

Waldemar Hirsch. *Die Glaubensgemeinschaft der Zeugen Jehovas während der SED-Diktatur: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer Observierung und Unterdrückung durch das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. 430 S. EUR 68.50, paper, ISBN 978-3-631-51620-1.



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Published on H-German (April, 2006)

Since the 1990s a large body of literature has emerged on the Christian churches in East Germany. With the publication of this book, Waldemar Hirsch complements this literature with an examination of the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses by the GDR state and, in particular, by the concerted effort of the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* (MfS), or Stasi. Drawing extensively on MfS documents as well as some materials from the Bundesarchiv and the Evangelisches Zentralarchiv in Berlin, *Hirsch's work has two primary goals. First, as he states in the foreword, he hopes to lift the veil of obscurity that has surrounded this persecution, drawing attention to the plight of its victims. Second, and less explicitly stated, he clearly hopes to demonstrate the complicity of other religious groups, especially Western anti-Jehovah's Witness organizations and the East German Landeskirche in this persecution, as gullible (or willing) consumers and disseminators of Stasi-funded propaganda. These two goals correspond fairly closely to the two main sections of the book. The first of these painstakingly details Stasi efforts to gather intelligence on, suppress, and disrupt Jehovah's Witness religious activity in*

the GDR. The second looks at one Stasi-funded anti-Jehovah's Witness journal in particular, Christliche Verantwortung.

Recognized by all four Allied powers as "victims of fascism" in the immediate aftermath of World War II, Jehovah's Witnesses in East Germany were nevertheless subjected to uncoordinated suppression and persecution measures during the Soviet Occupation. These efforts culminated in August 1950, with an outright ban on the group, which was accused of opposing the goals of the socialist state. This attitude could already be seen at higher levels of the SED in 1949, when, for example, in a meeting of the Politburo, the group was referred to as "an especially refined tool of American propaganda" (p. 75). Particularly irksome to the SED were the Jehovah's Witnesses' opposition to government participation (even extending to voting), their refusal to perform military service, and their organizational ties to the group headquarters in New York.

One day before the formal ban on the organization went into effect, the GDR state began a concerted program of suppression and disruption,

raiding meeting places, seizing property, and arresting hundreds of members. In a show trial before the highest court of the GDR, several leading members were sentenced to harsh prison terms for their supposed anti-state activities, while hundreds of less prominent members received multi-year prison sentences from lower courts. Those who avoided these measures were forced to quickly reorganize themselves as an underground movement. Some evidence of their success in these measures can be gleaned from the escalating efforts of the Stasi to infiltrate the organization and disrupt its function throughout the 1950s. These efforts centered on attempts to intercept religious materials being smuggled across the border, to infiltrate local cells with informers, and to arrest leaders. They culminated in 1958, after several failed attempts, in the successful theft of membership information from the *Ostbüro* of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization in Berlin-Charlottenburg and the ensuing panic that this inspired within East German Jehovah's Witness cells. Despite these successes, however, the Stasi was never able to entirely halt the group's activity. As the 1960s progressed, however, their tactics began to change.

While arrests and latent persecution continued at a slower pace, the Stasi shifted its focus to propaganda and the sowing of internal dissent. Willy Müller, a former cell leader who turned informer after his arrest, was central to these efforts. Working with Dieter Pape (the brother of a prominent West German anti-Jehovah's Witness author) and a handful of other former Jehovah's Witnesses on the Stasi payroll, Mueller gradually moved from an ineffectual campaign of anonymous letter writing to the position of founder and editor of *Christliche Verantwortung*, a journal that purported to speak for disaffected East German Jehovah's Witnesses. In this capacity, he kept up a steady drumbeat of criticism of the Jehovah's Witness organization, spreading rumors of the decadence of its western leaders (in contrast to the sacrifices of members in the East), questioning

its supposedly pro-Western, anti-socialist agenda, and eventually attacking its theological positions and articles of faith as well. Under Müller's leadership and that of his successors, *Christliche Verantwortung* was able to establish contact and cooperative relationships with a handful of anti-Jehovah's Witness organizations in West Germany, England, and America. More importantly, according to Hirsch, it came to be seen by the Protestant Churches in East Germany as a leading source of factual information on the Jehovah's Witness movement in the GDR. In his most forceful charge, Hirsch argues that such groups must have been able to guess at the role of the Stasi behind *Christliche Verantwortung*, but chose nevertheless to lend it full credibility and to cooperate with its leadership in anti-Jehovah's Witness activities.

Hirsch succeeds in this work in providing a thoroughly detailed examination of Stasi activities against the Jehovah's Witnesses. As a result, his book makes an interesting case study in Stasi operating procedures, even for a reader with little interest in religious history or the Jehovah's Witnesses themselves. Unfortunately, for those who have an interest in these areas, his scope is almost exclusively limited to Stasi efforts and tactics, providing little direct information on the perspective or experiences of Jehovah's Witness members themselves. In addition, his primary reliance on MfS materials limits his ability to assess the effects of these efforts, except through the problematic means of internal reports and assessments by MfS case officers. With regard to his harshest charge, that the East German Protestant churches were complicit in the suppression of Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR, he certainly demonstrates a level of credulity on their part (doubtless reinforced by their own beliefs and prejudices), but is on much weaker footing when he attempts to suggest a level of intentional complicity or to speculate about their motivations.

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Citation: Benjamin C. Pearson. Review of Hirsch, Waldemar. *Die Glaubensgemeinschaft der Zeugen Jehovas während der SED-Diktatur: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer Observierung und Unterdrückung durch das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

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