

Christoph Kösters, Wolfgang Tischner. *Katholische Kirche in der SBZ und DDR.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2005. 415 S. No price listed, paper, ISBN 978-3-506-71347-6.



Reviewed by Martin Menke

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When asked to review this volume, I thought at first that this was a paperback edition of a previous work by Wolfgang Tischner which has an almost identical title.[1] Thankfully, this is a different volume, both in content and scope. It covers a wider range of topics than the earlier work and addresses the history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) until its end in 1989. The essays included are interesting not only for the topics they address, but also for the historiographic snapshot they offer of current research on Catholicism in the Soviet zone of occupation and later the GDR.

The volume consists of four sections. First, Tischner and Kösters offer a useful introduction in which they review the state of the field. This is followed by a lengthy section on church-state relations, a section on "ecclesiastical and religious life," and finally a section on the "Catholic milieu." In the introduction the editors make clear that they mostly are interested in the state of scholarship on the life of the Catholic Church within GDR society. They argue that the broader social history of the GDR remains a work in progress and that

within that field, the history of the church poses particular problems. German Catholics in the GDR found themselves in a twofold diaspora, both because of the limited number of Catholics in the GDR—about 5 percent of the population, and because of the anti-religious regime itself. Furthermore, the zonal boundaries established in 1945 ruptured diocesan administrations. This led to an odd construction in which there was a *Berliner Ordinarienkonferenz* of the *Jurisdiktionsträger*, the highest local church officials in each diocese or fragment thereof in the GDR, which functioned as a regional conference of the Fulda Bishops' Conference (the prewar all-German bishops' conference), which after Vatican II was renamed more accurately as the German Bishops' Conference.

Much current research replicates the debates still ongoing about the role of the church in the Third Reich: either the church was heroically resistant or, in the case of the GDR, it withdrew from public life and minded its own business without engaging the state. In the course of their introduction, Kösters and Tischner argue for a

more differentiated understanding of Catholicism in the GDR and for more research about the church after the construction of the Berlin Wall, which completed the physical separation of the two German states and often is considered a second founding of the GDR. While the editors do not explicitly compare the historiography of Catholicism in the two German states, the increasingly large body of work on the social history of the church in postwar western Germany underscores how much remains to be done with respect to the GDR. There are, however, particular reasons for this. While in the West, documentation is fairly accessible and the level of commitment and engagement by the faithful is ascertainable by statistical means, in the GDR, the nature of the regime makes it much harder to measure the extent and nature of Catholic life.

While the editors remind their readers of Tischner's model of a "functionally differentiated sub-culture," a social structure much less coherent and unified than a milieu, there is little evidence of this in the essays, which often do refer to a coherent Catholic milieu as a source of strength when facing the regime's pressures (p. 15). To analyze the important open question of resistance to the regime, the editors borrow the term *Resistenz* from the late scholar of National Socialism, Martin Broszat, to claim that the rejection of the communist ideology implicit in a public affirmation of one's Catholicism and the maintenance of church-related activities and organizations constituted resistance. In the mid-eighties, this reviewer witnessed a woman religious taking her final vows in the lower church of Berlin's Saint Hedwig's Cathedral. While wondering in amazement what motivated this woman to expose herself so decisively to ostracism by the regime and its society, this reviewer can only concur with the broad definition of resistance adopted by Kösters and Tischner.

In the conclusion to their introduction, Kösters and Tischner review the areas where further research is most needed: daily life of

Catholics in the GDR, relations with the Protestant church in the GDR, the links between the Caritas (Germany's equivalent of Catholic Charities, which included hospitals, nursing homes, etc.) and the regime, the roles of Catholic women and lay Catholic elites, the integration of Catholic refugees and expellees, and the relationship between Catholics in the GDR and their fellow Germans in the West as well as their fellow Catholics in Poland and in Czechoslovakia.

Many of the essays that follow in the substantive sections of the volume do not offer new insights themselves, but ably summarize research published elsewhere in order to highlight areas in which further work is needed. For example, Tischner's own essay on the leadership of Konrad Cardinal Preysing, bishop of Berlin during the war and until his death in 1950, summarizes Tischner's earlier work and highlights that, in Preysing's case, there can be no notion of a "politically abstinent" Catholic Church. Tischner identifies as an area for further research that the Catholic Church benefited from the regime's focus on the Protestant church as the larger enemy.

Kösters' essay continues where Tischner's ends: at the death of Cardinal Preysing and the appointment of Wilhelm Weskamm as his successor as bishop of Berlin and leader of the church in the GDR. (One should note that Tischner has Preysing dying on December 22, 1950, while Kösters has him die a day later [pp. 60 and 63].) Weskamm's attitude toward the state was characterized more by pastoral-theological concerns than was Preysing's. During Weskamm's time in Berlin, the church experienced two waves of repression interrupted by a brief tactical thaw after the 1953 uprising. Twice during Weskamm's tenure, the church raised public protests, first against a draft family law code and, much more importantly, against the communist regime's effort to claim the loyalty of its young by means of the *Jugendweihe*, a ceremony in which young people were to commit themselves to the ideals and goals

of communism. This ceremony was to take the place of religious confirmation rites. On this occasion, the leaders of the church issued a strongly worded pastoral letter reminding Catholics and the regime itself that the constitution of the GDR guaranteed freedom of religion and of conscience. Here, too, one sees limited validity of the concept of "political abstinence" (p. 15). Pushed far enough, the bishops would indeed brave political confrontation with the regime.

Next in the discussion of Berlin's bishops follows an essay by the late Klaus Wittstadt on Julius Cardinal Döpfner, who initially was ordained bishop of Würzburg in Franconia (in the West), then bishop of Berlin, where John XXIII made him a cardinal, and then, in 1961, cardinal archbishop of Munich and Freising in Bavaria (again in the West). Döpfner was a strong opponent of the communist regime, which quickly forbade him access to his diocesans beyond Berlin's city limits. Döpfner responded by regularly addressing his diocese on (West) Berlin radio. In 1960, he made history by calling upon German Catholics to engage their fellow Catholics in Poland in a spirit of remorse for the suffering wrought in Germany's name. Döpfner maintained close personal ties with the leader of the Protestant church, Bishop Otto Di-belius. Both concurred in their opposition to the regime's repressive measures.

By the late fifties, the other *Jurisdiktionsträger* began to oppose Döpfner's hard line out of recognition that the GDR would last for the foreseeable future and that it was necessary to find a *modus vivendi*. Recognizing that a complete partition of the diocese was possible, Döpfner asked Rome to ordain an auxiliary bishop for the diocese who would reside in the Soviet sector of the city. In July 1961, John XXIII announced Döpfner's move to Munich. Given the paucity of sources, the pope's motives remain unclear. Wittstadt himself seems to argue that the pope wanted primarily a strong figure for Munich, which would be supported by his appointment as moderator at the

Second Vatican Council and as chair of the newly formed German Bishop's Conference. Also, Döpfner convinced John XXIII to appoint Karl Rahner as theologian to the Council. In many ways, Döpfner's lasting impact was in western Germany and in the world of Vatican II, rather than in Berlin.

The final essay in the section on church politics concerns Berlin's longest-serving bishop, Alfred Cardinal Bengsch, who held the position from 1961 (he was appointed by Rome three days after the wall went up) until his death in 1979. The author of this piece, Ruth Jung, has written an impressive study of the Berlin diocese during the first decade of its political division.[2] In contrast to his reputation as apolitical or at least abstinent, Jung presents Bengsch as a clever tactician. Cardinal Bengsch not only resisted the pressures of the GDR regime, but also the demands of West Berliners to establish a separate diocese for the western sectors of the city, and of the Vatican to acknowledge the *de facto* division of the city and the country with *de jure* changes to diocesan boundaries and structures. According to Jung, Bengsch made it clear that the GDR had to buy his "political abstinence" by tolerating his continued leadership of both parts of the diocese, his right to travel--denied most other GDR citizens--and his continued refusal to integrate Catholic life into government-mandated social structures of the GDR. Jung emphasizes that only the death of Pope Paul VI prevented the *de jure* separation of the church in Germany into two independent entities. Despite further overtures from the GDR leadership, Pope John Paul II would not hear of any accommodation of the GDR, even if it meant prolonging the ambiguous legal status of the dioceses in the territories annexed to Poland at war's end.

The second section of the volume, which discusses the maintenance of religious practice, opens with an essay by Clemens Brodkorb, in which he differentiates the pastoral theology of Hugo Aufderbeck, the later bishop of Erfurt, from approaches taken by bishops Weskamm and

Bengsch. Brodkorb argues that while the Berlin bishops sought to isolate religious life from daily matters and from engagement in communist society, Aufderbeck argued that one had to reach the faithful to give them strength to live as witnesses for the gospel in a hostile society. Above all, argued Aufderbeck, the church had to provide its members with a sense of community. Unfortunately, Brodkorb does not discuss the degree to which this pastoral concept was successful. Since the region around Magdeburg, with its small towns and villages, was home to particularly few Catholics, one can appreciate the importance of Aufderbeck's pastoral concept for the diaspora. Similarly, it would have been interesting to know to what degree Aufderbeck's pastoral theology influenced the thinking of the German bishops as they prepared either for the Second Vatican Council itself or for the implementation of its decisions. [3]

Well differentiated is a brief article by Christine Bartlitz, who addresses the role of Catholic media during the Ulbricht era. The complexities of media policy in the GDR becomes apparent as Bartlitz explains that the regime permitted the church to publish its own magazines, journals, and books in order to prevent criticism abroad and to justify banning imported Catholic publications. Furthermore, since Catholic journals were available only through the GDR's state subscription service, the regime could obtain precise information on who was actively practicing the faith. In later years, the official censorship system created a situation whereby the regime and the church would negotiate demanded cuts in the texts of articles and books. Often, the church would withdraw a work rather than make the desired changes. For much of the Ulbricht period, the church participated in regular broadcasts of morning prayer services, which always included a reflection by a priest designated by the bishops. The texts of these reflections revealed the fine line church leaders walked in order to maintain the faith while avoiding open confrontation with the

regime. Finally, Bartlitz argues that the availability in much of the GDR of radio and television broadcasts from the West further limited the regime's ability to curtail Catholic media activities.

Silvia Kroll, in her essay on the work in the GDR of Caritas, documents the evolution of the organization's work in the GDR. While in the aftermath of the war, the Soviet military authorities supported Caritas in order to meet the great need for services, the GDR later on slowly withdrew support. Caritas was heavily involved in running orphanages, which the communist regime correctly feared might produce young adults immune to the regime's ideology. Thus, by the end of the GDR, Caritas had become a complementary agency to the GDR's social services by taking on those cases in which the regime had no interest: the handicapped and the elderly. Although the regime could have used what amounted to accreditation standards to end the work of Caritas-sponsored institutions, Kroll also notes that the regime refrained from interfering in the training and education of qualified staff for the Caritas organization.

Summarizing her recent publication in the *blaue Reihe* of the Kommission für Zeitgeschichte, Birgit Mitzscherlich contributes an essay on the Meissen diocese in the immediate postwar period. [4] While the church benefited initially from the willingness of the Soviet authorities to support the church and from Bishop's Legge extreme reticence to oppose any government authority, relations soon came to a head over the issue of schools and of pastoral care for youth in general. The church adapted by resorting to methods proven successful during the years of the National Socialist regime and by maintaining a close-knit milieu largely impenetrable to the regime's agents. Given the argument made in this essay, it might have been placed more logically in the final section of the volume, a section on the Catholic milieu.

The first essay in this section, by Henry Krause, addresses an underresearched area of German Catholicism. In Lusatia, a region in south-eastern Brandenburg and eastern Saxony, a Slavic minority exists, the Sorbians. Suppressed by the National Socialist regime, their continued existence was an important element in the communist regime's propaganda. Unfortunately for the regime, the Sorbians remain largely resistant to communist ideology. Krause argues that the Sorbians were a minority in two different ways. They were a Catholic minority in a communist state, and an ethnic minority in a German majority. They equally opposed the regime for its anti-Catholicism and the diocese of Meißen for inadequately supporting the Sorbians' ethnic identity. The regime tried to exploit this dissatisfaction, but failed. While more Sorbian priests maintained contacts with the secret police than priests anywhere else in the GDR, none of them offered public support and none were able to prevent the increasing number of anticommunist priests promoted to higher positions in the diocese. Krause notes that the Christian Democrats received the highest number of votes in the first elections held in the region after 1945 and after 1990, as if the intervening years were but an interlude.

The final essay in the collection deals with Catholics in the Eichsfeld, a region of Thuringia which holds pride of place as the only Catholic-dominated region of the former GDR. Dietmar Klenke explores the ways in which the regime sought to undermine Catholic dominance in the Eichsfeld and the ways in which the Catholic milieu responded. As late as 1986, 50 percent of all communist party members from the Eichsfeld were practicing Catholics. This indicates a mutual recognition by both the regime and the church that some *modus vivendi* was necessary to avoid open conflict and to avoid embarrassing defeats on either side. The regime did not want to admit that it had failed to introduce socialism in the region, and the church did not want to force its members to abandon all hope of career advance-

ment by refusing to permit at least superficial identification with the regime. From the beginning of the GDR, priests were able to blackmail the regime in order to receive building permits, resource allocations, packages from the West withheld by the regime, etc. The priests threatened to expose communism's weak hold on the region, for example by urging Catholics to stay home on election day. Given the large majority of Catholics in the region, the Catholic milieu was able to render visible its power in ways that could only be understood as political. Thus, every Catholic pilgrimage or Corpus Christi procession was a reminder to the local communist functionaries--none of whom were natives of the Eichsfeld--of their limited power.

While the work lacks a conclusion by the editors, the volume goes a long way toward the more differentiated understanding of Catholicism in the GDR that Tischner and Kösters demand. What becomes clear is the ambiguity of the relationship between church and state, the ways in which both sides constantly monitored the power relationship in order to exploit weaknesses on the other side and to maintain their own positions. It cannot but amaze readers how serious a threat the regime considered this small minority to be to the welfare of the GDR. This in turn demonstrates that the regime understood how tenuous its hold on power was. The communists knew that there were alternatives to the regime, not only in form of the Federal Republic of Germany in the West, but also in form of the religious communities in the GDR.

Broszat's concept of *Resistenz*, mentioned by Tischner and Kösters, is validated in this volume, since it demonstrates how a publicly demonstrated commitment to one's faith can go a long way toward ensuring the survival of alternatives to a repressive regime.

Many of the contributions to this volume are summaries of longer works published elsewhere, and so the essays may suffer from compression.

Still, one wishes the contributors had offered less narrative and more analysis to engage the important questions their essays raise about the ability of the church to function in a communist state and society. Also, especially for the period after the Second Vatican Council, this volume makes clear the need for a comparison of the pastoral development of the church in both halves of Germany. The intense secularization that Germans in the West experienced was, at least in a limited way, similar to the secularization imposed by the atheist regime in the East. In both parts of the country, active participation in Catholic life beyond baptism, marriage, and funeral took on a countercultural role. Based on this volume, German Catholicism's influence on German culture and society since World War Two will remain a fruitful scholarly field for some time to come.

Notes

[1]. Wolfgang Tischner, *Katholische Kirche in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1951*, Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Zeitgeschichte, Reihe B, Band 90 (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2001).

[2]. Ruth Jung, *Ungeteilt im geteilten Berlin? Das Bistum Berlin nach dem Mauerbau* (Berlin: Morus, 2003).

[3]. See also Clemens Brodkorb, *Bruder und Gefährte in der Bedrängnis--Hugo Aufderbeck als Seelsorgesamtsleiter in Magdeburg: zur pastoralen Grundlegung einer "Kirche in der SBZ/DDR"* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2002).

[4]. Birgit Mitzscherlich, *Diktatur und Diaspora: Das Bistum Meißen 1932-1951*, Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Zeitgeschichte, Series B: Forschungen, vol. 101 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005).

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