (xi). A controversial prelate historically positioned to play a pivotal role not only in the resurrection of the Russian Orthodox Church but in the process of post-Soviet Russian identity formation, Aleksei has received mixed reviews at best by Western analysts primarily concerned with the attitude of the Russian Church toward minority religious viewpoints and its conformity (or nonconformity) to “appropriate” standards of church-state relations. To this field, the Garrards