

Roland Cerny-Werner. *Vatikanische Ostpolitik und die DDR.* Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2011. 384 S. ISBN 978-3-86234-875-6.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (August, 2012)

Vatican „Ostpolitik“ belongs to the most heatedly debated topics of Church history today. Was the Vatican “too soft” on the Communist regimes that tried to systematically suppress local churches? Did the Roman Curia go too far when it negotiated with representatives of the Communist party states? Was the heads of the church “betraying” the believers, when it tolerated or nominated priests and bishops who collaborated with the atheist dictatorships? Accusations like these are common in the international and the national debates about the role of the Roman Catholic Church during the 1960s and 1970s. The accusers refer to contemporary critics, mostly representatives of Catholic exile communities in the West, and they often can found their critique on archival materials dugged out in various Central and Eastern European state security archives since 1989.

Roland Cerny-Werner in his study on the diplomatic relationship between the Vatican and East Germany during the reign of Pope Paul VI. approaches the problem in a different way. He meticulously and systematically reconstructs the diplomatic policy and the communication strategy of the Vatican, mostly of Archbishop Agostino Casaroli, the Pope’s special envoy in dealing with the Communist world. His work is based on an abundance of archival materials from the Fondo Casaroli, the private archive of the Archbishop, and of an equally rich amount of materials from the archives of the former GDR, and of other

sources. Cerny-Werner explains the aims of Vatican diplomacy as twofold: as an attempt to create the best possible and most secure conditions for the everyday working of local churches, and, at the same time, as an attempt to start a worldwide, open debate with “the world” in order to heighten the moral and diplomatic status of the Catholic church outside the narrow borders of the Catholic milieu. One particular aspect of this second aim, which was most prominently formulated by Pope John XXIII. and the Second Vatican Council, was the Vatican’s concern for world peace (Encyclic “Pacem in Terris”, 1958), an aspect most critics of Vatican “Ostpolitik” almost completely ignore when they accuse Casaroli of being “too soft” on Communism. The Vatican was also strongly concerned about keeping its independence and also its control of national church leaders, another field, which is often forgotten: Criticising Vatican “Ostpolitik” could also be used to criticize Roman leadership from a supposedly “conservative” position.

In the case of the East German state, the situation was particularly complex. On the one hand, the SED regime did not brutally suppress the small Catholic minority as did other Communist regimes (Hungary, Czechoslovakia). On the other hand the East German regime wanted to use contacts and negotiations with the Vatican and its reputation for “peace” propaganda and, most of all, in order to gain full international acknowl-

edgement as a sovereign state. The Vatican reacted in a very flexible and cautious way to the Western, mostly U. S. and West German, détente towards the Communist countries, but it also developed its own brand of “Ostpolitik”. Cerny-Werner can convincingly show how both the Vatican and East Germany profited from the contacts and negotiations, especially in the framework of the Helsinki process. But the incredible sophistication of Casaroli’s approach made it also possible to enter into negotiations with a Communist state without compromising the fundamental teachings of the Church, and without weakening the (less flexible) positions of the West German bishops and Catholic politicians who followed the Vatican diplomat’s activities with rising anxiety. Cerny-Werner’s book on the diplomatic relations between Rome and East Berlin is an excellent, diligent, and balanced historical study. Critics might say that it mostly reflects the standpoints of the Vatican, and, to a minor degree, how the East German leadership thought about the contacts with Rome. But shouldn’t this be the first step if we want to better understand the thinking and acting of historical actors before we start to form strong judgements and develop clear opinions?

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Citation: Árpád von Klimó. Review of Cerny–Werner, Roland. *Vatikanische Ostpolitik und die DDR*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. August, 2012.

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