

**Ellen Ueberschär.** *Junge Gemeinde im Konflikt: Evangelische Jugendarbeit in SBZ und DDR 1945-1961.* Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 2003. 360 S. EUR 35.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-17-017898-4.



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At the end of World War II, the society and culture of the future German Democratic Republic were marked by vibrant Protestant church life, anchored in a strong and influential tradition and revitalized by ideological conflict with Nazism, and by the pressing needs of postwar society. After forty-five years of Soviet and Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) rule the situation was very different, with the bulk of the East German population alienated from the church and with many ignorant of the most basic points of doctrine. In this study of Protestant youth work in the early years of the GDR, Ellen Ueberschär seeks to explain this radical transformation, arguing for the centrality of the youth work and youth politics of both the East German *Landeskirchen* and the SED regime to this process of secularization. At the same time, she seeks to contextualize the forced, state-driven secularization that took place within the GDR as part of longer-term developments that were also at work in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Ueberschär's explanation of these developments, which is only clearly laid out in the conclu-

sion of her study, ties together the findings of the two otherwise separate lines of inquiry that make up the bulk of this book. The first traces the development and implementation of the "Junge Gemeinde" conception of church youth work. In contrast to the ideas embodied in the youth missions and associations of the nineteenth century, this model emphasized the integration of youth work into the formal institutional structure of the *Landeskirche* on the one hand, and the integration of youth into the life of the local congregation on the other. The second line of inquiry follows the development of Soviet and SED church and youth politics until the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the ensuing relative stabilization of the SED state. Here, Ueberschär argues that the alienation of youth from traditional religion was always central to the church-political and youth-political goals of the SED, although the party attempted to realize these goals in different ways at different times and in different places. She argues that these opposite but mutually reinforcing programs of *Verkirchlichung* and *Entkirchlichung*

combined to drive the secularization process of GDR society.

The *Verkirchlichung* of Protestant youth work began in the late nineteenth century, but especially developed in the first two decades of the twentieth, as a response to the threat of secularization posed by changing social conditions and by the growth of nationalist and socialist youth movements. Although this process was temporarily stalled during the Third Reich as members of the confessing church resisted German Christian attempts to impose their authority through centralization, it was also strengthened in many ways by the legacy of the *Kirchenkampf*. To Protestants in postwar Germany--both in the East and in the West--the lessons of the past indicated the need for a strong and socially influential church, which could stand against the dictates of a total state. At the same time, they showed the need for all church work to be rooted in the fundamentals of Christian life--in Bible study, prayer, and congregational worship.

In the Soviet Occupied Zone, where similar threats to the church seemed imminent, such lessons were taken to heart by both the church hierarchy and by individual youth workers. As the Soviet authorities began to restrict church activities--as early as 1946 in Saxony, where local communists were particularly anti-clerical--the institutionalization of youth work and its integration into congregational life was also promoted as a defensive measure, which would put the full authority of the church behind youth activities. Although this process was gradual and contested--and more pronounced in theory than in practice--it did result, in most Eastern *Landeskirchen*, in the eventual coordination of youth work under the authority of *Landesjugendpfarrer* and *Jugendkammern*, and, on a higher level, in the creation and coordination of policy in the Jugendkammer-Ost of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland.

Soviet and SED policies of *Entkirchlichung* were driven, according to Ueberschr, by both

church-political and youth-political considerations. On an ideological level, the teachings of the Protestant churches were viewed as a potential threat to the spread of a materialist and Marxist worldview. On an institutional level, the youth groups of the churches could rival the communist Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ), or, if integrated into the local FDJ, could hinder its effectiveness in developing a new generation of communist leaders. Despite these relatively constant goals, the practical policies adopted by the Soviets and by the SED varied with the immediate domestic and geo-political circumstances.

In the first years of the Soviet occupation, severe limitations were placed on church youth gatherings, although these limitations did not follow any coherent centralized policy. Especially targeted were transregional youth gatherings and activities that were not essential to the functioning of congregational life. These pressures peaked from 1950 to 1953 in a period of open repression, marked by the more systematic hindrance of church youth gatherings, by denunciation and defamation of "imperialist" Protestant youth groups, by more concerted observation of Protestant groups and leaders, and by the removal of "Junge Gemeinde" members from the FDJ. These heavy-handed tactics were replaced in the following years by a more subtle and effective strategy of hidden repression. This later strategy, which was less institutional and more individual in focus, aimed especially at the heavily Protestant ranks of *Oberschler*, combined repression and anti-Christian propaganda with incentives and rewards for accepting the SED system and the communist worldview. It culminated in the implementation of the *Jugendweihe*--a secular confirmation ceremony incompatible with Christian confirmation--as a necessary prerequisite for access to higher education.

In conjunction with more general social modernization trends, these measures were extremely effective, resulting in a 25-50 percent decline in

the number of church youth groups, and to similar declines in individual group membership (p. 274). They also resulted in a thorough transformation of the East German Protestant milieu, from the status of educated middle-class elites to the position of educational, economic, and social outsiders. At the same time, Ueberschr argues, this transformation of the Protestant milieu created new opportunities. East German Protestants became the carriers of an alternative culture, capable of supporting limited criticism of the SED regime and, thus, laying groundwork for the collapse of the communist system in 1989.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of this book is its failure to integrate the various lines of its inquiry into a strong central narrative or argument, at least until the conclusion. While Ueberschr ultimately argues that the *Verkirchlichung* strategy of the churches and the *Entkirchlichung* program of the state served to confirm the worst suspicions of each toward the other and to escalate their confrontation, this dynamic is only hinted at in the body of her work. The choppy and sometimes idiosyncratic narrative, which contains several tangents of marginal relevance to the book's main arguments, creates the impression of an author who is still a little too close to her sources to step back and focus on the bigger picture. Yet Ueberschr has done a valuable service in drawing attention to the importance of youth work as a field of ideological and institutional conflict. Her findings will be of interest to both church historians and scholars of the GDR.

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