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WHAT 1990 MEANT FOR MY COUNTRY...

By Thomas Bremer

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When I started thinking about what to write in this essay, my first thought was: I am probably from the country that was affected most of all by the events of 1998-1990. I am German, and I live in Germany, the country through which the East-West-divide went, most visibly through Berlin in form of the wall. But after a short time, I thought of the countries on which I concentrate most in my research—Russia and Ukraine, on the one hand, and Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand. Thirty years ago, they all belonged to larger countries, which do not exist anymore, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. I do not want to enter a competition regarding which country was more affected, and whether the split of a larger country into smaller ones has a larger effect than the unification of two countries into one. What is important, however, is to note that in both cases of break-ups, war was involved: for the years 1991-1995 in former Yugoslavia, and on a lesser level, in different regions for different periods of time, in the former Soviet Union, most significantly in the war still going on in Eastern Ukraine.

So, I would like to concentrate on Germany, without claiming it to be the country which was most affected. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 came unexpectedly for almost everyone. The East German State, the “German Democratic Republic” (GDR), was in turmoil. The events in Soviet Union influenced it, but the GDR government did not intend to change its course. When Mikhail Gorbachev visited East Berlin in October 1989, he encountered a group of hardliners at the top of the party and of the state, and he said something to them that later became famous as, “Who arrives late, will be punished by life.” A month later, the Berlin Wall fell.

The GDR was in a special situation. It had a neighboring, but “capitalist” German state, meaning that many people had contacts with people from the West—relatives who sent

Christmas parcels and visited, or tourists and businesspeople who came to GDR. Almost everywhere in the country, one could receive West German television. There was an area in the southeast which was too remote for reception, and which was mocked as “the valley of the clueless.” Ironically, the GDR government had antennas and amplifiers installed there, since from that region, more people applied to leave the GDR to West Germany than from the rest of the country—the ones who knew the Western reality at least by TV were more reluctant to emigrate. But when one came to West Germany, be it by escape, as a result of an approved application, or as a pensioner (they were allowed to leave), one immediately received West German citizenship with all privileges, as the West German government never accepted a distinct GDR citizenship but regarded everybody from there as being “German.” Any Russian, Bulgarian, or Pole who fled his country had to live abroad in exile. An East German lived simply in another part of Germany.

Many people regarded the situation of two German states as normal, especially after more time passed after World War II, and among those who had no relatives in the “other” Germany. My own family was completely West German, we had no contacts, relatives, or friends in GDR, and I remember that “the German question” was of no importance for many of us. On contrary, we regarded our country as the “proper” Germany—visible, e.g., that everybody named the soccer game during the 1974 World Championship as “Germany vs. GDR.” Other people, of course, had closer connections to the other state.

What was the role of the churches? The situation of the churches in GDR was special. They had found a niche for their existence and within that niche had certain privileges—some Christian holidays were state holidays, on Sundays there was a worship service broadcast over the radio, and the churches could train their clergy independently of the state. Of course, there was no full freedom of expression and of movement among church members, and active church members encountered discrimination. Thus, the regime succeeded in drastically diminishing the number of church members. In the years before the political changes, the Protestant Church offered space for alternative and opposition groups who fought for civil rights, for a clean environment, and against militarization of the society. During the events of late 1989, many pastors played an important role, so that in the last GDR government, the only one which was democratically elected and which was in charge for only a couple of months in 1990, from the free elections until the unification of the two German states, several ministers were pastors, including the foreign minister and the defense minister.

After the formation of the new united German state, all regulations concerning churches in Western Germany became valid for the whole country: religious institutions in public

schools, army chaplains, church taxes. However, the Eastern part of Germany was basically a secular state. Only a minority consisting of some 30 percent of the population belonged to a church. In some areas it was even much less. This trend continued during the following years. As of today, each of the six East German cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants (except Berlin) has more than 80 percent of its population who do not belong to any religious community. Today Christians in the Eastern regions of Germany are a tiny minority. Most people have not left or rejected Christianity; they simply have never been religious, not even formally.

In all this, there is only a small difference between the Protestant Church and the Catholic Church. With the exception of a few regions, the latter has always been much smaller, and did not play a significant role in GDR. It took part in ecumenical endeavors, but the main role towards the state was always played by the Protestants. The decline of religious belonging concerns most of all the Protestants, but it affects also the Catholics, though with a certain delay.

Because many people are quitting their membership in a church, and because that happens with the delay mentioned in the Catholic Church, Catholics are now for the first time in history the majority confession in Germany. Roughly speaking, around 56 percent of Germany's 81 million inhabitants are Catholics (23.6 million) or Protestant (meaning: Lutherans, Reformed, and United, 21.9 million), and the rest are Muslim (4.6 million), or belong to another church (Orthodox: 1.6 million, Free Churches and others: 2.9 million), or do not belong to any religious community (some 27 million). That means that more than 20 million belong to each of the large churches. Belonging, however, means being an official member and paying church tax. But less than 10 percent of these members attend a worship service on an average Sunday; some of them go once a year (typically for Christmas), or only for special occasions like weddings or funerals.

These numbers show that the Christian churches in Germany have strong structures, but only a weak participation by believers. "Structures" refers to buildings, institutions (above all in the social realm), and not least money. The two large churches had in 2016 a church tax income of 11.6 billion euros (almost 13 billion US dollars)—and that is without donations and other forms of income (rents, interests). Absurdly, the church tax income is growing though church membership is declining: The tax is a percentage of the income tax, and more people work, and have a good income, so that the church tax share goes up. That makes the German churches extremely rich, whereas the commitment of people towards the churches is

decreasing. This situation also explains how the churches in Germany could and can significantly help churches in other parts of the world, among them Eastern and Central Europe.

This is a short glance at Christianity in Germany in the last three decades, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification. However, as we know, *post hoc* does not mean *propter hoc*. The situation of the churches is not a result of the political events in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is an extensive debate about why such a development in Western Christianity took place; but the confrontation of the churches with modernity seems to be one of the main reasons. Believing and belonging to a church (and in Europe that meant mostly to an established church) is no longer a given, as it used to be for many centuries. The churches have to justify their doctrines and guidelines, even their existence, and to give reasons for them. It took them a long time to understand that—some representatives of churches doubt it even today. But it is the condition in which churches in Europe live today, or, to put it in more religious terms, the condition into which God has placed the churches in our times.

If this assumption is true, it means that the churches in Central and Eastern Europe quite soon will be confronted with the same challenges which the West and North European churches experienced decades ago. It is questionable, or rather doubtful, whether churches can learn from each other. In East European churches, one can sometimes hear the assumption that they will try to avoid modernity. That will be not feasible; one cannot avoid a historical development, as one cannot avoid the weather. But one can prepare for it. One also can see a chance for the churches in the current situation. Whether the churches in East and Central Europe will learn, or whether they will have to go through the same painful experiences—history will show. It might well be that the Great Transformation will have severe consequences for them. For Germany, it was a unique chance to become a “normal” country, with all positive and negative consequences.