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Katharina Kunter
University of Bochum

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**BETWEEN ACTIVE OPPOSITION, DIALOGUE AND LOYALTY:
CHURCHES IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC 1970-1989/90**

by Katharina Kunter

Katharina Kunter, Ph.D. is Associate Professor for Modern and Contemporary History at the University of Bochum and member of the German Research Foundation Project "Transformation of Religion in the Modern Age". Her main publications are *Five Hundred Years Protestantism* (2011), *Broken Dreams and Fulfilled Hopes: Protestant Churches in Germany in Suspense between Democracy and Socialism 1980-1993* (2006), and *Churches in the Helsinki-Process* (2000).

The aim of this paper, beyond the case study itself, is to draw out the underlying structures and mechanisms with which the Protestant churches in the German Democratic Republic had to deal in the last period of Communism. By so doing, I hope to contribute to and further stimulate international and balanced comparisons of the situations of the churches in Central and Eastern Europe in the Cold War.

The paper will provide an overview of:

- the general situation in the GDR in the 1980s
- church policy in the 1970s and 1980s
- arising state-church conflicts or tensions
- the new role of the church in 1989/1990

...at these three different levels:

- how the state acted against the churches
- how the churches responded to these attacks, and finally
- what have been the short- and long-term effects for the churches of this confrontation.

General Overview

When we survey the situation in East Germany during the Cold War we find at the beginning of the decade of the 1980s an increasingly deteriorating economic situation. The GDR's growing indebtedness to the West, the restriction of its imports and widely felt shortages of food and other goods made for a desolate economic situation. Demoralization and resignation dominated the emotional tone of the country, drawing a large part of the population into a sort of "collective depression." One consequence of this was the increasing number of people who sought to leave the GDR and relocate in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) despite the risk that they themselves and their families would likely be labelled as criminals and be discriminated against by the state. Between 1962 and 1983 10,000 relocations into the FRG were registered annually, but from 1984 to 1988 the rate increased to 40,000 per year.¹ This persistent grey shade of the eighties was sensitively described by the East German writer Christa Wolf in her novel *Kassandra*: "Gerade die Gewöhnung an den Zustand war es, die mir die Hoffnung nahm" ("It was this getting used to the normality of it all that took away my hope").² The situation got worse in other ways too. The

¹ Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat. Partei, Staat und Gesellschaft 1949-1990* (München, 2000), p. 276.

² Christa Wolf, *Kassandra* (Darmstadt, 1983), p. 116.

State Secret Service (*Staatssicherheit* or “Stasi”), intensified its presence, expanding its personnel to as many as 91,000 by 1989.³

Church Policy 1970s and 1980s

At the same time a new phase of state-church policy was emerging in the GDR. The seventies were characterized by a sort of *détente* between state and church. On 6th March 1978, toward the end of that decade, there was a summit meeting (“*Spitzengespräch*”) of prominent state and Protestant church leaders who agreed upon a *modus vivendi* and form of “peaceful coexistence.” Parallel to this, the state began to express a growing interest in the international and ecumenical contacts of the GDR Protestant churches and sought to use the East German theologians and pastors involved with international ecumenical bodies as tools for the spreading of its own propaganda and intelligence services.⁴ They often succeeded in this (but not always, as Christa Gregel shows in her paper in this issue).

As this high-level a church-state *modus vivendi* was being established, the number and volume of critical voices was rising too, mostly from groups closely connected to Protestant churches and parishes. They were speaking out against the growing militarization of GDR society, and joined their voices with others in Europe protesting the NATO “Double-Track” decision of December 1979, and calling for a nuclear free Europe and international disarmament. Many of these groups gathered together under the protective “umbrella” of the Protestant church, forming the basis of an “independent peace movement.”⁵ These church bodies and church-related groups were the only alternative to the state-run, ideologically-based peace movement of the GDR. They challenged it through movements like the “*Berliner Appell – Frieden schaffen ohne Waffen*” (Berlin Appeal - Make Peace without Arms) organized by youth pastor Rainer Eppelmann and the Berlin-based dissident Robert Havemann. Another was the popular movement “*Schwerter zu Pflugscharen*” (Swords into ploughshares). A broad-based GDR network “*Frieden konkret*” (Concrete Peace), founded in 1983, added to this new social dynamic.⁶

The state and the Party responded aggressively to this open challenge from a growing network of independent peace groups, launching a counter-offensive of repression, persecution, arrests, censorship, spying, and expulsion of “offenders” to the FRG. This posed a dilemma for the Protestant churches and their leaders. Many of these opposition groups were being protected by the churches (or were operating under the official church “umbrella”), but this was highly controversial and sometimes heatedly debated within the church. The Protestant church had long remained aloof from politics and the idea of being seen as supporting the political opposition was for many very upsetting. Most church leaders, especially on the highest levels of the main Protestant church body, the “*Bund Evangelischer Kirchen in der DDR*” (Council of Churches in the GDR), wanted to avoid the provoking the state. They tended to avoid such controversial topics as individual civil and human rights, and sought to restrain opposition groups and initiatives.

In turn the Communist party (SED) also intervened actively, seeking to gain the leadership of the Council of Churches as an ally and a stabilizing factor in society.⁷ To a degree they

³ See Dietrich Starlitz, *Geschichte der DDR*, (Frankfurt, 1996), p. 332.

⁴ See Katharina Kunter, *Erfüllte Hoffnungen und zerbrochene Träume. Evangelische Kirchen in Deutschland im Spannungsfeld von Demokratie und Sozialismus (1980-1993)* (Göttingen, 2006), pp. 79-93.

⁵ See Ehrhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949-1989*, (Bonn, 1997), as well as Anke Silomon, „*Schwerter zu Pflugscharen*“ und die DDR: Die Friedensarbeit der evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR im Rahmen der Friedensdekaden 1980-1982, (Göttingen, 1999).

⁶ For more detail see Ehrhart Neubert.

⁷ See Clemens Vollnhals (ed.), *Die Kirchenpolitik von SED und Staatssicherheit. Eine Zwischenbilanz*, (Berlin, 1992).

succeeded. The synod of the Council, at its meeting in Görlitz in September 1987, refused to support a petition, "*Absage an Praxis und Prinzip der Abgrenzung*" (Renounce the practice and principle of borders) brought by a grassroots group that broached the question of the lack of basic liberal human rights in GDR.⁸ Still, the fact that members of the synod were debating the petition and discussing the issue was taken by the petitioners to be a success. It showed that the GDR regime was not omnipotent and that some space did remain for free speech within the sphere of the churches.

Again, the response of the SED was one of growing repression towards the end of the eighties. In November 1987, two months after the Görlitz synod, a Stasi squad broke into the parish rooms of the Zionskirche in East Berlin and arrested many activists gathered there. East Berlin opposition groups had created there an "*Umweltbibliothek*" (Environmental Library), where they collected and displayed officially banned literature. They also printed and distributed underground publications, organized events with debates on banned topics and coordinated a dissidents' network. The brutality of the Stasi in making these arrests was shocking and Protestant Christians organized solidarity demonstrations all around the country.⁹

Another important incident happened in January 1988 at the annual state-sponsored "*Rosa Luxemburg/Karl Liebknecht*" demonstration. For the first time, dissidents from Protestant groups openly participated, carrying placards with two quotations from Rosa Luxemburg: "*Die Freiheit ist immer die Freiheit des anderen*" and "*Der einzige Weg zur Wiedergeburt – breiteste Demokratie*" (Freedom is always the freedom of the other; and Widespread democracy -- The only way to rebirth). This was even more remarkable since just before that demonstration some 160 persons had been arrested, but the opposition refused to back away or hide: Christians gathered for worship and intercession; information-sharing activities were relaunched; opposition groups were reconnected and coordinated; and all across the GDR Christians expressed their solidarity. Still, however, there were tensions between Protestant activists and the churches' official statements. As a whole, the churches advocated caution, political reserve, but they engaged nevertheless in actions of solidarity with individual victims of repression.

Church-State-Conflict and Tensions

Now the SED seemed to be losing its grip on power and again the state answered by putting pressure on the church leadership.¹⁰ Bishop Werner Leich, leader of the most influential church leadership body in the GDR "*Konferenz der Kirchenleitungen*" (Church Leadership Conference), was summoned in February 1988 to a meeting with Politbüro member Werner Jarowski. Jarowski said the church had overstepped its bounds and had been used by groups whose members were enemies of the state. The time had come to "go back to being church." More state repression was forthcoming. Church magazines were censored, worshippers were stopped and inspected by police and pastors and other church workers were placed under still more constant surveillance. But the churches refused the state's demand that they dissolve the groups. Again, church and state were obliged to meet at the highest level. Bishop Leich was summoned in March 1988 to an encounter with the GDR's highest ranking politician, Erich Honecker, the "*Staatsratsvorsitzender*" (Chairman of the State Council). Leich sought an understanding with

⁸ See Anke Silomon, *Synode und SED-Staat. Die Synode des Bundes der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR in Görlitz vom 18.-22. September 1987*, (Göttingen 1997).

⁹ more detail in Neubert, (footnote 5 above).

¹⁰ See Detlef Pollack, „Kirchliche Eigenständigkeit in Staat und Gesellschaft,“ in Claudia Lepp/ Kurt Nowak (eds.), *Evangelische Kirche im geteilten Deutschland (1945-1989/90)*, (Göttingen, 2001), p. 202.

Honecker, pointing out that the growing social problems in GDR could only be solved if the church were included in the dialogue as mediator and advocate between state and society.

New Roles, 1988-1989

In the role of “advocate for the silent majority” the Protestant church found a new purpose and self-understanding. It brought the Church back to the “heart of society” (Detlef Pollack), where it not only defended its own institutional autonomy but also the people’s interests. This new role had been evolving through the “conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation” set in motion by the World Council of Churches at its 1983 Assembly in Vancouver, Canada. In the GDR it led to three ecumenical gatherings related to the “conciliar process” held in 1988-1989 that built a new kind of ecclesiastical-political forum in the GDR. Active Christians were now more often present and better integrated in networks than in previous years. Certain Protestant parishes with very active groups engaged for peace, human rights and democracy in GDR were isolated islands of opposition, however, with influence across the regions.

As this was happening the state’s SED regime was going through an ever deepening crisis of legitimacy as its public support waned noticeably. Citizens suffered from ever deeper economic difficulties. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s promising reform programme of “Perestroika” and “Glasnost” seemed to be reaching everywhere but the GDR. The GDR’s fraudulent national elections of May 1989, and Egon Krenz’s (Erich Honecker’s successor’s), public support in June 1989 of the massacre of Chinese student protesters in Tiananmen Square in Beijing contributed to a further weakening of the SED’s authority. The numbers of people wanting to leave the GDR for the FRG increased dramatically. Refugees occupied the West German embassies in Prague and Warsaw, and with the opening of Hungary’s western border in September 1989 some 50,000 GDR citizens had sought refuge in the West by the end of October.

In the fall of 1989 from the former opposition group activists formed new democratic circles and a civil rights platform, and began calling for free elections. The internal political dynamic changed.¹¹ The SED was now faced with a political opponent who had clear demands and programmes that found broad support among foreign observers, but most especially among the mass of “ordinary East Germans.” The most important of the new civil right movements were “*Neues Forum*” (New Forum), “*Demokratie Jetzt*” (Democracy Now) and “*Demokratischer Aufbruch*” (Democratic Awakening). In October the new Social Democratic Party of the GDR was founded. In all of these Protestant Christians were active, stepping out from the walls of the church and onto the wider political stage. Democratization and taking power now became the two main goals. A central round-table was established in Berlin at the end of 1989, followed by the creation of regional round-tables around the country. At these forums different political and State officials came together – from the Communist party as well as from the civil rights movement – to fill the power vacuum and plan the first free elections in March 1990 of the GDR parliament, the “*Volkskammer*”. Because of their training and experience in public speaking in the parishes and in church and ecumenical councils, and their reputation as persons of high moral integrity, Church leaders were called on to moderate these round tables.

Churches and Christians were very visible at the end of the GDR regime in other places, too. For the first time the synod of the *Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR* took a clear and

¹¹ Among others Eckhard Jesse (ed.), *Eine Revolution und ihre Folgen. 14 Bürgerrechtler ziehen Bilanz*, (Berlin, 2000); Konrad Hugo Jarausch / Martin Sabrow (eds.), *Weg in den Untergang. Der innere Zerfall der DDR*, (Göttingen, 1999); Kurt Eberhard in connection with Hansjörg F. Buck and Gunter Holzweißig (eds.), *Die SED-Herrschaft und ihr Zusammenbruch*, (Opladen, 1996).

radical position calling for the dissolution of the one-party-system, democratic elections, the freedom to travel, and other civil rights. The churches also played a major role at the local level. Many churches opened their doors wide in autumn 1989, praying for a peaceful transition, holding candle-light vigils, organizing special worship services, and generally encouraging a feeling of solidarity and belonging together. The peace prayers, candle-light vigils, and Monday demonstrations at the Nicolaikirche in Leipzig gained much media attention in the West, but it was not alone. Protestant churches all over the country gave the uprising of autumn 1989 their own public face. That the "Wende" (The historical Turnabout) of 1989 finally occurred as a "peaceful revolution," a transition from dictatorship to democracy without bloodshed or destruction, was thanks in no small part to what the churches had accomplished. When the Berlin Wall was breached on the night of 9 November 1989 political developments accelerated and the way to the German reunification was opened. But that story exceeds the current topic.

Conclusion

Looking back now in an attempt to summarize, we see how the State and Party sought to weaken the churches and bring them to heel: its acts of repression, its attempts to turn their international cooperation to the State's advantage, the promotion of "peaceful coexistence," fostering a "*modus vivendi*," obliging clergy to serve the State's propaganda ends, aggressive counter-offensives to church initiatives, persecution, arrests, censorship, spying, expulsion—all in an attempt to keep "the church in line".

We see the churches also reacting to the State offensives: promoting détente between State and Church, enabling opposition through alternative thoughts and actions, sheltering opposition groups and providing an "umbrella" under which they could have more or less free discussion. But whatever method they chose there was no action without reaction from the State; no reaction without counter-reaction. The setting was the totalitarian state. In the short term there was polarization; opposition arose within the churches and their institutions, sometimes coming close to the splitting of Protestantism. In the long term the authority of church hierarchy was weakened, the church became less state-orientated, and secularism was fostered.¹²

That Protestantism and its churches stood on the side of the people, as it did in autumn of 1989 showed at a very special moment in history a growing acceptance of a new identity for the Church: first and foremost as advocate and actor in the civil society and not—as so often in the past—the natural counterpart and ally of the State. The 21st century will show where and how far this new experience will take Protestantism in Germany.

¹² See also, although not focused primarily on the churches Detlef Pollack / Jan Wielgohs (eds.), *Dissident and Opposition in Communist Eastern Europe. Origins of Civil Society and Democratic Transitions*, (Wiltshire, 2004).