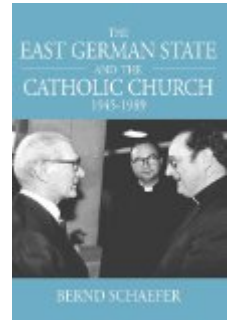


Bernd Schaefer. *The East German State and the Catholic Church: 1945-1989.* Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010. 303 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84545-737-2.



Reviewed by Derek Hastings

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Commissioned by Chad Ross

Bernd Schaefer's skillful examination of the fate of the Catholic Church in communist East Germany originally appeared in German in 1998. The decision to translate the work into English is to be lauded, as the book provides a thorough and accessible overview of an important aspect of the broader transition from single-party rule under the Nazis to four decades of single-party rule under the Socialist Unity Party (SED) that governed the German Democratic Republic. Rather than focusing on theological imperatives, internal parish life, or devotional developments, Schaefer's main concern is to illuminate the interactions between church and state from the top-down perspective of high politics. A finely textured examination of the experiences of individual Catholics in East Germany is thus beyond the scope of this study. There is, however, much to be said for Schaefer's approach, since he was able to mine a vast variety of official diocesan and government files, including especially the records of the Ministry of State Security (*Stasi*), and he succeeds in offering well-

measured conclusions about policy issues of unquestioned importance.

As a decided minority within the territory that became East Germany, Catholics and their leaders were faced with special challenges starting in 1945. Similarly, communist ideologues who were convinced that Christianity was a reactionary force destined for demise were also forced to deal, at least in the short term, with the reality of the churches' existence and continued social influence. One of Schaefer's central arguments is that, beginning already within the Soviet Occupation Zone that predated the establishment of the GDR in 1949, communist leaders pursued an often conflicted approach characterized by two basic orientations: a "security policy" (*Sicherheitspolitik*) involving varying degrees of surveillance and repression aimed at hastening the inevitable demise of Christianity, and a more conciliatory "alliance policy" (*Bündnispolitik*) that recognized, however grudgingly, the practical usefulness of the churches as potential stabilizing forces within society. The ensuing four decades of church-state

relations within the GDR were characterized to a large degree by the pursuit of a delicate balance between these two competing policy trajectories.

In the years leading up to the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, relations were on occasion driven by more rigidly doctrinaire ideological imperatives at the expense of compromise and practicality, with the institution in the mid-1950s of the *Jugendweihe* (secular youth initiation)--a social rite designed explicitly to compete directly with Christian confirmation--as one of the more fiercely contested examples. Especially during Julius Döpfner's tenure as bishop of Berlin from 1956 to 1961, East German authorities responded to what they perceived as Döpfner's pronounced "Western" (pro-Adenauer) orientation by further ramping up the machinery of surveillance and repression. After the Vatican agreed to remove Döpfner in 1961, on the eve of the construction of the Berlin Wall, a more conciliatory course was set by his successor Alfred Bengsch, who served as bishop of Berlin until his death in 1979. Preaching the virtues of "political abstinence," Bengsch presided over a period of détente in which clergy largely refrained from overt opposition to the regime while also withholding official support. In response to new theological debates that emerged in the context of the Second Vatican Council, throughout the 1960s and 1970s traditionalists like Bengsch proved themselves to be stable and at least somewhat reliable partners in the SED's broader *Bündnispolitik* by increasingly marginalizing younger reform-oriented clergy, whose calls for change could have fomented not only theological but also political activism. Both church and state authorities continually attempted to utilize the existing *modus vivendi* to their own advantage, as evidenced by frequent financial collaboration throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with East German Catholic leaders obtaining much-needed hard currency from West German sources and facilitating the flow of millions of marks into the struggling GDR. The debt-ridden regime benefited from the infusion of cash and, in return, Catholic

leaders were granted some measure of increased flexibility. As the 1980s progressed, with forces advocating radical change roiling beneath the surface on a number of levels, church leaders continued to maintain the paradigm of "political abstinence." As a result, by the time bishop of Magdeburg Johannes Braun issued a striking pastoral letter calling for radical government reform in September 1989--a statement that "attacked the SED with a harshness Catholic leaders had never before displayed" (p. 251)--the wheels of change had already been largely set in motion by other forces, with the Catholic leadership remaining largely on the sidelines.

Despite its numerous strengths, Schaefer's book suffers somewhat from the fact that very few substantive additions were made to the version that originally appeared in German, leading to a lamentable lack of engagement with the growing body of relevant historiographical literature that has appeared since 1998. Furthermore, although the conclusion pursues a more expansive ideas-based approach that effectively draws together several of the thematic strands that emerged in the preceding chapters, throughout the body of the text Schaefer adheres quite strictly to a straightforward chronological framework, with each individual chapter addressing a tightly defined time frame (1945-53, 1953-57, 1957-61, 1961-71, 1972-89). This structure leads to frequent repetition and potentially forecloses on creative insights that Schaefer could perhaps have developed with more inventiveness. To close on a positive note, though, the book's rigid structure does provide the benefit of enhanced clarity and accessibility, and it is on this level that Schaefer's contribution should ultimately be evaluated. This is a very useful, practical introduction to an interesting and important aspect of church-state relations in twentieth century Europe. As such, it should be of benefit to a broad readership of generalists and specialists.

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