The East German State and the Catholic Church, 1945-1989

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Abstract:
Over a period of almost forty-five years, relationships developed between the Catholic Church in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the socialist state that shaped both sides. The supposition that the German Democratic Republic was going to last forever led to changes in the attitudes and behaviors of Catholic Church members and representatives that to some extent grew out of the church’s institutional dynamic. Church-state relations were characterized by mutual skepticism and distance, but they also constituted an amalgamation of conflicts and pragmatic cooperation, as well as irreconcilable differences and areas of convergence. Over the course of the history of the GDR, mutual influences emerged between these two completely antithetical structures, which ultimately led to a kind of routine.

It can be said that Catholic life under the totalitarian conditions in the GDR produced two characteristic features that were contradictory but parallel. On the one hand, it produced multiple spaces for exercising human freedom that people both inside and outside the church could use as an “alternative public sphere.” In spite of its limitations, people found such freedom useful for dealing with life in a monotonous socialist society. The internal changes in the church in the wake of Vatican II, combined with the productive discussion in the Catholic student milieu, in Catholic professional circles, and during the Dresden synods, were especially helpful in creating such a free space within the GDR. Catholic educators, students, and congregations often worked for fundamental human rights denied to citizens in the GDR. The Catholic Assembly in Dresden in 1987 and the Catholic participation in the Ecumenical Convocation for Peace, Justice, and the Conservation of Creation held in 1988 and 1989 in Dresden and Magdeburg rejuvenated Catholics’ need for discussion and critical public debate about dealing with their socialist environment.
At the same time, some clergy—whether motivated by personal or theological concerns—saw the dictatorial conditions in which they lived as an opportunity to preserve hierarchical features and practices in their own domain. Parallel to the increasing desire for travel and emigration among GDR Catholics, a still greater sense of home and GDR identity could also be perceived, not for the “socialist homeland” but for “this country” or “our country.” As in other socialist countries in Eastern Europe in these years, or among some in the Vatican, one could put a theological spin on the peculiarity of existence of the Catholic Church under dictatorial socialist conditions. Seen from this perspective, the Berlin Wall and the tightly controlled German-German border shielded GDR Catholics from the kind of “permissiveness” and consumer-oriented “practical materialism” that could lead to a loss of Christian faith. In the GDR, it also must be concluded, the strict division of church and state and the stigmatization of religion unintentionally strengthened Catholic identity and thus enabled the survival of a small but stable Catholic culture.
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Over a period of almost forty-five years, relationships developed between the Catholic Church in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the socialist state that shaped both sides. It was natural that, forced to exist under a dictatorship, the church was more deeply marked than the state. The supposition that the German Democratic Republic was going to last forever led to changes in the attitudes and behaviors of Catholic Church members and representatives that to some extent grew out of the church’s institutional dynamic. Church-state relations were characterized by mutual skepticism and distance, but they also constituted an amalgamation of conflicts and pragmatic cooperation, as well as irreconcilable differences and areas of convergence. Over the course of the history of the GDR, mutual influences emerged between these two completely antithetical structures, which ultimately led to a kind of routine.

It took the SED (Socialist Unity Party, the GDR’s communist party) a long time to develop a more objective way of dealing with the churches, in which “Kirchenpolitik” (policy towards the churches) always remained subordinate to tactical calculations. It saw the church as a potential enemy that needed to be monitored with suspicion. Because religion and the churches were merely forms of “institutionalized superstition,” the SED long believed that both would die out gradually in the course of building socialism. The SED had to move away from this hope, as actual events did not conform to the deterministic vision of “scientific atheism”. Communist ideologues had to modify their prognostications in the 1960s. The pressure of a hostile environment had shrunk the churches down to a hard core, it was true, but that core remained stable. The churches were able to sustain themselves and to bring up new generations, and it appeared likely that they could continue to do so for the foreseeable future. After a considerable delay, the SED openly conceded this in the late 1970s. At international conferences in the 1980s, the GDR pointed to the existence of “its” churches as proof of the state’s tolerance, claiming that there was religious freedom in the GDR.
Compared with the rest of the Communist world, the GDR’s repressive Kirchenpolitik was rather moderate. No lay Catholics or priests lost their lives in the GDR due to political persecution for their religious conviction or function within the church. No more than fifteen Catholic priests were imprisoned between 1945 and 1961 for political “crimes,” and church intervention saw that most of these were only detained for a short time or released before their full sentences were served, although there were some draconian exceptions. Yet the GDR’s special circumstances—the fact that it lacked the true character of a nation-state through its special relationship with the Federal Republic of Germany and corresponding restraints—spared the churches from the much harsher measures of Stalinist-type repression as experienced in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1940s and 1950s.

**Stabilization**

The SED finally came to terms with the existence of the churches and no longer fundamentally challenged them once the Berlin Wall was built in 1961. Without the resulting internal stabilization of the GDR—and the official international recognition by other countries achieved a decade later—the SED leadership would likely not have found a path to a more pragmatic form of Kirchenpolitik. After 1961, the SED was often satisfied merely to contain unwanted political activities by using disguised forms of measured repression or by sending messages via the state’s Catholic negotiating partners. Not a single priest or leading Catholic official was arrested for political reasons between September 1961 and December 1989, although some individual Catholics were.

In this period, the “ruling party” gradually recognized the economic usefulness of the Catholic Church and its value for foreign relations. Although all of the legal connections across the German-German border were cut off, the SED approved the influx of West German money and materials to finance and supply the churches because of the GDR’s growing need for hard currency, in the end even encouraging the growth of this enterprise. The SED needed to fund its ambitious economic and social programs, as well as its massive security apparatus. For GDR leaders, social stability and “law and order” were the unconditional foundation of their monopoly on power. Thus the churches simply made good business sense for the GDR’s
“commercial coordination” bureaucratic apparatus, which had aimed to secure hard currency on a large scale since its establishment in 1966. As of the mid 1970s, the regime sought to expand Western financial transfers even more. All this substantially undermined the “dying-out prognoses” of “scientific atheism”: permanent West German financial aid for the Catholic Church in the GDR was so essential that it did much more than just preventing the church from its demise.

Finally, the SED leadership’s policy vis-à-vis the Vatican contributed to a stabilization of the Catholic Church in the GDR and expanded its sphere of activities. In the 1960s, the GDR sought to use the Catholic Church’s international character for its campaign to gain diplomatic recognition as a sovereign state in the world community; in the 1970s and 1980s, it tried to use the church to further aid its diplomatic ambitions. GDR leaders thereby saw the Vatican less as a religious institution than as a state of tremendous diplomatic potential, which did not even preclude the possibility of an official exchange of ambassadors and a papal nuncio in East Berlin as doyen of the diplomatic corps. The Soviet Union vetoed the latter, but a pope who communicated with all the other global heads of state always remained an attractive target for providing evidence of the GDR’s international standing.

The state thus respected and cautiously expanded the room for maneuver of the Catholic Church in the GDR, which was much greater than that of churches in other socialist countries (except for the special case of Poland). The GDR church, for its part, was able to use this relative freedom also to the advantage of Catholics in other countries through private and official visits by bishops, or by means of discreetly organized transfers of literature or other assistance. Numerous Czechoslovakian priests, for example, were secretly ordained on GDR territory after entering the country as tourists across the visa-free border. The Vatican, too, made use of the GDR’s special situation in its own policy toward the Communist world and hoped to establish the East German Catholic Church as a diplomatic bridgehead for Central and Eastern Europe. The Berlin Conference of Ordinaries (BOK) and the Berlin Bishops’ Conference (BBK) were somewhat afraid of this allegedly too-accommodating Vatican policy (developed under Pope Paul VI) for reasons related to both domestic Kirchenpolitik and German-German relations. Yet this did not in any way diminish the favorable status quo that the Catholic Church in the GDR enjoyed. By the end of the
1980s, this status had finally made it possible to mutually plan for a special visit of Pope John Paul II to the GDR and Berlin, scheduled for 1991.

Neutralization

SED tolerance was calculated to stabilize the party’s power. It went so far as to grant the bishop of Berlin, who resided in the East, regular and steady access to West Berlin beginning just a few weeks after the erection of the Berlin Wall. For the dictatorial regime, neutralizing the internal political threats posed by the church was the precondition for establishing informal “rules for mutual business” (Geschäftsgrundlage). In August 1961, the MfS negotiated such rules with the Catholic Church’s emissaries, which developed into the best possible “modus vivendi” from the perspective of Catholic leaders.

The road to this “modus vivendi” had been a long one. The inner-Catholic conflict in 1950 between West Berlin and “the zone” (i.e., the GDR) over the very existence of a Catholic Church in the GDR took place without Communist authorities monitoring or attempting to influence the discussion. The ordinaries who lived and worked in the Soviet zone/GDR prevailed in this debate; their orientation reflected what they called the “zone reality.” In 1951, Wilhelm Weskamm, who strongly advocated this position, became bishop of Berlin. Although he wanted Catholics in the GDR to develop a unique church identity, the repressive period of Kirchenpolitik in 1952–1953 and the introduction of the Jugendweihe ceremony in 1955 conflicted with hopes for an orderly “modus vivendi” with the state. In 1956, Weskamm’s last year in office (when he was already seriously ill), the new strongman in the East German Catholic community, Bishop Otto Spülbeck of Meiβen, tried to achieve a working relationship with the state, feeling encouraged to do so by Pope Pius XII. But his unintentionally undiplomatic sermon before the Cologne Catholic Congress in September 1956, combined with the generally worsening repression in the Communist world in the wake of the bloody suppression of the Hungarian uprising, made this impossible.

Instead, beginning in 1957, the GDR’s centralized political apparatus, especially the MfS, used surveillance and administrative measures to set increasingly clear boundaries regarding what public Catholic activities it would tolerate. Deploying listening devices
in Catholic offices on a massive scale, the security services were able to gather comprehensive internal information in 1958–1959 and to use it to intimidate the church. The state continued an intensive campaign of atheist propaganda until about 1963 to “prove the superiority of dialectical materialism over religious superstition.” In the same period, it also reconfigured the entire education system with a comprehensive socialist slant, thereby pushing the churches completely out of the schools.

In March 1960, Catholic ordinaries residing in the GDR refrained from making joint public statements when Berlin Bishop Julius Döpfner’s movements were severely restricted and the state increased pressure on them. After May 1958, Döpfner was no longer allowed to visit his diocese or any other place in the GDR except the city of Berlin. Döpfner’s course—a political offensive to expose the Communist regime—was rooted in his perspective from West Berlin; he clearly overestimated the potential of the Catholic Church within the GDR as a supposed counterpart of the regime. In light of the harsh realities of power relations, his efforts led nowhere. The Vatican ultimately transferred Döpfner to Munich in July 1961 to ease the situation for the church in the GDR.

The new bishop of Berlin, Alfred Bengsch, who resided in East Berlin, was elected two weeks before the building of the Berlin Wall. In a summit meeting with GDR Prime Minister Willi Stoph on 2 November 1961, Bengsch implemented a paradigm change in GDR-Catholic relations. Through his MfS contacts, which he had built up since 1958, Prelate Johannes Zinke had established, in at least three conversations in the second half of August 1961, a central long-term agreement to be ratified in the November Stoph-Bengsch meeting: the Catholic Church would be “loyal” to the state by abstaining publicly from political statements in return for the “unity of the Diocese of Berlin,” which would be achieved by granting the bishop, who permanently resided in the East, regular access to the Western part of the city. Despite the informal character of this mutual agreement, which was in no way guaranteed, this was the first time that the long sought-after “modus vivendi” between the state and the Catholic Church had been negotiated.

After August 1961, Bengsch repeatedly signaled to state officials that the Catholic Church would practice strict “political abstinence” regarding comments on SED politics; as a rule, this policy was upheld. For the state, this silence counted as
“loyalty.” In turn, leading Catholic representatives also used the term “loyalty” to describe their positions to state agencies. Up until the 1970s, the GDR state wanted political abstinence to be understood in a one-sided way, merely as refraining from critical statements. In addition, however, it also expected the church’s “loyalty” to include a public affirmation of SED political positions. The Catholic bishops refused to do this, pointing to their intention to refrain from any kind of public political pronouncement, whether affirmative or critical. When state agencies realized that it was fundamentally hopeless to expect “positive” political positions from the Catholic Church, they grasped the major advantage of also having no “negative” public statements, either. In contrast to the wide and unreliable range of both positive and negative opinions coming from the majority Protestants, the regime began to see Catholic political abstinence as the lesser evil, and ultimately as a model for the role of the churches in the public sphere. Some Catholic officials did not perceive (or did not want to perceive) how the regime changed its attitude toward political abstinence. Instead, in anticipation of the state’s expectations, they expanded “loyalty” by promoting “predictability” as the measure of church actions.

The state, however, could not always completely rely upon the Catholic Church to remain politically abstinent. In rare cases, the bishops themselves broke the political silence by publicly reading pastoral letters with political implications. In January 1972, for example, a letter regarding abortion was read, in November 1974 there was one concerning the socialist educational system, and in March 1981 another on the Jugendweihe. To be sure, the bishops expressed themselves with such clarity only in those rare cases when they felt compelled to do so by their religious beliefs (to combat the general moral acceptance of abortion in the population, to shield Christian faith from the secularist school system, or to fight an attempt to replace Christian rituals with atheistic ones, respectively, in the cases just mentioned). The government knew about these letters in advance because the church handed them to the MfS a few days before their reading, yet the regime was still unable to exert an influence on their content. In two cases in November 1974 and March 1981, the state secretary for church affairs attempted to prohibit the reading of pastoral letters, threatening sanctions if the ban was not followed in formal declarations.

Such declarations, however, were not the main threat to the GDR/Catholic
Geschäftsgrundlage (whose advantages for the church, as shown, included bishops’ access to West Berlin, transfers of money and material from West Germany, and permission to communicate with the FRG and the Vatican, as well as to travel there). Political figures in both the church and the government saw the “undiplomatic actions” of individual bishops after Cardinal Bengsch’s death in 1979 as a greater danger, and were even more concerned over “potential dissent and disturbances” from individual lay Catholics and clergy dating back to the 1960s and reemerging during the late 1980s.

Indeed, this potential for dissent had unfolded after 1965 in the wake of the Second Vatican Council as a result of a pluralist and anti-authoritarian understanding of the church. Catholic dissenters demanded critical dialogue with Marxist theory and the practical realities of life in the GDR in order to change society by means of personal “engagement.” For the SED, such social activism “diverted” and “undermined” socialism. Collaborating with other state agencies, the MfS increased surveillance and stepped up the targeted “destruction” of Catholic groups and individuals. Because the GDR was simultaneously striving for international recognition, the SED was careful to use less overt means of repression. The state viewed the emergence of a church movement for the “critical affirmation of socialism” with trepidation, as a “modernization” of the church would give it greater potential for “mass appeal.” But the regime was not able to exploit this movement by means of its differentiation policy (e.g., by promoting “pro-GDR” Catholics while isolating others) or by means of controlled organizations like the (East German) CDU or the Berlin Conference. Instead, state and party organs had to try to infiltrate the church in order to have influence upon these internal Catholic battles.

The Catholic leadership in Berlin, like the Catholic leadership in many other parts of the world, perceived the pluralist post-Vatican II movement within the church as damaging, particularly as a threat to papal and episcopal authority. However, in these internal Catholic debates in the GDR of the late 1960s, the leadership there presented political rather than theological objections to the movement: it would be especially dangerous in the GDR, they argued, because it would give the regime an opening for its “differentiation policy.” Ensuing Catholic leaders’ demands that the church “close ranks” were interpreted by some in the Catholic community as a convergence of the
church with the GDR authoritarian environment. For example, Claus Herold, a priest in Magdeburg and head of a working group of youth pastors in the GDR, said on 1 November 1967 in his annual report to the bishops that “the uniform thinking in this Church is a totalitarian response to totalitarianism, the response of a minority forced into a ghetto, behind a wall, a response to the pressure of state organizations and power.”

In the final analysis, the state’s successes in its policy of “differentiation” did not result from the internal Catholic movement for pluralism after Vatican II but rather from the efforts of Catholic leaders to quash this pluralism within its own ranks. In other words, those “dissidents” who were deeply rooted in the church very rarely allowed themselves to be used by the SED, whereas some representatives of the Catholic leadership were quite willing to cooperate with the SED powers to neutralize their own internal “dissidents.”

**Intersections**

To achieve effects of stabilization and neutralization of the church, the GDR state used secret diplomatic avenues of negotiation as a tool of Kirchenpolitik. Talks were held with Catholic clergy authorized by the bishops. Within the capricious and unpredictable realm of GDR Kirchenpolitik, the church saw such talks as an appropriate means to negotiate and maintain its sphere of activities. The successes of secret diplomacy, which had led in 1961 to the establishment of the Geschäftsgrundlage, came at a price for the church, however, which depended upon the personal integrity of the given individual Catholic negotiators. If they tried to use their diplomatic power—which automatically derived from the specific conditions within the GDR—to push their own ideas and policies about the church, then these channels became a kind of church-state axis of communication or even mutual cooperation.

Based on their notion of “security policy,” the MfS and the Office of the State Secretary for Church Affairs used these channels to demand that their Catholic negotiation partners discipline potentially “disruptive” critics within the church. If the Catholic officials in question happened to be motivated against specific Catholic groups or individuals, whether for ideological or personal reasons, then a de facto convergence of the interests of the state and of Catholic leaders took place. Official
contacts between Catholic officials authorized by the bishops and the MfS and other GDR government branches became more intimate and pragmatic during the internal church conflicts of the 1960s and early 1970s. The state was unable to score any successes for its “differentiation” policy in public, but behind closed doors the accent was on “predictability” and a perceived common responsibility to maintain and expand the Geschäftsgrundlage at the expense of Catholic dissidents.

Regarding the actual content of the secret diplomacy, there was very little transparency within the Catholic Church in the GDR, or even within the BOK/BBK or between individual delegates and the bishops they reported to (the Diocese of Dresden-Meißen was an exception in this regard). When critical inquiries were raised from within church ranks, the leadership called for “discretion” and “a basic trust in church leaders.” Research shows, however, that the GDR bishops did not always maintain this basic trust in one another, nor did some bishops trust the delegates who carried out negotiations. Inner-Catholic conflicts were often based on a personal dislike or an attempt by one or another person to raise his profile. These conflicts did not remain hidden from GDR government officials for long; some high-ranking Catholic negotiators liked to chat and talk a lot. Within the church, those talks as such were known to only a few leading figures, and hardly to their full extent.

The state’s knowledge about the church was not nourished by these contacts alone. Using “operative techniques” (telephone surveillance, listening devices) and informers from all parts of the GDR, the MfS gained a wealth of information over the decades. The security services could use this knowledge to target certain groups or individual lay Catholics or clergy. Such practices not only destroyed trust and solidarity but also turned individual lives upside down. Without the information that church members—often thoughtlessly—gave, as well as the intelligence gathered by the many informers from outside the Christian milieu in GDR society, the MfS would not have been able to interfere and intervene. Remarkably, most of the information it gathered was given voluntarily, not extorted.

But at no point in the entire history of the GDR were the security services or, thus, the SED in a position to actually steer the entire Catholic Church. The ultimately small degree to which information gained by secret police could be used to political advantage in a real crisis situation was proved during the SED collapse in
the autumn of 1989 (and not only concerning the Catholic Church). The mechanisms of the regime’s e had begun to gradually falter since 1987. The intransigent posturing of the SED leadership and its proud public refusal to engage in dialogue with the churches in 1988 and 1989 could in no way be compensated for by MfS action.

The Catholic Church in the GDR

In conclusion, it can be said that Catholic life under the totalitarian conditions in the GDR produced two characteristic features that were contradictory but parallel. On the one hand, it produced multiple spaces for exercising human freedom that people both inside and outside the church could use as an “alternative public sphere.” In spite of its limitations, people found such freedom useful for dealing with life in a monotonous socialist society. The internal changes in the church in the wake of Vatican II, combined with the productive discussion in the Catholic student milieu, in Catholic professional circles, and during the Dresden synods, were especially helpful in creating such a free space within the GDR. Catholics claimed this free space as something natural; it was not first gained though secret diplomacy.

Sometimes secret diplomacy helped protect this freedom, but only when individual Catholic negotiators cared to work for it. Many leading Catholic officials had a limited view of freedom and human rights that included only the freedom to practice one’s religion in services and the freedom of conscience to live their lives in the Catholic faith. Catholic educators, students, and congregations, in contrast, often worked for fundamental human rights denied to citizens in the GDR. The Catholic Assembly in Dresden in 1987 and the Catholic participation in the Ecumenical Convocation for Peace, Justice, and the Conservation of Creation held in 1988 and 1989 in Dresden and Magdeburg rejuvenated Catholics’ need for discussion and critical public debate about dealing with their socialist environment.

At the same time, some clergy—whether motivated by personal or theological concerns—saw the dictatorial conditions in which they lived as an opportunity to preserve hierarchical features and practices in their own domain. Parallel to the increasing desire for travel and emigration among GDR Catholics, a still greater sense of home and GDR identity could also be perceived, not for the “socialist homeland” but for “this country” or “our country.” Catholic leaders, however, only hesitantly took
up the corresponding wish to stay in the GDR while working for change in society that accompanied this sense of home. As in other socialist countries in Eastern Europe in these years, or among some in the Vatican, one could put a theological spin on the peculiarity of existence of the Catholic Church under dictatorial socialist conditions: Berlin’s Cardinal Meisner was fond of saying that in contrast to Westerners, GDR Catholics “had less opportunity to sin.” Seen from this perspective, the Berlin Wall and the tightly controlled German-German border shielded GDR Catholics from the kind of “permissiveness” and consumer-oriented “practical materialism” that could lead to a loss of Christian faith. In the GDR, it also must be concluded, the strict division of church and state and the stigmatization of religion unintentionally strengthened Catholic identity and thus enabled the survival of a small but stable Catholic culture.
사회주의 국가인 동독과 동독 내의 가톨릭교회 간의 45년에 걸친 관계는 상호 불신과 거리감을 특징으로 한다. 그러나 그 둘 사이에는 화해 불가능한 차이도 있었지만 수렴의 영역도 함께 있었고, 또한 갈등이 혼재하는 가운데 실용적인 협력이 이루어지기도 하였다. 완벽하게 정반대인 이 두 조직들이 서로 영향을 주고받으면서, 동독의 전체주의적 상황 하에서 가톨릭적인 삶은 두 가지의 특징을 산출하였다. 하나는 인간적인 자유를 행사할 수 있는 다중적인 공간을 만들어냄으로써 교회 안팎에 있는 사람들이 그 공간을 ‘대안적인 공공의 영역’으로 이용할 수 있다는 것이다. 비록 한계는 있었지만, 사람들은 단조로운 사회주의 사회에서 삶을 살아갈 때 그런 자유가 유용하다는 것을 깨달았다. 동시에, 일부 성직자들은 그들이 처해 있는 이러한 독재적인 사회 여건이 오히려 그들 자신의 영역에서 성직제도의 특성과 관행을 보존할 수 있는 기회라고 생각하였다. 이런 관점에서 보면, 베를린 장벽과 엄격하게 통제된 동서 국경은 가독교 신앙의 상실로 이어질 수 있었던 “관용성”과 소비자 지향적인 “실용적 물질주의”로부터 동독의 가톨릭교회를 보호해준 셈이었다. 동독에서 국가와 교회의 엄격한 분리와 종교에 대한 낙인은 의도하지 않게도 가톨릭의 정체성을 강화해 주었고 그동안 작지만 안정적인 가톨릭 문화의 존속을 가능하게 해 주었다.