The Christian Face of Peace in East Germany

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by Paul Oestreicher

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Most of the churches in East and West have recognized that they cannot decently escape the debate about nuclear weapons and about the Cold War, which makes the weapons so dangerous. Christian judgments range from the World Reformed Alliance's position that obedience to Christ demands an unqualified no to the possession, as well as to the use, of nuclear weapons; to the position of the Pope that nuclear deterrence may still be morally justifiable provided that there is a genuine intention and will to adhere to nuclear disarmament. By far the most impressive collective example of Christian thinking on the subject in the West is the pastoral letter of the American Roman Catholic Bishops: The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response. It is applied theology at its best, idealistic and yet wholly rooted in practical politics; a radical questioning of American social and political conventions, a challenge to Reaganite ideology. The Church of England's The Church and the Bomb, and the General Synod debate and resolution on it, form one small part of a great ecumenical mosaic on the subject.

In the Third World, where children starve and conventional wars, fueled by the weapons' industries of both power blocks, cause untold suffering, the nuclear debate looks like an indulgent obsession of the rich North.

How does it all look to Christians on the other side of the Berlin Wall, and all stations eastwards to Moscow? The Marxist-Leninist version of socialism is not given to open debate. It regards itself as the only true guarantor of peace. The official line is that peace will always be threatened as long as capitalist powers seek to destroy societies on the road to communism. And the only way to maintain peace and socialism is to deter the
potential aggressor with weapons to match his; the NATO doctrine in reverse. Most Russians, like most Americans, feel threatened. They accept the USSR's defence policies, even if they reject other aspects of Soviet power. In the smaller nations of Eastern Europe it is all much more complicated. The Governments are committed to Warsaw Pact policies (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) but ordinary people, many with strong anti-Soviet feelings, are often privately glad that the West is as strongly armed as it is.

What of the churches? In the USSR and all the Warsaw Pact countries except Poland and East Germany, the churches are expected to support the official policies of the state. By and large they do—and often quite sincerely. Many church leaders, especially in the USSR, men who in other contexts are deeply at odds with communist ideology, do not find it hard to accept that their rulers genuinely want peace. It is when "our peace policy" becomes a code word that really stands for the whole state package, that support for it becomes a much more difficult position to sustain. East European official peace organisations, Christian ones too, have no policies of their own. They generally assume that to support peace and to support Soviet foreign and defence policy are one and the same thing. The Polish Catholic church does not fit this pattern. In its life, the peace question has no major role to play. It manages to ignore the issue. It would certainly not campaign for the Warsaw Pact. But, being intensely patriotic and nationalistic, it would not wish either to call into question the legitimacy of Poland's armed forces. At this point there is no friction between Church and State. It is virtually taken for granted that every young Catholic Pole will serve in the army, Communist led though it is, and part of a nuclear alliance.

All is quite different in East Germany—the German Democratic Republic. There, a mainly Lutheran form of Protestantism—and especially its leadership—has developed a commitment to the peace issue, both theologically and politically. This puts it on a par with the American Roman Catholic Church. The GDR is, of course, the heartland of the Lutheran Reformation. Luther's 500th birthday has just been celebrated there in grand style by both church and state. And the Church has won for itself a public position of respect that is—Poland apart—unique in Eastern Europe. With the nominal allegiance of about half the population, but the active membership of only about five percent, the Protestant Church is not the massive counter-weight to
the state that the Catholic Church represents in neighboring Poland. But the Church is, nevertheless, the one major lawful alternative to Marxist-Leninist society. Its relationship to that society is one of critical solidarity. It carefully describes itself as a "Church within socialism", not a Church for or against the socialism of the state.

On the peace issue it has become clear that this Church retains for itself--both in theory and in practice--the right to publicly put forward policies which differ from, and are therefore more or less critical not only of the West but also of GDR and Soviet block policies. Organized in both regional and national synods, and with a strong balance of episcopal and lay leadership, all the official church structures have had the peace issue as an almost permanent item on their agendas for the last four or five years. Synodical statements, episcopal pronouncements and expert study documents on peace--if collated--would now fill several fat printed volumes.

In marked contrast to peace pronouncements from most other churches in the Warsaw Pact countries, none of these documents resemble those of the state in style or in content. There are some Christians, pastors among them, who do support state policy. They are organized in the Christian Democratic Union (one of the parties supporting the Communist establishment) and the GDR branch of the Prague-based Christian Peace Conference. In the Church, these Christians are a tolerated minority. There is another, somewhat larger, tolerated minority in the Church: those who are out-and-out opponents of official East German society. Though they are unable to articulate themselves publicly, they are a real factor that is not likely to die out.

What, then, is the 'peace policy' of the broad center of this ably lead East German part of the ecumenical movement? The nuclear issue, until very recently, has not been at the heart of the debate. The key issue has been the militarization of society, the adulation of patriotic military virtues by the state, and the revival, in terms of signs and symbols, of Prussian military traditions, from war toys in the shops to parades and military rituals on the streets. In the wake of Hitler's aggressive war, most East Germans who are adults today, Christians, Communists and the majority of people who are neither, were brought up in the fifties and sixties to reject all things military. The mood of the people remains fairly strongly pacifist and this is specially true in the Church. The young generation has largely inherited this
mood, a mood the state now works hard to change. There is no similar mood in
other parts of Eastern Europe. But there is a parallel phenomenon in West
Germany. The Nazi past is one reason for this East and West German
development; the division of one nation into two officially hostile states is
the other. Brothers and cousins do not want to shoot each other.

Both German states have military conscription. West Germany has written
the right of conscientious objection into its constitution and a high
proportion of young people (including nearly all the children of the clergy)
chose the alternative social service option. The East German state is the only
communist-ruled country to make a comparable (though less liberal) provision.
Young East Germans can opt for service in a kind of pioneer corps of the army
("construction units") which does no weapons training. To join these units is
in itself a form of legalised protest. It is discouraged and can put obstacles
in the way of a later career, but more and more Christians refuse to do even
that. These absolute conscientious objectors go to prison.

Some official church bodies have boldly said that the best Christian
witness to peace is to refuse service in the armed forces by joining the
pioneer corps or possibly even to refuse to serve at all. They then go on to
say that it is also possible for a Christian to serve the cause of peace by
becoming a soldier. Yet there is no doubt what the better way is held to be.
For the state, that is a bitter pill to swallow, especially as the West German
church authorities have failed to give an equivalent priority to the pacifist
option.

Also under attack by the Church in the East is the instilling of
military values by the state education system, from nursery school to
university. Defence studies are, at every level, part of the curriculum and
some Christians (with varying degrees of success) have demanded the right of
their children to opt out of these classes. At secondary school level, this
now includes weapons training, as in British school cadet corps. This
horrifies most East German Christian (and not only Christian) parents. The
inculcation of military virtues begins in all the state kindergartens, though
at that level, in some places, there do exist alternative church-run nursery
schools. An attempt in East Berlin to run a private secular anti-militarist
nursery school came to an abrupt end when the police bricked up the building
and arrested its founder, though she was released after a few weeks, in part
probably because of the intensive behind-the-scenes lobbying by the Church.

All the while, state policy stresses that military virtues and military readiness and the promotion of patriotic sentiment has only one purpose: the defense of peace. At no point is the suggestion ever made that communism should or could be spread by armed force. On the other hand, if socialist society is threatened from within or without, it must be resolutely defended, by armed force if necessary and, as a last resort, with nuclear weapons.

The nuclear issue now has come to the fore in the GDR, too. East German synods have nearly all rejected "the spirit, the logic and the practice of deterrence," and therefore, in effect, the policies of both NATO and the Warsaw Pacts. In this way they have gone much further than most West German church bodies. They have criticized one side only and have therefore clearly distanced themselves from GDR state positions on the nuclear issue. They have firmly come out against the stationing of new missile systems (Cruise and Pershing) in the West, predicting, correctly, that this would lead to a further escalation of the nuclear arms race and--for the first time--to the stationing of Soviet nuclear missiles on East German and Czechoslovak territory. This Soviet response, which is very recent, they can hardly condemn outright, though in effect, by rejecting the validity of nuclear deterrence on both sides, they clearly have no sympathy with it. That even goes for elements in the East German ruling party, which clearly accepts these Soviet weapons with deep reluctance. Remarkably, when a local parish wrote to the GDR President begging him not to accept the deployment of new Soviet weapons, the letter was published in full in the Communist Party press with the comment that, tragically, NATO deployment in the West left the GDR with no choice.

While a Greenham Common-type protest against Soviet missiles in the GDR would not be tolerated for a moment, there is no doubt that the sentiments of the Greenham women about Western and Eastern missiles are shared by a very high proportion of the East German population and almost certainly by most Christians. They do not believe that any nuclear missiles serve the cause of peace. There is, however, no debate about unilateral nuclear disarmament in its British form. There are no independent East German nuclear weapons to get rid of, and everyone accepts that the Red Army is there to stay for the foreseeable future. These are facts of life. What people really do want is a freeze on new deployment, arms control agreements and eventually a nuclear
free Europe, beginning with the two German states.

Is there such a thing in the GDR as a peace movement that is independent of the state? No, if by that is meant an organization comparable to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain or its counterpart in West Germany. Yes, if by that is meant active groups of people, especially young people and women, who have strong views on peace to which they give expression, and which differ from those of the state-sponsored peace movement, which claims to speak for the whole nation. These groups prefer to call themselves autonomous (eigenständig) rather than independent (unabhängig), as the latter might imply that they consist of hostile dissidents. That some dissidents who reject East German society as a whole use the peace issue as a cloak is true. They tend to finish up as emigrants or refugees in West Germany. But this is not true to the vast majority of peace activists, who are much more like typical members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain, unhappy about many aspects of society, but with no wish to be subversive.

For these individuals and groups, the Church provides the one place where they can freely articulate their hopes and fears. Many are not traditional Christians, and yet the church is prepared to welcome them, though often uneasily. They certainly do not fit into traditional congregations. They almost begin to form a para-church for which special forms of pastoral care are required. And there is always the fear on the part of the state (and some church leaders) that eventually this could lead to the Church playing the kind of role that Solidarity--the independent trade union movement--played in Poland, with near political disaster.

The fear is almost certainly unjustified. The GDR is simply too unlike Poland in almost every respect. But unjustified or not, it is a real fear and Poland is very, very near. In practice the alienated young, of whom there are many (though probably fewer than in the West) and whose style is often close to the western hippy culture of the sixties, find that only the Church takes them and their understanding of peace seriously. Special services are held for them from time to time (mostly in Berlin) called "blues masses" to which as many as six thousand come in one evening from all over the country, which means two or three repeat "performances." Both conservative Christians and conservative communists in the government tolerate this--but only just. What
matters is that the youth chaplains know they are supported by their Bishop and his Council. All this takes some courage, all around, including on the part of the state.

I suspect the Ministry of State Security (always conspicuously present in plain clothes agents whom the young people tend to send up) wished it could forbid such happenings. That is even more true of the periodic 'peace workshops' on church premises which last a whole day, which are really peace festivals with folk music, poetry and free speech à la "speakers' corner" (which is what they call it, in English). Churches, set in large gardens, are ideal for such events.

Women's groups have their equivalent, with feminism and peace interwoven, and with something of the spirit of Greenham Common, though in a Christian context. Fasts and prayer vigils are now frequent. The numbers of people involved are hundreds (who have the courage), but they almost certainly reflect the feelings of thousands. They reject the weapons and the propaganda of both East and West. Protest by women has been much more overt since the state announced that women were to be more fully integrated into the armed forces and, in emergencies, subject to conscription.

Some people undoubtedly are not willing to keep their protests within the relatively safe confines of the Church, its structures and its premises. They want to go into the streets, as in the West. And they want to put their ideas into print, as well as to express them by word of mouth. They quickly come up against the limits of what a Marxist-Leninist state can tolerate. Brushes with the law are then inevitable. Sometimes there is a real test of strength, as there was two years ago over the "Swords to Ploughshares" symbol. The Church produced the design with a quote from the prophet Micah and a reproduction of the statue presented to the United Nations in New York by the Soviet Government. Thousands of young people chose to wear it instead of, or as well as, the dove of peace of the state youth organization. The police were instructed to order young people to remove it. Yet wearing it broke no law. When young people had the courage to refuse, some were roughly handled. On the whole, the police were civil and there were no prosecutions. As a mass symbol the offending motif receded, but the young people, backed by the Church, really won that round. The state had overreacted and beat a tactical retreat. Again, when some 6,000 young people staged an unofficial peace rally in
Dresden to commemorate the destruction of the city in World War II, the Bishop and the Dean invited them into the Cathedral, allowed them to say all they wanted, conducted an exciting and risky open forum, and spoke to them about the significance of prayer for peace. They prayed together, some almost certainly for the first time in their lives. So the peace scene also becomes a place for Christian mission.

Some (and I do not mean anti-state dissidents) who feel they cannot keep within the limits set by GDR society, who want to campaign in western style, who have staged public vigils, written public slogans, published radical alternatives—in short those who have got under the skins of the authorities to an intolerable degree—have had to pay with their freedom. At the moment there are probably some 20 to 30 people in prison for peace-related offences. Many more have been interrogated or have lost jobs. Those sentenced are, of course, never punished for promoting peace but for, in one way or another, undermining the state's concept of peace. They are, like some peace activists in the United States, prisoners of conscience in Amnesty International's sense of the term. Some are Christians; some are not; some cannot easily be categorized and do not want to be. Behind the scenes, the church leadership actively tries to help them and has negotiated the release of many, even before they are charged or brought to trial. Certainly, without the Protestant Church many more would be in trouble with the authorities than is now the case. For Bishops and their Councils that is a demanding ministry; to speak and act for those whose conscience drives them to make an autonomous witness for peace, and yet not to allow the Church to become a haven for dissidents. It is a fine line. And it is, incidentally, an area of witness which the Roman Catholic hierarchy have deliberately left to their Protestant brethren.

Some senior Churchmen, having in mind the courageous stand of the Confessing Church movement under Hitler, are beginning to ask a new question: in the light of the threat of life on our planet by weapons of mass destruction which, if used, would equal Auschwitz many, many times over, has the time not come in East and West for a new Confessing Church which declares that any kind of cooperation with the possession of such weapons is both sinful and heretical? Has the military-industrial complex of which President Eisenhower warned the American people before his death, not become the Beast of the Apocalypse with which the saints must be totally at war? In the United
States and in the two German states that question is now being most insistently asked.

In September, 1984 a conference of European theologians from East and West, pacifists and non-pacifists, from right and left of the political spectrum--really the first meeting of its kind--hosted by a Hungarian Reformed Bishop in cooperation with (END) European Nuclear Disarmament, a body equally suspect to politicians in East and West, intends to wrestle with questions such as these, in Budapest. This will be a risky experiment for all concerned. Without a substantial East German contribution it would lack an essential and unique component. And that contribution will newly raise Dietrich Bonhoeffer's question about the cost of discipleship. In 1945 Bonhoeffer paid with his life. What will the price be in 1985?