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EAST GERMANY: A GOVERNMENT AND CHURCH ON HOLD

By Bill Yoder

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Something snapped in the German Democratic Republic on January 17, 1988. On that day, in the midst of a state-run demonstration commemorating the 69th anniversary of Rosa Luxemburg's murder, peace advocates held aloft signs quoting statements from that cerebral revolutionary clearly at variance with the Leninist theory of "democratic centralism." Nearly 50 of them spent more than two nights under arrest; the church responded by holding "intercessory services" on their behalf.

Attended by thousands of both the young and the curious, these happenings within church walls quickly took on the unmistakable aura of political manifestations. By the time church officials abruptly called off the meetings three months later, party hard-liners had received a promising updraft; what resulted was a year of significant political upheaval between church and state. During 1988, church periodicals were censured or kept from being distributed in nearly 30 instances, resulting in the first-ever GDR street demonstration for the rights of church periodicals. Klaus Gysi, the much-respected State Secretary for Church Affairs, resigned in July, apparently in disgust. For the first time in 20 years, polemics against major church officials appeared in the national party press.

Very recently, Gysi's successor, Kurt Löffler, has succeeded in reestablishing a pivotal role for his ministry. When travel rights were broadened in April of this year, the GDR church was the first to be informed. Censure of church publications came to a sudden halt early this year, yet no one is expecting significant breakthroughs within the immediate future. Few favors are being extended: A national Baptist youth convention repeatedly sanctioned in the past has again been postponed. The promising mutual peace pilgrimages of Christians and Marxists in 1987 have not been repeated. The government bureaucracy is attempting a holding pattern: a crown prince has not yet appeared. Consequently, the party careerist is understandably reluctant to expose himself in a period of incalculable and fickle political currents. The next major party convention is scheduled for 1990; it is assumed that party chairman Erich Honecker, now 77, will then name his successor.
On the official level, state actions remain galling to the critical observer. The adulation extended to Ceausescu's Rumania is undoubtedly an intended affront to the adherents of perestroika. The Protestant press retaliates by pointing out the economic duress of Rumania's citizenry. Yet, strangely enough, glasnost appears alive and well behind the official facade. Prominent personages—including the long-time chief of espionage, Markus Wolf—have gone on record as supporters of Gorbachev. Stephan Hermlin, a confidant of both Honecker and church circles, has repeatedly lauded Soviet reforms in the Western press. Indeed, it is being claimed that Honecker is not entirely in control of his own security police, which has been responsible for most of the more flagrant repressive actions of the past several years. Despite reoccurring setbacks, it appears to be only a matter of time until the government of the GDR is forced to board the Perestroika bandwagon.

In the meantime, the government is continuing to woo the church as a stabilizing force: Both prefer that citizens continue to reside within the country. The party has been attempting to win the church for its scheme to make life in the GDR more appealing without conceding that which the church demands most of all: dialogue on education, demilitarization of public life, equal access for Christians to public office, and travel rights for all. Consequently, the state's efforts have met with only marginal success.

The Lutheran and United provincial churches have long functioned as the sole public forum for political contention. The recent "Conciliar Process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of the Environment" was welcomed as a ready excuse to dispute domestic issues under church auspices. Preliminary conferences attended by hundreds of delegates from across the country have been held, the results of these sessions are intended to flow into the all-continent "European Ecumenical Assembly" scheduled for May in Basel.

The church's role as a critical commentator of state policies is accepted by most believers as legitimate, yet its additional role as patron and shelter of the alternative youth subculture guarantees continued controversy. This subculture is comparable to the West German "Green" movement; its affinity for Western role models and unchaste behavior supports the conclusion that it has no specific interest in matters of faith. It is for many believers indeed a marriage of necessity caused by the lack of any further possible patrons. In a unique coalition, both conservative-evangelical and pro-government Protestants are castigating the church's willingness to allow its facilities to be misappropriated by alternative circles. Both of these factions and the state (as well as the Catholic hierarchy) have shown a marked preference for church causes which are strictly spiritual in nature.

Yet the church cannot afford to make short shrift of the alternative scene. In addition to humanitarian concerns, West German media would lacerate the church leadership for collusion with the state. Ruling Bishop Werner Leich recently attempted a compromise by
assuring that the church is called to offer its shelter to all who seek it, but that it cannot be 
expected to endorse the stances of all those enjoying shelter.

Glasnost and its precursors have further opened the floodgates westward, much to 
consternation of those who choose to stay. Most of the youthful protesters arrested in 
January, 1988, immediately applied for or received exit visas to the West, thereby clouding 
the credibility of their demand for a more democratic society. Heightened resignation and 
a feeling of desertion have resulted; the exit wave has not made life within the present 
holding pattern more palatable.