The Emigration Wave from East Germany and the Church

In January 1984, the number of emigration permits granted to East German citizens jumped abruptly upward. During the first six months of 1984, 28,000 persons emigrated to West Germany. Forecasts predict that 35,000 to 40,000 will be permitted to emigrate in 1984. Since the early 1970s, between 8,000 and 10,000 East Germans have been granted exit visas annually; illegal refugees brought the total number of emigrants per year to between 12,000 and 15,000. Incidentally, 532 West Germans moved to East Germany during 1983.

The German Democratic Republic's (GDR's) sudden leniency has dried up much open dissent in youthful hotspots such as Jena. Young persons allied with the West German ecological "green" movement--there were many of them in the south-central city of Jena--have been among the first to apply for emigration. In 1984, youthful "greens" have also been the one grouping which the government has been most eager to send westward. Of course, the readiness of many "greens" to seek better pastures in the West has seriously damaged their credibility in the eyes of those supporting the East German Communist Party (SED).

The GDR government has proffered no reasons for its sudden leniency; all observers have therefore been limited to conjecture. It can nevertheless be assumed that the East German desire for continued loans and a favorable trading climate has played a significant role. Other theories heard in the GDR mention that the government has chosen these means of reducing its surplus work force caused by a downturn in the economy. National one-ticket elections were held on March 6, 1984. The drop in exit permits immediately after that date may indicate that the government desired to free itself of as many nay-voters as possible.

It is said that the GDR hoped to rid itself once and for all of a troubled and dissatisfied minority. Yet the "mass" exodus may instead induce a vacuum effect; for a minor run on police stations has apparently taken place. Many who had long hesitated to apply for emigration suddenly realized that their chances of receiving permission might never again be
as favorable. The lists of those desiring to emigrate are now probably longer than ever; West German estimates regarding the total number of applicants have run as high as 500,000. With a GDR population of nearly 17 million, that would involve 2.9 percent of the total.

Why East Germans Desire to Leave

Though only a small minority of émigrés would be honest enough to admit it, the most frequent reasons for emigration are undoubtedly economic. GDR media have long extolled the "mighty" achievements of their own economy. But the spectacle of West German Mercedes roaring past sputtering, boxy, two-cylinder Trabants on the transit highways to and from West Berlin quickly demonstrates to the consumption-minded which German economy has achieved the more "mighty" recovery. It is said that Western television commercials fluttering across East German television screens are the best propaganda imaginable. Although the Ohio-sized GDR is the world's ninth largest industrial power, West Germany inevitably appears wealthier, shinier, cleaner and more colorful. Though few GDR-citizens are aware of it, their own meat consumption is even higher than in the U.S.; and, according to a UNESCO report, their standard of living has now surpassed the British one. On the other hand, pastors' salaries have not fared particularly well. A GDR Lutheran pastor earns approximately 800 Marks per month; his colleague in the Federal Republic earns 500 percent more.

A larger-than-life mystic vision of West Germany permeates all segments of GDR life. Though few younger persons have been to the West since the sealing of the border in 1961, their own country is inundated with visitors from there. Every evening anyone can "émigrate westward internally" by switching on a Western television or radio station. Though many of one's own relatives and former schoolmates now reside in the Federal Republic, one personally has no access to that country. Actually, a higher percentage of the East German population travel to West Germany than vice versa. But the chronic impossibility of most younger persons to make any trip westward is a major cause of the national trauma regarding West Germany. Except for government officials, only the retired and disabled have liberal access to travel in Western countries.

Manfred Stolpe, a major lay representative of the East German
"Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg," is convinced that most persons who have emigrated would not have done so had they possessed the option of traveling freely. They were forced to emigrate as the only means of obtaining the liberty to travel. Stolpe added in a declaration on April 9, 1984, "Even ... the politburo ... knows, that travel makes one fonder of home, and that direct contact with questionable influences immunizes better than any theoretical lectures."

Until now the GDR-government has seldom deemed it necessary to advise those denied exit visas of the reasons behind that decision. Non-party members understandably rise up against such practices and laws which they themselves have never had the opportunity to help shape. A feeling of powerlessness over against the arbitrary nature of state decisions and policies leads to deep resentment.

The highly-restrictive nature of the SED's information policies is also a major cause of unrest. Although all higher-level party members have ready access to the Western press, the non-party "masses" are reduced to perusing the jingoistic essays of the GDR's own press. Although the emigration wave had been a topic on everyone's lips for several months, it took the state press until April 7, 1984 to even admit that the reports of emigration had substance. On that date the party paper Neues Deutschland stated cryptically that "numerous former GDR citizens have applied for reentry." Although such desires were "entirely understandable," they could not be honored by the government. This was an apparent effort to curb the vacuum effect. No public explanation has yet been proferred by the government regarding the reasons behind its sudden leniency. Such state distrust of its citizenry has very frequently led to mutual mistrust; the church was the only GDR institution which openly discussed the issue so prevalent in the minds of all this past spring.

Practicing Christians are barred from becoming members of the SED. Earlier this year Church President Eberhard Natho of Dessau complained that an active Christian could therefore become neither a policeman nor a school teacher. Outside of the virtually powerless Christian Democratic Party (CDU), the Christian has chances of achieving a career of national visibility only under church auspices.

The government has made major concessions regarding recognition of the church since 1978. On March 6, 1978, a much-publicized meeting
between state head Erich Honecker and Bishop Albrecht Schönherr led to
the proclamation of an official modus vivendi. The state made further
concessions during the Luther anniversary of 1983. Nevertheless, present
concessions to the church should be understood in light of the party's
determination to secure for itself the future through mass indoctrination
of the young. The state has for years adamantly rejected all appeals by
the church for a discussion with the Ministry of Education on the
outstanding issues of public education.

The Church's Response to the National Exodus

The church has been the institution hardest hit by the flurry of
exit visas. Persons applying for emigration have often lost their means
of employment, and the church has been one of the few employers willing
to outfit them with new short term jobs. These persons have worked
primarily in church-owned hospitals, offices, farms, and graveyards.

The renewed tearing asunder of families and relationships through
emigration is a major cause of concern within church circles. The exodus
of convinced Christians and the occasional imprisonment of politically
dissent activists are probably equally trying for those believers
committed to making a go of life within the GDR.

Church and state are experiencing a coalescing of interests: both of
them desire to stem the flow of emigrations. In fact, the Lutheran and
United "Federation of Evangelical Churches" has long had an understanding
with the western "Evangelical Church in Germany": no former East German
pastor finds ready employment in the Western sister church if he or she
has departed without the blessings of his or her former East German
church.

GDR Christians intending to remain there have been irritated by the
claim made by recent emigrés on West German television, stating that "one
cannot live as a Christian in the GDR." Church President Natho added in
protest: "Christians in the GDR have a future and are not being forced to
leave their country. They should rather be trusting God to equip them
with that which is necessary for their existence here."

The Evangelical Federation believes that an elimination of the
primary sources of discontent would entice many more persons to
rediscover the GDR as their true home. It is therefore demanding of the
state that it "create such conditions, in which persons could feel at ease and desire to remain living here." At the Görlitz Synod on April 2, 1984, Bishop Hanns-Joachim Wollstadt labeled following conditions as "intolerable" for citizens of the GDR: "The philosophical dogmatism of the entire educational sector," "insufficient willingness to entrust other-minded citizens with significant responsibilities," and "the limitations on movement beyond the borders of the GDR."

The Church's Appeal to those Desiring to Emigrate

Superintendent Dietrich Mendt of Zittau wants East Germans to expand their views beyond the narrow West German horizon; their own degree of wealth or poverty should be measured according to the living standards in the Third World. At the afore-mentioned Görlitz Synod he lamented, "The living standard of the Federal Republic is utilized as a measuring stick to determine our own (consumer) expectations." Church President Natho stated in March, "We in the GDR are considered to be filthfully and dreadfully rich" by those from the Third World. They have perhaps "already given up any hope that the socialist world will be willing to aid them in any meaningful way."

Former Bishop Heinrich Rathke of Mecklenburg has attempted to direct the gaze of East German Christians eastward. He has pointed out that for their sisters and brothers in the Soviet Union, the GDR is virtually an outpost of the "Golden West." Mendt and Rathke are sorely chastened by the fact that one-third of the GDR church budget is still being covered by the hard-currency donations of Western churches.

Perhaps the most significant appeal of 1984 directed specifically towards those contemplating emigration was delivered by the Erfurt provost Heino Falcke. In a pastoral letter distributed last February he pointed out that very many persons—though they spoke of politics—had left the GDR in a futile attempt to escape their own personal problems. Although, according to Falcke, the "sealed and heavily guarded border" lacks any justification whatever, political conditions neither secure nor eliminate the prospects of personal happiness. Any departures by native-born East Germans leave a gaping hole "in the weave of interpersonal relationship." Those who leave should ponder more seriously "how many of those who remain behind are driven into internal emigration"
through their own (external) emigration." According to him, "brave resistance to opportunism and a little self-denial" would truly "strengthen and encourage others."

Falcke reassures the despondent that socialism really is "improvable." The "immobile and frozen attitude of protest" must become reactivated. If GDR society is ever to be improved, then it desperately needs the active criticism of those sensitive and uncompromised persons who are now leaving.

Falcke concludes his letter by appealing to the idealism which has kept the Protestant churches in the GDR afloat for three decades: "We as Christians should ponder at great length whether we want to abandon the attempt to be the church in a socialist society. Two generations is very little time for this type of experiment. . . . Not only many persons from the world-wide oikumene, but assuredly even the angels of heaven are engrossed in watching this great experiment. Don't cast away your hope."

NOTE

1 An essay originally written for World Encounter.