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Siegfried Suckut

University of Mannheim, West Germany

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FROM OPPOSITION TO ALLIANCE

by Siegfried Suckut

Dr. Siegfried Suckut is a research associate working in the area of the history and politics of the GDR (German Democratic Republic) at the University of Mannheim in West Germany. He is presently studying the development of the GDR-CDU during 1945-1961. This is a translation of "Von der Opposition zum Bündnis," Kirche im Sozialismus, Vol. 8, No. 5 (1982), pp. 50-55. Used by permission of KiS. Suckut had frequent opportunity to examine the archives of the Free German Unions (FDGB), the National Front, and also the GDR-CDU. In the historical review which is presented here on the origins of the GDR-CDU, Suckut has used material not published previously.

From October 13 to 15, 1982, the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) of the GDR (German Democratic Republic), the last of the parties allied with the SED (Socialist Unity Party of East Germany), held its 15th party conference in Dresden. The last time this party received any notice by the Western press was in March 1972, when in the GDR "Volkskammer"--a sort of House of Representatives--the "law concerning interruption of pregnancy" was not passed unanimously, as is normal, but with 14 votes against and 8 abstentions. The assumption was that these votes came from the CDU party, presumably from those delegates closely affiliated with the church.

This attitude of the Western press is typical. Even the West German CDU overlooks the fact that its name was coined by the eastern association and was taken over by the western sister organization--with the exception of Bavaria--in December, 1945.

The man who founded and named the eastern CDU was the former Reichs-minister Andreas Hermes, who also was chosen as head of the Ministry of Food in the Soviet Military Zone. After the Soviets surprisingly allowed the re-establishment of political parties, Hermes was the leading member of a group interested in initiating a Christian Party of all confessions. On June 26, 1945, the CDU was formed, and it is therefore formally the oldest of the five parties in the GDR and, with
125,103 members, the second largest. Originally, of course, it was planned for all of Germany.

The founding circle contained former Zentrum Party members, liberal representatives from the former DDP (German Democratic Party)—Walther Schreiber, Ernst Lemmer, and Otto Nuschke. During the early history of the CDU it was typical to have close cooperation with local church representatives, who were often the driving forces behind the new party. Church superintendents even gave the CDU lists with addresses of pastors, who later received letters asking for support in forming the party and in the upcoming political campaign. Only a few protests came from those pastors who were annoyed at such methods.

The early history of the CDU was marked by a close cooperation and personal involvement between church and Party. Even today on the periphery of the Party’s work one observes this special relationship, when, due to lack of materials, the Bible is used practically as the only "textbook" in the schooling of members. This was also shown at the end of 1945 in the combined efforts to see religious education accepted as a school subject on the same level of respect as all other subjects. This attempt was rejected by the other parties. Only sporadically were there inner-Party conflicts concerning a perceived over-representation of Catholics in the CDU, giving rise to the suspicion that the new CDU could simply be a successor to the old Zentrum Party. It was not until the summer of 1946, in connection with the first parliamentary elections, that the Soviet Military Administration started to oppose the frequently open cooperation between church and party. Nonetheless, many clergy were on the candidate lists of the CDU.

The CDU's original central demands (political democracy, creation and preservation of a constitutional state, protection of private property, nationalization of natural resources, public control of mining and of key monopolistic corporations) were so vaguely expressed that there was great room for the most varied interpretations. The CDU organization also showed numerous weaknesses. There was no central steering body, but rather an indeterminate number of the original "Founders' Committee" of Berlin.

The ability of the CDU to take and defend a political position was
tested in the late summer of 1945. The Founders' Committee spoke out for a redistribution of agricultural land, but their unwillingness to accept expropriation without compensation caused the Soviet Military Authorities to dismiss Hermes and Schreider (whom they had already distrusted due to their stubborn defense of political views). Jakob Kaiser and Ernst Lemmer, two remaining top functionaries, took over the open posts.

Under the new leadership the party began to become less a traditional middle-class party and developed a more "socialist" profile. Kaiser sought to steer the party towards the goal of "Socialism with Christian responsibility."

The economic foundations of the proposed new society were:

--- the workers would have a say on the job;
--- private property would be guaranteed, except for nationalization of the key industries;
--- skeleton planning would be introduced by the state.

When this program was officially accepted at the First Party Conference in June, 1946, it was clear that the goal of the CDU leadership was to attract as many former SPD members as possible and, through later elections, become the strongest political party in the Soviet Zone. Although the concrete concept of "Christian Socialism" did not succeed, the above program was still what the party sought to formulate until approximately the middle of 1951. The membership—200,000 in September, 1947—composed of people formerly not affiliated politically, readily accepted this clear change in program.

Despite all attempts, however, the CDU was not able to fulfill its goal of becoming an equal rival to the SED in the Fall elections of 1946. The CDU received 20% of the vote. It was able to surpass the SED in industrialized areas and in conjunction with the Liberal Democratic party. In two of five provincial diets the CDU and LDP held the majority of votes. These results, together with results of the sister party in West Germany, justified the claim of being the "strongest political power" in post-war Germany.

If one tries to summarize the CDU's political position in 1946-1947, it is clear that, despite its socialistic program, the CDU primarily worked for the protection of the economic interests of the
middle class and the realization of church interests. Specific interests of the workers were hardly considered.

The deepening division between the eastern and western parts of Germany, caused by the controversies among the four powers in the second half of 1947, made it more and more difficult to be in opposition politically to the Soviets.

The final break between the CDU and the Soviets came closer when, in mid-1947, Kaiser sharply rejected the ever clearer claim to leadership by the SED. The reprisals demanded at a meeting of the CDU party heads climaxed in the statement that in the future the CDU should function as a "breakwater of dogmatic Marxism" in the Soviet Zone.

Kaiser was still completely supported by the membership. In a secret ballot he was re-elected chairman with only one vote against and one abstention. Even many of the delegates who later distanced themselves from him still supported his political stance. Nonetheless, he was in a weakened position because of the changing political situation and the fact that he had not been able to keep the organization of a United German CDU alive. Adenauer kept his distance, suspecting that Kaiser was being influenced by the Soviets. Adenauer failed to come to the GDR-CDU party conference in Berlin. Kaiser's attempts at establishing a "National Representation" failed due to the negative attitude of the West German SPD and CDU. Hence, through no fault of its own, the CDU found itself isolated.

The final break came when the entire CDU refused to support an SED appeal for a "Peoples' Congress on Unity and Just Peace," because the cooperation of the Western German parties could not be expected. This negative attitude gave the Soviet Military Authority the occasion to remove the CDU leadership from their offices.

Soon afterwards Otto Nuschke, who was acceptable to the Soviets, became the CDU chairman. On December 11, 1947, he openly demanded Kaiser's resignation.

When Nuschke became the new CDU chairman at the Third Party Conference in September, 1948--a position he held till his death in 1957--the role which the SED and SMA planned for the CDU had changed gravely. The transformation of the CDU was a direct result of the
transformation of the SED, which now claimed the lone leadership role in
government and society. At the provincial level, the CDU became a very
different party by the fall of 1952.

It was apparently not Nuschke's original intention to work toward
such a change. He tried to maintain the independence of the party, and
attempted to keep united German contacts and cooperation. He even
renewed Kaiser's statement of "Christian Socialism." The Union still
worked toward these goals which were clearly anti-Marxist, against the
SED.

The CDU's followers evidently honored this attempt at continuity
for, despite withdrawals, the party was successful in increasing
membership to its highest level--213,000--in September, 1948. However,
within the framework of the official "Construction of Socialism"
(officially accepted in 1952), the CDU as a party of opposition
possessed ever narrowing elbowroom. Nuschke recognized the necessity of
showing willingness toward reaching an understanding with the SED. This
decision to seek agreement included a commitment to accommodation in
times of conflict. This was the Party's political situation in the
following years.

The CDU leadership decided to promote its own viewpoints in regard
to the key political issues, such as the postponement of elections in
1948 and 1949, the recognition of the Oder-Neisse border, the
establishment of the GDR and the setting up of unified election lists.
Nevertheless, the CDU was forced to tie itself to the SED line as soon
as any of these problems took on a political or existential character.
It was forced to accept the SED position to ensure the preservation of
the party. Hence, the policy of the CDU was clear and predictable for
the SED.

When it watered down its own positions, at the same time
approaching the view of the SED, the CDU robbed itself of its political
credibility. The assimilation by the Leninists of the party of
leadership also affected the area of organization, for the principle of
democratic centralism encouraged the members to increasingly take over
control from the leaders.

By the end of 1948 many members had left; ten years later the
lowest membership ever--100,000--was registered. Between 1948 and 1952 the leadership changed greatly. Of the original Founders' Committee only Nuschke and Fobedanz were left in leading positions by mid-1950. Young, inexperienced members took the places of those who were in politics since the Weimar Republic. This basic change in structure was primarily a result of a purge by the SED, which actually made decisions regarding personnel. Even slight deviations in behavior raised the suspicions of the SED and were dealt with either directly or indirectly.

The CDU was able to keep its integrity the longest in the area of program. "Christian Socialism" was not replaced by "Christian Realism" until the second half of 1951. It was difficult when forming a position paper in October, 1951, to convincingly combine Christianity with the development of a social system of the Soviet type. The final point in the position paper read:

Through Christian responsibility the CDU professes itself for the socialist order of society. Socialism gives Christians the best possibility of realizing the teachings of Christ and of practicing practical Christianity. Marx's teaching of the establishment of a new, better societal order has been realized in exemplary form in socialist Soviet Union. The Christian democrats recognize that the working class has the leadership on the way to establishing socialism and is firmly determined, together with the party of the working class, to fight for the realization of these goals.

To solve this problem at least formally was the prerequisite for the acceptance of the role which the SED designated to the CDU. The goal of the SED-inspired transformation of the CDU was for it to become a controlled mass organization led by the Leninist party, which received tasks for the building of socialism. In the case of the CDU the task consisted of following a policy of alliance to integrate into the socialist society the Christian citizens and their religious communities. The Sixth Party Conference in October, 1952, spoke to this new function through corresponding resolutions.

The CDU carries important responsibility towards the establishment of socialism in the GDR. It has the task to tirelessly educate the Christian population about the socialist order to gather the peaceloving Christians and to lead
them in participating toward socialist goals. Hence the CDU is the leading and helping power of the Christian population in the GDR.

The fact that the CDU clearly took the side of the state in its church policies alienated many members, who turned their backs on the Party and, when it came to real conflicts, stood on the side of the church. Many feared the CDU would drive a wedge between the church leadership and the church members. After all, a member of the Political Committee of the CDU and GDR Foreign Minister Dertinger openly demanded in 1952: "If we do not succeed in leading the church to the state, then we shall have to lead the Christians to the state against the will of the churches."

Here was an example, as was soon to be evident, of a gross miscalculation of its own abilities. On the contrary, it had not yet succeeded in convincing its own members of the correctness of CDU politics over against the churches. The majority of the membership rejected the unmodified acceptance of the goals of the SED and chose the side of the churches in the great conflicts of the time.

This alienation between party leadership and members was the primary cause of the decrease in membership. The influence of the churches upon the CDU thus became, ironically, greater than that of the CDU upon the churches.

Only gradually did the realization come that the churches would be able to survive even in socialism. The churches' members numbered in the millions and therefore represented one of the greatest mass organizations. The influence of the CDU in the churches could only be achieved by active participation and full integration in the work of the church by as large a number of party members as possible.

Translated from German by
Norman Robinson
Westtown School
Westtown, Pennsylvania