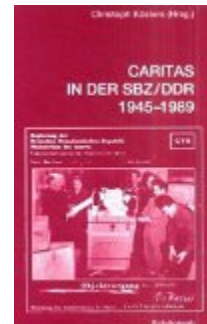


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christoph Koesters, ed. *Caritas in der SBZ/GDR 1945-1989: Erinnerungen, Berichte, Forschungen*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2001. 257 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-3-506-74791-4.

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## Caritas under Communism

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This volume derives from a Spring 1999 conference of historians and former leaders of the Catholic social welfare organization, Caritas, in the Soviet occupation zone and German Democratic Republic. While clearly significant to the history of German Catholicism, Caritas' fate under Communism poses equally important questions about East Germany, ranging from the nature and boundaries of its dictatorship to larger issues of continuity and comparison—continuities with Nazi and pre-Nazi traditions of *Freien Wohlfahrtspflege*, comparison with other Soviet Bloc states and the Federal Republic of Germany. As Hans Gunter Hockerts argues in the book's first chapter, "Die Geschichte der Caritas kann, nimmt man alle Fragen zusammen, geradezu als ein Seismograph fuer gesellschaftliche und politische Verhaeltnisse und Problemlagen dienen—auch und gerade in der 'Fürsorgediktatur' der SED" (p. 36).

That Caritas managed to survive in the GDR was hardly self-evident. As sponsors of "die einzige Caritas zwischen Elbe und Wladiwostok" (p. 238), East German Catholics also maintained training programs for clerics, Caritas leaders, and nursing staff. Such exceptionalism in the Soviet Bloc had various roots: continued Anglo-American influence even after the collapse of Allied cooperation; the political categorization of Catholicism as anti-Nazi and therefore anti-fascist; the influence of social democrats less hostile than younger communists to religion. Faced with a humanitarian catastrophe after

the war, the Soviets showed keen interest in the Kindergaerten and hospitals that Caritas had protected from the Nazis. Perhaps of greatest importance, GDR leaders were afraid to ban later what the Soviets had once authorized.

Caritas suffered most acutely under Ulbricht, whose attempts in the 1950s to build socialism marked the high point of Church-State confrontation. In particular, as detailed by Christoph Koesters, the Ministry for State Security targeted Caritas' practice of importing food and medications from the West; the Stasi later closed Caritas children's homes. In 1957, the *Republikfluchtgesetz* highlighted and increased Caritas assistance for political opponents of the regime. At the same time, the Stasi's new head, Erich Mielke, began to recruit priests and lay people as spies. Stasi's success in this endeavor remains unclear, in part because the archives reveal surprisingly little about Caritas. Koesters nonetheless documents numerous meetings between Caritas and Stasi, many arranged by Caritas leaders to advance their own agendas. Although it is difficult to determine the exact nature of these contacts, Koesters concludes that the Stasi rarely succeeded in enlisting Caritas leaders as *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*. Crucial to the Stasi's failure was Catholic hierarchy—Caritas was under complete Church control, policy decisions were reserved for the bishops, and all Stasi conversations were directed by the central Caritas office in Berlin. At the same time, Caritas relied on a lay network in resisting state pressure; not surprisingly, diaspora Catholics rallied around their threatened Church.

By the 1970s and 1980s, as Catholic religious networks disintegrated in a largely dechristianized society, Caritas ironically enjoyed increased safety. Honecker's commitment to "soziale Sicherheit and Geborgenheit," particularly as justification for the state's other failings, guaranteed Caritas' ability to provide services for East Germans, including those seeking emigration (the *Ausreisewillige*). As Josef Pilvousek demonstrates, Caritas hospitals, Kindergaerten, and homes for the elderly and mentally handicapped filled crucial gaps in the East German social welfare infrastructure. In particular, Caritas hospitals came, far more than priests, to represent the public face of Catholicism in the GDR: Not only was their quality widely recognized, including by party functionaries who preferred treatment there, but in some areas Caritas offered up to 30 percent of available hospital beds.

This book offers an important addition to the outpouring of literature—estimated at some 4,000 publications since 1989—on the Churches in the GDR. Because the conference and volume joined practitioners and scholars, the style and quality of the articles range widely. Those by former Caritas leaders often provide informative, if overly detailed, descriptions of the functioning of Caritas, while non-Caritas actors, such as Wolfgang Vogel, former Representative of the GDR for Humanitarian Questions, offer interesting accounts of their contacts with Caritas. One thematic gap appears to be gender. Although several leading Caritas women attended the conference, none contributed a chapter, and no author addresses topics concerning women in East

Germany or within Caritas. (Josef Pilvousek notes briefly that increased female employment left little time or energy for volunteer work, but there is no discussion of how this affected Caritas.) In general, this volume reveals little about everyday Catholic life. While clearly not its stated goal, much of the book's information begs questions of *Alltagsgeschichte*, questions that scholars such as Martin Hoellen, Ursula Pruss, and Bernd Schaefer have begun to explore. For example, while 60 percent of Caritas' funding was foreign (the bulk of that from West Germany), 40 percent was domestic, suggesting a complicated relationship between donations and dechristianization. Finally, it would be helpful to contrast systematically the fate of Caritas in the GDR with that of its larger Protestant counterpart, the *Diakonisches Werk der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*.

In sum, *Caritas in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1989* offers a valuable integration of first-person accounts and historical analysis of a subject with broader significance than first meets the eye. As the discussion summary notes, additional research will offer new insights into religious life and organization in East Germany. Caritas is certainly one important chapter in that story.

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