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Confidence and Legitimization: The Role of the Protestant Church in Fostering Opposition in the GDR

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to pursue the answer to a perplexing question in German history; namely, how did serious domestic opposition to the East German state develop in the 1980s given the extremely oppressive nature of its society? The results of my research reveal that the East German Evangelical Church's decision in 1971 to become a "church in socialism" coupled with the March 6, 1978, summit between church and state leaders provided the church with a legitimate place in German Democratic Republic (GDR) society and its associates with the confidence necessary to shelter serious opposition to the state within its physical and metaphorical boundaries in the 1980s. Although not all opposition to the GDR's communist regime was church-based, I conclude that the church's protection from state oppression afforded the East German citizenry an opportunity to effectively voice dissent. When combined with the public expression of dissent from thousands of others and placed within the broader context of tumultuous events in the Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s, church-based dissent made possible by the church's accommodation with the East German state most certainly contributed to bringing about the end of the GDR.

The 70,000 people who gathered in the Leipzig city center on October 9, 1989, to hold peace prayers and hear sermons calling for non-violent resistance to the state put a culminating stamp on a decade of protest in the German Democratic Republic (GDR; Steele, 1994). Regardless of their specific causes or demands, many of those who protested that night did so under the protection of the East German Evangelical Protestant Church, the predominant religious denomination in the GDR (Cordell, 2000). Prior to the late 1970s, the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) successfully kept political dissidents disorganized and isolated by penetrating essentially all aspects of life in the GDR, but from the late 1970s onward the Protestant Church provided a free space, sheltered from the incursions of the East German state in which its citizens

came together in solidarity to create alternative groups (Pfaff, 2001). These groups, “though small and seemingly powerless, were able to develop an alternative politics that eventually helped stimulate the emergence of a mass, public opposition” (Burgess, 1997, p. 60). Although not all opposition to the GDR’s repressive regime was church-based, the church’s protection from state incursions allowed many East Germans to publicly voice dissent against their government. This public dissent, when placed in the broader context of ongoing dissent against communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, certainly contributed to bringing about the end of the GDR.

External politics aside, what changed in East Germany to allow the church to harbor dissent within its walls and to shelter opposition groups from the state? In this paper, I argue that the tenants of the “church in socialism” formula and the March 6, 1978, summit between church and state leaders provided the legitimization and confidence that church associates needed in order to foster major opposition against the state in the 1980s.

To illustrate this argument, I begin with an overview of church-state relations prior to 1969 and the events leading up to the creation of the church in socialism formula and the March 6, 1978, summit. Second, I will explain the important implications of these church-state agreements for the position of the church in society. Finally, I will explore how the confidence and legitimization gained by those associated with the church led to the proliferation of the peace and environmental movements under its protection in the 1980s.

The Evangelical Church began its postwar relationship with the state as an anchor in the chaos at the end of World War II. The institutional structures of the church remained intact during the Nazi era and thus the church found itself in a position to administer much-needed aid immediately after the war (Fulbrook, 1995). The important social functions provided by the Protestant Church and the personal relationships forged between Christians and communists imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps combined to create a “honeymoon period” between the church and Soviet occupation forces from roughly 1945 to 1948 (S. P. Ramet, 1992).

This notion of a partnership in which “Christians and communists would work together in a broad, democratic, anti-fascist front” quickly melted away as “anti-Christian policies became more forceful under Ulbricht” (the head of the SED) after the founding of the GDR in 1949 (Fulbrook, 1995, pp. 92–93). In the early 1950s, the incompatibility of Christian and Marxist world views became increasingly apparent as the state systematically discriminated against Christian school children, banned Bible study and church youth groups, and discontinued state subsidies to churches (S. P. Ramet, 1992). In 1954, the state also introduced the *Jugendweihe*, a secular alternative to Christian confirmation (Fulbrook).

Church leaders responded to this repression by protesting and issuing official declarations against state policy, but not until 1958 did church and state leaders establish a tentative working relationship. State leaders agreed not to undertake overtly repressive actions against the church if the church agreed to refrain from vocal protest and to submit to state policy. With the new working agreement in place, the SED increasingly shied away from overt repression and focused on covert methods to drive a wedge between conservative church leaders, whom the state saw as capable of

cooperation, and more liberal leaders, whom the state saw as incapable of working with officials to forge a state-centered relationship. As Steele explained, “the main issue of dispute changed from curtailment of rights to...determining who would speak for the East German church” (1994, p. 122).

To facilitate this process, in 1960 the SED created an agency known as the State Secretariat for Church Questions. Working closely with the SED hierarchy and the Stasi, the Secretariat used “differentiation cleverly and skillfully in order to persuade other church leaders to change their attitudes” (Fulbrook, 1995, pp. 98–99). Stasi agents and informers infiltrated the church and in many cases successfully steered church leaders toward a course of accommodation with the state, as in the case of “red” bishop Mitzenheim of the church in Thuringia (Fulbrook, pp. 98–99). In short, throughout the 1960s state officials worked to create a church dominated by conservative leaders with whom it could work to keep the church compliant with state policy.

Despite the SED’s attempt to divide church leadership and to steer church leaders toward an accommodationist course with the state, the church fought back in the 1960s. Although the state proclaimed a willingness to speak only with those church leaders who “recognized the common humanistic responsibility of Christians and Marxists,” the tendency of local Protestant pastors to make decisions independently of the church hierarchy made the SED’s top-down strategy of negotiating with more conservative church leaders insufficient to cultivate a pervasive atmosphere of cooperation with the state throughout the church (Steele, 1994, p. 122).

Furthermore, the church took steps in the early 1960s to speak to youth culture. Specifically, when the state imposed a draft for the armed forces, the church aided young conscientious objectors by making young men aware of an alternative service branch of the military known as *construction soldiers* and supporting individuals who decided to join them. Here young men could serve out their term of service by engaging in construction projects rather than military actions (Fulbrook, 1995). This initial positive experience with the church influenced many contentious objectors to later become members of the peace movement, which developed under the protection of the church in the 1980s.

By the latter half of the 1960s, the church’s efforts to fight back against the incursions of the state could not stem the rising tide of state dominance. For one, the citizenry became increasingly secular; in fact, between 1945 and 1964 membership in the East German Evangelical Church fell from 82% to 60% (Burgess, 1997). Furthermore, the church’s efforts to maintain ties with the West German Church became more difficult with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the new 1968 GDR constitution, which specified that the East German churches had to “conduct their activities in conformity with the GDR’s legislative and administrative limitations” (S. P. Ramet, 1992, p. 56). In short, the constitution made it illegal for any organization, including the church, to operate beyond the borders of the GDR.

Given its increasingly marginalized position in society, the East German Protestant Church slowly accepted that the GDR was there to stay and that no possibility of creating a federation of Protestant churches from both East and West Germany existed. In sum, the church realized it would have to work within the East German system if it hoped to survive. This realization at the end of the 1960s marked an important turning point in church-state relations in the GDR.

In June 1969 the East German Protestant churches broke away from the all-German Evangelical Church in Germany to form the Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR, or *Kirchenbund*. Under the leadership of Bishop Albrecht Schoenherr, the organization played a critical role in developing relations between church and state (Steele, 1994). Not all church leaders voiced approval of what they saw as accommodation to the state, but, as Fulbrook (1995) explained, “the forces in the Church leadership who were in favour of coming to terms with political realities...had attained dominance in the church” (p. 106).

Despite the church’s new basic policy of working with the state, discrimination against Christians persisted as long as communists dominated the country. In 1971, Bishop Schoenherr attempted to partially remedy the problem of continuing repression with the introduction of the church in socialism formula. Church leaders who met at the Evangelical Church’s synod conference in Eisenach in July 1971 accepted the programmatic formula that “the church did not want to be a church alongside socialism, or a church against socialism, but a church in socialism” (S. P. Ramet, 1992, p. 57). What the statement meant remained intentionally vague, but it clearly implied reciprocity in the relationship between church and state. Cordell (2000) more succinctly described the meaning of the church in socialism formula as one in which the SED recognized the right of the church to care for its congregations and the church recognized the socialist nature of the GDR and the right of the SED to rule and define society. Whatever Schoenherr’s original intent, the formula gained widespread acceptance among both church and state leaders in the 1970s.

With the church in socialism formula in place, it became increasingly possible during the 1970s for the state and church to collaborate in many areas of GDR society. The state had a vested interest in supporting the variety of social services provided by the church that played a key role in sustaining the country’s social infrastructure. The *Kirchenbund* in turn participated in the geo-political strategy of the GDR when it partnered with the state to speak out against NATO nuclear proliferation in the 1970s (Fulbrook, 1995).

On the other hand, the church-state relationship was never entirely smooth—even after the creation of the church in socialism. Old issues such as restrictions on church meetings and publications, discrimination against publicly-professed Christian children in the education system, and compulsory military service for young men created tension between SED officials and church leaders. This policy of working with and yet remaining independent from the state created a rift between “the rapprochement and accommodation approach of the *Kirchenbund* leadership and the ideological tension experienced by local pastors” (Steele, 1994, p. 125). These tensions culminated in the state-church summit between the executive committee of the *Kirchenbund* and Head of State Erich Honecker on March 6, 1978. This meeting played a critical role in creating an environment conducive to the development of church-based opposition against the state in the 1980s.

The historic meeting between church and state leaders developed not only at the request of the church, but also as a result of state recognition that religion was not disappearing and that it would be to the SED’s advantage to “co-opt Christians for their own purposes” (Fulbrook, 1995, p. 110). The meeting ran according to a pre-negotiated plan to ensure ideological substance. The church requested many concessions including

access to television and radio, a pension for clergy over the age of 65, and permission to construct church facilities in the new churchless cities built after World War II (S. P. Ramet, 1992). Bishop Schoenherr also called for peace, the improvement of the life of the individual, the protection of the individual's right to practice his or her faith, and the recognition of the importance of a relationship of trust between the state and the church in the GDR (Fulbrook). In response, Honecker avoided all points of serious criticism leveled against the state but agreed to the church's many requests. Specifically, he pledged to end discrimination against Christians in education and employment, to lift obstacles to church construction projects, and to allow for the renovation of church buildings (P. Ramet, 1984). Furthermore, Honecker allowed dissident groups to use church facilities, but only if the groups remained physically and metaphorically within it. In short, the state would not allow public expressions of dissent (Pfaff, 2001).

What motivated the state to grant these concessions? S. P. Ramet (1992) held that the meeting represented Honecker's attempt at putting church-state relations on a more tranquil footing before introducing mandatory pre-military training in schools in September 1978. Whatever the state's motivations, the result of the March 6, 1978, summit was that the church and state expressed mutual commitments to respect their ideological differences, to cooperate in areas of common social and political concern, and to resolve political differences through dialogue rather than confrontation (Burgess, 1997).

How then did this more liberal church-state relationship provide the impetus the church needed to foster serious opposition against the state in the 1980s? The partnership created by the church in socialism formula represented the first step in a policy of small steps undertaken by the church to abandon outright opposition to the state and to instead assume a policy of accommodation to gain improvements in conditions for people in the GDR (Fulbrook, 1995). This policy allowed the church to survive within the socialist system of the GDR and accumulate further gains at, and even after, the March 6, 1978, summit.

The list of specific gains won by the leaders of the church at the summit figures less prominently than the legitimization of the church's role as an independent institution in the GDR and the confidence its members felt to push the boundaries of state control. As Fulbrook (1995) reiterated, "the church-state agreement of 6 March 1978 appeared to signify that the boundaries of the politically possible had indeed begun to shift.... Activists were able to make use of new found spaces for discussion and organization within a rather ambivalent Protestant Church" (p. 206). Many GDR citizens came together in the free space of the church to organize, experience solidarity, and criticize the state in a manner that was possible in only a precious few other places and ways in East German society.

This does not mean that the church in socialism formula and the 1978 summit created a free space within the church. Rather, these agreements gave those associated with the church the confidence needed to fully use the church's free space as a safe haven in which to express dissent against the SED. How then did the new confidence of the church associates and their legitimate place in society lead peace and environmental movements to develop within the protection of the church and affect serious opposition to the state in the 1980s?

The church provided an excellent base for a peace movement to develop. Christianity offered peace groups powerful symbols and themes, such as the biblical symbol from Micah 4:3 of a man beating swords into plowshares, a symbol which was adopted and employed with great effectiveness by the peace movement. The theme of pacifism implied in Christ's Sermon on the Mount also led many dissidents such as Pastor Rainer Eppelmann to pursue peace initiatives (Burgess, 1997). The church's tradition of peace coupled with its newly legitimized role in society caused leaders to feel responsible for maintaining national and international peace (Burgess). In short, church leaders felt confident enough to foster and protect a peace movement in which citizens who disagreed with the state's handling of peace issues met within the context of religious gatherings to voice dissent and discuss how best to solve peace problems.

Peace protests began as early as November 1978 when a placard criticizing the state's defense policies appeared outside a church-owned building in Leipzig. The ratcheting up of Cold War tensions in the late 1970s and early 1980s coupled with NATO's decision to station new missiles in Europe in December 1979 provided a further impetus for the development of the peace movement. Church-based peace initiatives developed on a broad scale when the Evangelical Church began its official Prayers for Peace campaign on November 9, 1980 (Cordell, 2000). Also in 1980, the statewide Peace Decade conference could meet under the slogan "make peace without weapons," which morphed into the "Swords to Plowshares" symbol and motto that became the unofficial slogan of the peace movement. Despite the state's official ban on the symbol, an estimated 100,000 people sported it on pins and clothing (Pfaff, 2001).

The rapidly emerging church-based peace movement received further support from the Peace Forum held in Dresden in 1982 to commemorate the anniversary of the 1945 firebombing of the city. Five thousand supporters came out to stage a protest vigil at this event (Pfaff, 2001). Beginning in 1980, regional churches additionally held annual peace weeks where leaders presented peace workshops designed to educate the citizenry. These meetings facilitated contacts between parishioners of individual churches and thereby developed a contact network of peace movement workers (Fulbrook, 1995).

The early peace movement also received a boost from the Berlin Appeal, a document written by intellectual Robert Havemann and dissident Eppelmann in 1982. The appeal called for the disarmament and removal of all occupation troops from Germany (Pfaff, 2001). The high point of the independent peace movement came between 1982 and 1983 when within the estimated 100 independent church-based peace groups, "a new confidence and self awareness among activists was plainly evident" that stemmed directly from the independence and legitimacy gained from the church in socialism formula and the 1978 church-state summit (Pfaff, p. 289).

Despite the rapid growth of the peace movement, it did not develop at all levels and in all places within the church. In fact, no cohesive, unofficial peace movement existed in the GDR. Instead, local pastors largely determined whether or not their individual congregation would become involved in the peace movement (Fulbrook, 1995). In-fighting between more conservative church leaders and more liberal pastors also occurred over the extent of protest. One activist pastor, Eppelmann, explained that although the church hierarchy generally supported his efforts with "trembling and hesitation," church leaders frequently came to him and said

“Eppelmann, you’re putting the fate of the entire church at risk with your activities” (Eppelmann, 1993, p. 65). Although he described the pressure from the church hierarchy as difficult to bear, Eppelmann did little to explicitly censor his church’s protest activities.

It is also noteworthy that the majority of the people associated with individual peace groups affiliated with the church did so not for purely religious reasons, but rather because of the free space the church provided in an otherwise almost entirely censored society. The exception to this trend is Leipzig pastor Klaus Kaden, who, in addition to supporting political protest, emphasized religion in his work with dissidents and maintained that “the gospel of Jesus Christ represented an immense life support for these people” (Kaden, 1993, p. 145).

In spite of the rapid growth of the peace movement within the church in the early 1980s, popular momentum slowed toward the middle part of the decade. The November 22, 1983, decision to station nuclear missiles on German soil coupled with the relaxation of travel visas, which reduced the number of current and potential participants in peace groups, created an atmosphere of resignation within the peace movement (Fulbrook, 1995). Despite the disappearance of roughly half of all peace groups after 1984, the peace movement of the early 1980s set the stage for later protest movements because it placed a significant portion of opposition to the state within the church and established the methods of engaging in protest that would be picked up by later movements (Pfaff, 2001). Perhaps most importantly, the tremendous growth and willingness to push the bounds of protest undertaken by the peace movement demonstrated to existing and potential dissidents that the church had confidence as a legitimate societal organization to shield oppositional groups from state oppression within its free space.

The growth of the environmental movement in the 1980s represented another manifestation of serious opposition to the state that developed within the church. Like the peace movement, the church provided an ideologically sound place for environmental groups to develop because “on theological grounds, mistreatment of the environment could be seen as a sin against the handiwork of God...Man’s stewardship role on earth...was cited by the church in opposing environmental degradation” (Jones, 1993, p. 240). The church’s traditional theology on environmental stewardship, together with the confidence it gained from the church in socialism formula and the 1978 summit, led the church to provide protection for dissidents who saw environmental damage as a major threat to the future of the GDR (Burgess, 1997).

Environmental pollution posed a serious problem for the GDR as early as the 1960s after years of emphasis on economic over sustainable growth led to substantial levels of environmental degradation. By the 1980s, mounting evidence of environmental damage forced the state to address the problem, and, in 1980, the SED formed the Society for Nature and the Environment (Fulbrook). The organization’s goals included the co-option of citizens concerned about environmental issues under a state-dominated organization and the silencing of any public demand for changes in economic policy that would limit damage to the environment (Markham, 2005). To further suppress public knowledge of environmental damage, the state banned the publication of any information related to the deteriorating environmental situation in 1982 (Fulbrook).

Roots of an independent environmental movement within the church stretched as far back as 1927 with the establishment of the Ecclesiastical Research Center in Wittenberg (KFH) to explore nature's relationship to Christianity and flesh out theological matters concerning the environment. In 1974 the KFH came under the direction of Dr. Han-Peter Gensichen, who frequently met with groups of theologians and scientists to discuss environmental issues during the late 1970s. The KFH's efforts culminated in the first independent publication about environmental matters in the GDR, *The Earth is Ours to Save*, in 1980 (Jones, 1993). In addition to this publication, the KFH created a traveling exhibition, organized meetings, and gave demonstrations on ecologically sound lifestyles (Fulbrook, 1995).

One might ask why the state felt threatened by a movement whose very name revealed its focus on environmental rather than political issues. According to socialist ideology, "environmental problems cannot exist under communism, for ecological destruction is the result of profit driven capitalism" (Jones, 1993, p. 236). Therefore, to the leaders of the SED, any leaked information about rampant environmental degradation in the GDR would undermine socialist ideology in the eyes of the world. With its emphasis on ethics and personal lifestyle changes however, the early environmental movement did not pose a serious political threat to the state. Thus, although the SED remained concerned about the early environmental movement, it shied away from overt repression (Markham, 2005). Furthermore, like the peace movement, local pastors determined if and to what extent individual churches would become involved in the environmental movement. In short, environmental groups remained isolated and largely ineffective during the early stages of the movement and thus did not incur the wrath of the SED.

The account of Gerhard Ruden, an environmental activist who worked within the church at Magdeburg, provides an inside look at how environmental opposition developed within the church. Ruden explained that "my political activities started within the realm of the church...since about 1979 our pastor began to talk about problems concerning the environment" (1993, p.167). He admits that his group's first activities did not attract much attention. For example, Ruden and other concerned parishioners eventually initiated dialogue with authorities involved in building a nuclear reactor near Magdeburg and "attempted to convince them that nuclear energy was too dangerous to pursue" (p. 167). He readily admits "of course this was perhaps a bit naïve on our part" (p. 167). In short, Ruden's account illuminates the fact that the small and non-political nature of the early environmental movement did not pose a significant threat to the state.

The aims of the environmental movement changed dramatically when the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident sparked a new wave of environmental activism throughout the Eastern Bloc. As international awareness grew, so too did the abilities of independent environmental groups to access international channels of communication while remaining under the protection of the church in the GDR (Jones, 1993). The unofficial headquarters of the environmental movement moved from the KFH in Wittenberg to the more accessible city of East Berlin. In the summer of 1986, Pastor Hans Simon constructed an *Umweltbibliothek* (UB), or environmental library, in the basement of the Zion church in East Berlin (Fulbrook, 1995). The UB published a monthly newsletter, the *Umweltblätter*, which would become the center of future grass-roots environmental activism in the GDR.

This politicizing shift of the environmental movement occurred as groups began to “conclude that environmental problems could not be addressed without a thorough overhaul and democratization of the system” (Markham, 2005, p. 22). Further politicization manifested itself in the founding of *Arche*, a group that broke away from the UB over Arche members’ insistence on forming a network of environmental groups (Jones, 1993). The state did not take the environmental movement’s increasing political affront lightly. In November 1987 the Stasi raided the UB library, accusing it of illegally printing non-church material. Agents confiscated printing presses and arrested several UB workers, an act which the church countered with widespread protest. Although public pressure led to the eventual release of the prisoners and the return of printing equipment, the SED could do nothing to quell the growing discontent of the populace (Fulbrook, 1995). In the end, environmental groups joined together with other opposition groups in roundtable discussions as the regime collapsed in 1989 (Markham).

Although some environmental groups eventually worked outside the church, by necessity the base of the environmental movement remained under the church’s protection throughout its period of opposition to the state. Through the church in socialism formula and the 1978 summit, church leaders gained the confidence to provide environmental groups with places to meet, scarce printing presses, and even employment opportunities and legal help (Jones, 1993). In short, the growth of the environmental movement and its opposition to the state in the 1980s proved that the church possessed the necessary confidence to shield oppositional groups from state oppression as a result of its legitimate role in society.

Many of the 70,000 people who gathered together in the Leipzig city center on October 9, 1989, to protest the injustices of the GDR did so because of the shelter given by the East German Evangelical Church from incursions of the state. As I have demonstrated, the tenuous relationship between the church and state prior to the 1970s stifled the development of any church-based opposition to the state. The major turning point in church-state relations came with the church’s 1971 decision to become a church in socialism. This formula redefined the church’s position vis-à-vis the state and allowed the church to operate within the socialist system for society’s benefit. Furthermore, the March 6, 1978, summit between church and state leaders established a climate of mutual respect and cooperation between church and state, which in turn provided associates of the church with a legitimate place in East German society and the confidence to shelter opposition to the state within its physical and metaphorical boundaries. The shelter that peace and environmental movements found within the church allowed them to develop serious opposition to the East German state in the 1980s.

Perhaps most importantly, church-protected peace and environmental groups allowed GDR citizens to speak out against the state during the 1980s. As a result, the Evangelical Church in East Germany became one of a growing number of intermediaries between an increasingly alienated populace and a totalitarian state. In the end, the church’s protection of many opposition movements by virtue of the confidence and legitimization granted by the tenants of the church in socialism and the March 6, 1978, summit finally allowed the voices of an oppressed citizenry to be heard. These church-based voices of dissent against oppressive government, when combined

with those of thousands of others from separate groups inside the GDR and other Eastern Bloc countries, had a powerful effect on bringing about the end of the GDR.

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